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Raymond Knapp:

The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity

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The Viennese Connection

Franz Lehár and American Operetta

THE AMERICAN MUSICAL has sometimes been understood as the American answer to European operetta, or as an extension of the European tradition. A good case for these and similar claims is easy enough to make, given the impact of Gilbert and Sullivan on late nineteenth-century American musical comedy and of Franz Lehár a few decades later. Moreover, the case need not be overwhelming in order to be fairly convincing. Thus, divergences from these formative influences may be readily accounted for; after all, important differences also evolved between and among the principal European forms, so that one might simply argue that Americans, like their European predecessors, evolved their own distinct type of operetta, according to local tastes and interests. Or, to summarize the scenario that Gerald Bordman argues for, one might trace how an American type of musical comedy has been periodically enriched by returns to its European models, with Rodgers and Hammerstein, in particular, representing one of the most vigorous of these later returns, if seldom recognized as such.¹

But it is just as easy to argue the other side of this issue. European operetta was largely a reaction against more serious operatic traditions, which by mid-nineteenth century had evolved into something quite serious indeed in the three main traditions that then flourished: Italian and German romantic opera, Wagnerian *Musikdrama*, and French grand opera. America had no comparable tradition to react against, although many attempted, often with some success, to transplant these European traditions to America, so that European opera did in fact provide a frequent foil for humor on the American musical stage. But in the main, American musicals took shape, as a genre, within a context almost diametrically opposed to the European situation. Instead of reacting against a thriving higher tradition—opera—they quite often strove to elevate an already “low” tradition into something more elevated, if not fully operatic. Regarding Viennese operetta in particular, American reception seemed oddly dissonant with European reception, even if both sides of the Atlantic came to an enthusiastic accord over *The Merry Widow* (1905, 1907 in London and New York). Thus, although Americans embraced the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas as (almost) their own—and here we might well remember that England also had no native high-art operatic tradition of any consequence—they did not similarly embrace either the French or the Viennese operetta traditions in the nineteenth century. Moreover, when they did respond enthusiastically to *The Merry Widow*, it was largely because of the show’s greater sophistication relative to American

fare, and not merely because of the escapist fun that the show offered (which was the basis of its appeal in Europe, in retrospect already well on its way to the cataclysm of World War I, a cataclysm that was first of all Vienna's).

This greater sophistication had a number of facets, all of them easily associated with Europe. Musically, the show was deftly realized by Franz Lehár, a trained composer who had tried his hand at opera (if unsuccessfully) and had already composed popular waltzes and achieved mixed success with a handful of operettas before *Die lustige Witwe* (*The Merry Widow*) became the most widely performed operetta ever, playing across Europe with huge success before it was brought to America. But musical sophistication was only part of what *The Merry Widow* had to offer, for its story of sexual and political intrigue was presented with both frankness and a suave grace rich in nuance, with the latter serving to partly deflect the former, offering a face-saving interpretive strategy of deniability about just how much (if any) illicit sex the audience was supposed to be winking at. This blend of a frankly acknowledged sexuality with modes of graceful deflection became an important topic for Americans, who sometimes referred to it as “worldly” or “sophisticated,” but often enough located its origin more specifically, with descriptive terms such as “European,” “continental” (thus, as opposed to the presumably more respectable British), “Parisian,” or “Viennese”—the latter two referring to the setting and original venue of *The Merry Widow*, respectively.

This one signal success of Viennese operetta in America set off a long series of reverberations across the twentieth century, first in the spate of American offshoots that followed it (even if few other Viennese shows, including Lehár's, had much success in America). But this initial wave of enthusiasm was short-lived. Many blame World War I for the sudden lapse in America's enthusiasm for Viennese operetta so soon after *The Merry Widow*'s American success; Vienna was, after all, the seat of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the referential flashpoint—and our eventual enemy—in the Great War, as it was then called. But the genre did not simply disappear, as the leading American practitioners—Rudolf Friml and Sigmund Romberg—continued to have great success throughout the 1920s, with their authenticity seemingly guaranteed by their names (although Friml was born in Prague, and Romberg, like Lehár, in Hungary; Victor Herbert, their prominent older colleague who died in 1924, was born in Dublin but raised—and trained—in Germany).² When synchronized sound made film musicals a practicality by the 1930s, operettas provided a rich body of source material, particularly since—however daring they might once have seemed—they had by then acquired an important patina of respectability, with their music being generally viewed as more elevated, and stemming from a more reputable tradition, than more “American” jazz-influenced styles.³ Many important operettas from earlier in the century were filmed, often substantially altered, several with Jeanette MacDonald (with still others being refashioned as vehicles for the child actress Shirley Temple). As color became more standard after World War II

