

LRM MUSIC Q4 Musical Theater

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Musical Theater: An Introduction

Musical Theater is a musical form that tells a story through dramatic dialogue and song and dance. Musical theater used to be referred to as “light opera” or “musical comedies” in the earlier 19th and 20th centuries. It wasn’t until the 1960’s that the musical turned itself into a stand-alone genre. (Block, et al., 2014) There are grey-zones with regards to its definition and inclusivity, scholars have narrowed this geographically—which means that any work that originated or eventually inhabited the New York City theater district known as Broadway is considered part of musical theater.

The history of Musical theater originated from Ancient Greek drama. It saw its way into comic operas, later into vaudeville sketches, the revues, until found its home in Broadway, New York city.

According to Kamien, a musical is generally divided into two acts. Melodies from the first act are played in the second act and is shorter in terms of duration. American musicals embrace a variety of musical styles but are relatively simpler compared to its operatic counterpart. Spoken dialogue is more prominent in musical theater. There are a variety of musical styles that musical theater embraces—it is a collaborative effort between the composer, musicians, choreographers, actors, writers, and stage production. Musical theater is hardly ever restricted to a musical style, in fact, George and Ira Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* (1935) and Leonard Bernstein’s *West Side Story* contain many characteristics of opera while Lin Manuel Miranda’s *Into the Heights* and *Hamilton* rap their dialogue. (Kamien, 2018)

The years 1920 to 1960 saw the golden era of the American musical. Composers such as Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990), Stephen Sondheim (1930-2021), Frank Loesser (1910-1969), Richard Rogers (1902-1979), Cole Porter (1893-1964), George Gershwin (1898-1937), Jerome Kern (1885-1945), and Irving Berlin (1888-1989) fine-tuned musical theater into what it is today. The stories told in musical theater became more relatable and believable. They expanded the subject matter and crafted song and dance to be deeply ingrained into the stories. Musical theater suddenly tackled important social issues: (Kern and Hammerstein’s *Show Boat* tackled interracial relationships); even satirized the Great Depression (George and Ira Gershwin’s *Of Thee I Sing*); and teenage gang warfare (Bernstein’s *West Side Story*)

Musical Theater continued to evolve past its golden age. It incorporated rock music elements in *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971) and *Hair* (1967), embraced foreign musician-composers such as Andrew Lloyd Webber who wrote *Cats* (1982), *The Phantom of the Opera* (1987) and Frenchmen Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil wrote *Les Misérables* (1986) and *Miss Saigon* (1989). *The Phantom of the Opera* maintains the title for longest running musical. Some musicals were written after movies such as *The Lion King* (1997), *Billy Elliot the Musical* (2005), and *The Producers* (2005) to name a few. Other works were adapted from novels such as *Wicked* (2003) and *Man of La Mancha* (1965).

Recently, successful musicals have been adapted into movies to allow a wider audience to enjoy these musicals without having to travel to New York City. Bernstein's *Westside Story*; Sondheim's *Into the Woods* and *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*; Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Cats*; and Lin Manuel Miranda's *In the Heights* and *Hamilton* are some examples.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES:

1. Solo: Record yourself singing to your favorite song from a musical. You may find instrumental tracks online to accompany you but be careful with musical copyright!
2. Group: Create your own class musical! You can compose your own songs or use existing songs (always mindful of copyright). As a class, create a plot line that ties all your songs together (remember to keep it feasible and distribute the workload evenly). Edit your works and combine them into one final project.

Bibliography

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