and into the 1950s, a new wave of film musicals included another large dose of revived operettas, most often with newly revised plots. Alongside this development, television provided yet another venue for keeping early works in the genre before a wide public, if often drastically cut.

The operettas I've chosen for the first part of this chapter reflect this history fairly well. *The Merry Widow* was filmed with a vastly reworked plot by Ernst Lubitsch in 1934, with Jeanette MacDonald and Maurice Chevalier,⁴ and was filmed again in 1952, similarly unrecognizable in its refashioned plot and spare use of songs from the original; a live television version of the show was broadcast in 1958. *Naughty Marietta*, the most important of the early American operettas that followed *The Merry Widow*, was filmed with Jeanette MacDonald one year after she starred in Lubitsch's *The Merry Widow* and was broadcast live on television in 1955. (For other representative film versions from the 1930s and 1940s, and "second-wave" revivals as color films and in televised versions from the 1950s, see the list at the end of this chapter.)

The quaintness of both these live televised performances and the lavish MGM operetta films of the 1950s inspired the hugely successful off-Broadway parody-operetta *Little Mary Sunshine* (1959), which makes many specific references to *Naughty Marietta* and other well-known operettas (including, most prominently, the 1924 *Rose-Marie*, filmed in 1936 and 1954). One may well argue that *Little Mary Sunshine*, in its affectionate campiness, was oblivious to the large dose of camp appeal already long recognized in the genre, but the show deftly struck a chord with audiences, who loved much of what operetta had to offer but winced at its dated sentimentality; it thus provides us with a useful gauge for assessing the devices and contrivances of operetta, as seen from the vantage point of the late 1950s. Certainly the success of the show confirms the separateness of the American musical from operetta by that stage of development. Indeed, for many who may not otherwise be familiar with the American operetta tradition, *Little Mary Sunshine*, enduringly popular in revival, is a surer point of reference than more traditional fare.

If *Little Mary Sunshine* refers mainly to the American operetta tradition—although, surely, the assonance between the titles *Little Mary Sunshine* and *The Merry Widow* is no accident—the older European tradition serves as the most useful background for considering Stephen Sondheim's *A Little Night Music* (1973), with its confrontation between Old-World sensibilities and modernity, and its dance-infused score. Besides completing a usefully symmetrical frame for this chapter, *A Little Night Music*, in its very title, manages both to refer obliquely to Vienna (specifically, to Mozart's *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, composed in Vienna and often used emblematically, as "background music," to represent Vienna's rich musical past) and to complete a string of verbal assonances that might also include *Rose-Marie*; thus, *The Merry Widow*–*Naughty Marietta* (or, perhaps, "Naughty *Little Mary*"?)–*Rose-Marie*–*Little Mary Sunshine*–*A Little Night Music*. More-

over, the words that accompany this string independently articulate a sexually suggestive symmetry (especially remembering that Little Mary Sunshine, among its many associations, refers to a particularly striking flower, a bearded iris): *Widow–Naughty / Rose–Sunshine / Night Music*.

The Merry Widow, as it was presented to American audiences in 1907, was performed with its songs in rhymed translation, with a few minor cuts to its score, two interpolations of musical numbers in Act III (added by Lehár himself; see the website for the complete English-language song list), and some minor adjustments to its plot and comic byplay. In most respects, the English adaptation by Adrian Ross (the one most often staged in America, first performed in London earlier in 1907) is close enough to the original that it will not be necessary here to draw a particularly sharp differentiation between them, beyond noting a series of name changes and occasionally observing other concessions made to its English-speaking audiences in London and New York. Inevitably, of course, something is lost in translation, even with a fairly faithful adaptation such as this one, both because of the forced rhymes that such translations often produce (which, besides sounding quaint, also often result in an awkward fit between text and music) and because it is difficult to know with any precision what, in musical terms, would have seemed exaggerated and mannered about performance styles in 1905 Vienna versus 1907 New York. To some extent, something of *The Merry Widow* slips between the cracks that open between different levels of familiarity and perceived strangeness. Nevertheless, in the present context, Ross's adaptation of *The Merry Widow* may usefully be taken as *the* representative of the Viennese tradition in America, for that is indeed how it functioned historically.

Because of the numerous versions of *The Merry Widow* that have since proliferated on film, all of them with plots wildly different from that of the original stage show, it will be useful to sketch the story here.⁵ Although the basic plotline remains much the same as in the Viennese original, Ross's English adaptation makes a number of name changes, the most important of which are as follows:

die lustige Witwe **Hanna Glawari** becomes the merry widow **Sonia Sadoya**;
 the kingdom of **Pontevedro** becomes **Marsovia**;
Baron Mirko Zeta becomes **Baron Popoff**;
Valencienne (the baron's wife) becomes **Natalie**;
Camille de Rosillon (her lover) becomes **Camille de Jolidon**;
 and **Count Danilo Danilowitsch** becomes **Prince Danilo**.⁶

The entire action takes place in Paris, where Baron Zeta (Popoff), who is afraid that the recently widowed Hanna's (Sonia's) fortune will be lost to Pontevedro (Marsovia) if she is to remarry with a foreigner—with catastrophic results for the small kingdom—enlists the help of fellow countryman Danilo, a notorious womanizer who was once romantically involved with

Hanna. Meanwhile, Zeta's own wife, Valencienne (Natalie), is conducting an affair with Camille, of which only the Baron seems ignorant; although Valencienne seems to be trying to break off the affair (or, perhaps, end it before it truly begins), her behavior can be interpreted as "playing hard to get." Danilo agrees to help keep Hanna from marrying a foreigner but refuses to court her himself, since, although he has long been in love with her, he feels betrayed by her, believing she married her late husband for his money; this is why (we are given to understand) he now habitually spends his free time at the Parisian nightclub Maxim's. Hanna also loves him, but knows she will have to finesse their oddly oblique courtship. She flirts with a number of suitors at a ball before choosing Danilo as her partner for a "Ladies' Choice" waltz number, only to be outraged when he offers to auction the dance off among her would-be suitors, all of whom abandon the field. The first act ends with a bare rapprochement between them, as eventually she joins him in dancing the "Ladies' Choice" waltz ("Oh, Come Away").

Act II begins with musical entertainments from Pontevedro hosted by Hanna, including characteristic dances and two parable-like folk songs, "Vilja" (or "Vilia") and "The Cavalier," both obviously resonant with the situation at hand, with the latter presented as a playful duet between Danilo and Hanna. In "Women," the men alternate celebrating and disparaging the opposite sex, ending in an all-male, cancan-inflected chorus line, after which Danilo and Hanna come together and dance to what is now known as "The Merry Widow Waltz." The progress of their rekindled relationship is disrupted, however, by the culmination of Camille's dalliance with Valencienne (the passionate duet, "Love in My Heart," concluding with their entering the pavilion together for a "farewell kiss"). When Zeta discovers his wife's apparent infidelity with Camille, Hanna rescues the situation by taking Valencienne's place and announcing her own engagement to Camille. Act II then ends with alternations of Hanna's description of a modern marriage of convenience ("In the Modern Style," or "In the Parisian Style," sung with the chorus) and another "parable song" ("The Prince and the Princess") delivered by a furious Danilo.

The third act is quite short if we do not count the standard interpolations, sometimes augmented with an extensive waltz ballet (reminiscent of the long-standing custom of interpolating the entire *Blue Danube Waltz* into Johann Strauss's *Die Fledermaus*). The setting is again Hanna's residence, now fashioned into a semblance of Maxim's (or the actual Maxim's, in the American version) and introduced by the "show girls" (Grisettes) led by a slumming Valencienne (in some performances by Hanna herself). After Hanna explains why she pretended to become engaged to Camille, Zeta, again convinced of his wife's infidelity, announces his intention to divorce her, offering to marry Hanna himself. Hanna then plays her trump card, announcing that, according to her late husband's will, she will lose her fortune if she remarries, which prompts Zeta and her other suitors to withdraw and Danilo to propose to her; as she accepts Danilo, she further explains

that she loses her fortune only because it devolves to her husband. Danilo accepts this news with some resignation, but is content that he has proven he loves her and not her money, while she has proven her desire to wed for love rather than money. Resolution is nearly complete: Pontevedro is saved; Zeta and Valencienne reconcile; and Danilo, still unable to confess his love for Hanna in words, lets “The Merry Widow Waltz” say it for him.

The scenario and musical structures of *The Merry Widow* deftly lay out a number of landscapes, the subtleties of which are often lost when they are tampered with. We may usefully think of these interlocking landscapes on either a quasi-literal level, referring to actual political geographies, or a figurative level, mapping a terrain of public and personal lives and describing against that terrain contrasting trajectories of romantic intrigue.

The musical geography includes some fairly straightforward markers and a few contradictory ones. Vienna maintains a benign control over the whole even though it is nowhere to be seen, simply because all truly important events in the show are accompanied by waltzes, with many of the other dances borrowing the dynamic energy of the Viennese waltz, as well. Paris, the official setting, is well represented by the frequent galops performed in the raucous style of the cancan, often replete with cymbal crashes; the most obvious of these are at the very opening of the show and in the women’s “Grisette” number in Act III, but the style also permeates the all-male show-stopper in the middle of Act II, “Women,” and the “laughing” concluding section to Act II (“In the Modern Style”).⁷ Slightly trickier is the precise location of Pontevedro, whose name hints strongly at the often victimized country of Montenegro, one of the Balkan states located on the Adriatic Sea between Bosnia-Herzegovina (then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), Serbia, and Albania (the latter still under Turkish control in 1905) and absorbed after World War I into Yugoslavia. The change in name obliquely pokes affectionate fun at the lofty pretensions of such small countries by converting the imposing “Black Mountain” of “Montenegro” into the more homey image of “Cheerful Bridge.” Much else in *The Merry Widow* points to an identification of Pontevedro with Montenegro, including the names of Baron Mirko Zeta, whose surname is the name of a river in Montenegro and an old name for Montenegro itself, and Danilo, who takes his name doubly from the first in the line of a later theocratic dynasty (Petrović, 1697–1851)⁸ and from an especially important (and, in 1905, still fairly recent) Montenegrin prince (also Petrović) who effected a shift to a secular state. (The second Danilo—Danilo Danilowitsch?—ruled from 1852 to 1860, when he was assassinated; his older brother Mirko was a famed military strategist.)⁹

But the music associated with Pontevedro spreads out in a wide scatter shot across Eastern Europe, with strong doses of Polish, Czech, and Russian, along with a hint of Hungarian (or, perhaps, Gypsy) worked in. Thus, Hanna’s opening number is a mazurka (a Polish folk dance);¹⁰ Valencienne introduces Camille to Hanna as a potential suitor in the first-act finale with a

♪ 1.1

♪ 1.2

♪ 1.3

polka (a Czech dance with Polish associations); Act II begins with a polonaise to introduce the celebration of Pontevedro's heritage (the polonaise, although Polish, has strong Russian associations, particularly when introduced with fanfares such as Lehár uses) and continues with a set of country dances redolent of Hungary, Russia, or both at once, with generic "folk-song" elements added to the mix, including both a lyrical "folk legend" ("Vilja") and its rustic counterpart ("The Cavalier"). Despite this rather wanton mix of types, however, what they sing during one of the dances is (in both the original and English-language versions) indeed Serbo-Croatian, the language of Montenegro: "Mi velimo dase veslimo! Hei a ho!" (in more standard spelling: "Mi volimo da se veselimo!"—roughly, "We like to make merry!"). Moreover, the Russian cast to some of this music may easily be justified—indirectly, at least—by the fact that many Montenegrins have a common heritage with the Baltic region of Russia.¹¹ And just before they dance "The Merry Widow Waltz" later in the second act, Danilo and Hanna dance a *kolo*, which they identify as the national dance of Pontevedro, and which is indeed the most important dance type native to Montenegro, even if it is just as important to other Balkan states, such as Croatia and Serbia.¹²

♪ 1.4

♪ 1.5

♪ 1.6

♪ 1.7

♪ 1.8

♪ 1.9

It is important to note the orientalizing aspect of Lehár's musical strategy, since what binds the music of Pontevedro together is its Eastern European "otherness" in relation to Vienna (even recalling that Vienna is farther east than Prague); also involved is a strong imperialist streak, which looks down on the extreme vulnerability of (most of) the lands referred to, all of them except Russia functioning historically as buffers between larger and more powerful neighbors on all sides, forced to form compromising alliances with those powerful neighbors in order to achieve some measure of stability.¹³ Montenegro itself was caught directly between the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire, protected more by its strategic inconsequentiality and mountainous inaccessibility than by its own strength or alliances—even if, historically, Montenegro boasts a truly impressive history of fierce resistance to the Turks, maintaining some degree of sovereignty during centuries of being completely surrounded by the Ottoman Empire. Since shortly after the Napoleonic Wars in the early nineteenth century, the Czech lands had been under Austrian control and most of Poland under Russian control; Hungary was also a secondary power to Vienna within what was ostensibly a ruling partnership, and Gypsies, by definition, have no specific homeland (although in musical terms they are most often linked with Hungary).

If all this might have been lost on American audiences in 1907, particularly with the shift to "Marsovia" (it is in any case definitely lost on most audiences today), what is *not* lost is the shift to the *kolo*, the last "ethnic" dance introduced in the show, early in Act II. Of all the ethnic dances, this is the least universalized. The mazurka, despite its specific origins, had long since become a familiar type, given Chopin's series of piano works in this idiom earlier, in the nineteenth century. The polonaise and polka already had a kind of mixed currency. The Russianist and "Hungarian" dances are not

identified as types. Suddenly, however, we are drawn inward, with the kolo, into the shared heritage between Hanna and Danilo, this time more intimately than in the playful folk-song duet heard shortly before, “The Cavalier.” It hardly matters that their kolo is inauthentic or that it doesn’t coordinate very well with the other ethnicities being suggested; what does matter is that this move aligns with a larger strategy that shrinks the dramatic focus from the public and political to the personal and intimate. This strategy is evident throughout the show, especially with regard to the three parable-like folk legends in Act II and the treatment of the famous “Merry Widow Waltz,” whose subsequent fame tends to obscure its careful deployment in the show.

Most memorable of the three parable songs is Hanna’s “Vilja,” which tells of a wood nymph (“Vilia” is a “witch” in Ross’s translation) who seduces and then abandons a hunter, a scenario resonant with Danilo’s perspective on Hanna’s behavior toward him. Musically, the folk element is first established rhythmically, in the verse, through simple repetitions of a duple-meter “canzona” rhythm (long, short-short), which the haunting chorus then takes up in an expansive gesture based on the “gapped” or pentatonic scale (a five-note scale without half steps often used to evoke folk music) that climaxes, however, on an aching major seventh above the tonic before falling back (see also example 1.1 below):

♪ 1.10

♪ 1.11

Vilia, O Vilia! the **witch** of the wood!

The upper pitch of this archlike trajectory (on “witch”) departs from the pentatonic vocabulary, so that its bittersweet failure to attain the upper tonic note is all the more poignant, an emblem for the apparent unattainability of Vilja herself (although the upper tonic is reached and lingered over when the musical phrase repeats).

The second parable reverses perspective; in “The Cavalier,” sung by Danilo and Hanna, it is the man who is fickle, unwilling to commit to his beloved, preferring his freedom and thus missing his chance for romantic happiness. As before, the verse tells the story, this time with a rhythmic snap over characteristic “rustic” accompaniment (a grace-note inflection to the upper note of an open-fifth drone),¹⁴ a combination that well expresses the haughty horseman’s impatience; the chorus mocks this prideful hauteur with a flighty “Silly, silly cavalier!” contemptuously sending the uncomprehending horseman on his way. Important here is the woman’s perspective, which takes in much more than that of the man, who sees only that she has spurned him and congratulates himself that he has retained his freedom. Implicitly, we know from this that Hanna sees both past and future more clearly than does Danilo, whose vaunted “freedom” mainly involves escape to Maxim’s.

♪ 1.12

The third parable, “The Prince and the Princess,” is the most transparent; here, in Danilo’s story of a prince who has finally had enough of his beloved princess’s tricks, his rage overcomes him, so that he is barely able to distinguish between himself and the prince of his story. But between “The

Cavalier” and “The Prince and the Princess” (which serves as a kind of “trio,” or middle section, to “In the Modern Style”), comes “The Merry Widow Waltz,” where begins the true trajectory of his and Hanna’s rekindled romance.

“The Merry Widow Waltz” contrasts vividly with the other, much louder waltzes that have come before it (such as “Oh, Come Away” in Act I), all very public in their orientation. One of Lehár’s principal concerns from the start, it would seem, is to set up this sudden shift to extreme intimacy for maximum dramatic effect; this is undoubtedly why he does not begin the show with this most famous of his waltzes,¹⁵ but rather begins the first act with “Parisian” music, provides ample ballroom music along the way (often as background), and closes the act with the couple finding their private way within a public waltz. Within Act II, he creates “public” frames for two related moments of private intimacy. First, as the trio to the fast and furious “Mi velimo dase veslimo!” he introduces the extended lyrical interlude of “Vilja.” Across the second half of the act he creates a larger-scale frame based on the even more raucous Parisian idiom, extending from “Women” to “In the Modern Style,” with its repeated episodes of musical laughter and cancan effects. Between these framing numbers, the trajectories of the show’s two love stories meet and cross, with Hanna and Danilo’s “Merry Widow Waltz” interlude and Camille and Valencienne’s final impassioned duet; thereafter, the latter’s affair will terminate, and the former’s will continue to flourish (after an initial setback).

“The Merry Widow Waltz” episode is thus situated in parallel to “Vilja,” as a suddenly intimate moment within a raucous, public frame, and Lehár underscores this connection by beginning each with the same four-note musical gesture (and in the same key), borrowing as well from “Vilja” the characteristic move to the upper leading tone that does not resolve to the upper tonic (see example 1.1). But these two recollections make somewhat opposite points. The striking opening gesture is immediately arresting with its recollection of Vilja’s siren song—the overpowering voice of true love—but the suspended leading tone in this case does not “ache,” since it is harmonized not against the dissonant tonic but within a conventionally descending sequence that comes to rest comfortably in the lower octave.

Indeed, part of what makes this waltz so satisfying is its fairly systematic conversion of the early tune’s poignancies into something more comfortably assured. From the beginning, the open-ended gesture of “Vilja” is absorbed into a more compact waltz idiom, the opening four-note phrase repeats, reaches benignly up a half step (thus departing from the eerie pentatonicism of “Vilja”), and immediately cycles back down to begin again. Meanwhile, the waltz idiom returns us to the moment at the end of Act I, when Hanna and Danilo are virtually compelled by the waltz to come together as a couple, if only for the duration of the dance. In this way, “The Merry Widow Waltz” suddenly brings together the necessary ingredients of a successful resolution: the overpowering love and shared heritage of “Vilja,” and the idiom of the

 1.13

 1.14

Vil - ja, O Vil - ja! the witch of the wood

Example 1.1a. *The Merry Widow*: excerpt from “Vilja”

Example 1.1b. *The Merry Widow*: excerpt from “Merry Widow Waltz”

waltz, with a comforting sense of trust evoked by the familiar formulas of romantic dance (especially important for Danilo). The only missing ingredient is verbal articulation. The first step toward this is taken during this initial episode, which moves from an instrumental waltz to their humming in unison while they dance (a broad hint that has been particularly well received: this has indeed been a tune that people have chosen to *hum*, usually quite comfortable about not knowing the words). But verbal articulation does not come until the plot is comfortably resolved, when, near the end of Act III, words added to the tune complete the trajectory from instruments to expressed love (and here I offer a literal translation, since the Ross translation is not entirely successful in conveying this element):¹⁶

♪ 1.15

♪ 1.16

Lippen schweigen, 's flüstern Geigen:	Lips are silent, the violin whispers it:
Hab mich lieb!	Love me!
All die Schritte sagen: Bitte,	All the steps say: Please,
Hab mich lieb!	Love me!
Jeder Druck der Hände	Each press of the hands
Deutlich mir's beschrieb,	Describes it to me plainly,
Er sagt klar: 's ist wahr, 's ist wahr,	It says clearly: It's true, it's true,
Du hast mich lieb!	You love me!

[middle section]

Bei jedem Walzerschritt	With every waltz step
Tanzt auch die Seele mit,	Dances the soul as well,

Du hüpfst das Herzchen klein,	You make my small heart leap,
Es klopft und pocht:	It knocks and pounds:
Sei mein! Sei mein!	Be mine! Be mine!
Und der Mund, er spricht kein Wort,	And the mouth, it speaks no word,
Doch tönt es fort und immerfort:	Yet it sounds on and on:
Ich hab' dich ja so lieb . . .	I love you so . . .
Ich hab' dich lieb!	I love you!

Even when words are placed against the tune, they insist that the real message remains unspoken, sounding within the music and experienced in the responsive dance. And these lines of communication, too, are intimate in the extreme, for it is not what even the music *says aloud* but rather what it *whispers* (through its solo strings) as the hands press together in secret, the soul dances along, and the heart within leaps in response.

This insistence on the intimate and personal over the public, expressed so eloquently in the music of *The Merry Widow*, is ultimately the “message” of the show. The larger fate of Pontevedro does not really matter; neither Danilo nor Hanna expends a moment’s energy on this issue, one way or the other. Even the clichéd dichotomy of love versus money becomes part of this theme; only when all considerations of money—the loudest and most public of the world’s “talkers”—are put aside is Danilo able to “speak” of his own love for Hanna, and then only through music and dance. The raucous, very public clamor that especially the Parisian music offers is thus a foil for the more private resolution—even if that foil is indulged in with shameless abandon at nearly every turn. Within the dynamic of the music’s “geography,” Paris is the real world, the noisy exterior; Pontevedro—not as a real place, but as a nostalgic memory—provides the path to a quieter and more vital interior; and Vienna (through the waltz) inflects each dimension with romance (i.e., the potential for coupled sexuality).

But the trajectory of Hanna and Danilo’s reconciliation does not in itself provide a fully satisfactory romantic trajectory within the established idioms of romantic musical theater. The ardor against a perhaps feigned resistance and the interplay between the dangerous unknown and the safely known—that is, the emblems of a romance in its early stages—are part of their prehistory and not relived except through the mediation of their parable songs. Camille and Valencienne, however, provide precisely this dimension of romance and disappear as a romantic couple only as—and precisely when—the viability of Hanna and Danilo as a romantic pairing is proven. Symbolically, the shift between the two romances occurs when we see Valencienne enter the pavilion and Hanna emerge to launch the second-act finale. But before that shift, we get three musical numbers that provide the fully launched trajectory of a romance: the resisted initial thrust (“A Dutiful Wife,” early in Act I); the jesting interplay of a projected domestic tranquility (“The Charm of Domesticity,” later in Act I, often cut), which offers the playful cut and thrust that operetta recovered from Mozart’s *Da Ponte*

collaborations;¹⁷ and, in Act II, the overwhelming ardor of Camille’s romance, “Love in My Heart,” sung in a waltzlike idiom just before they enter the pavilion for what is ostensibly a farewell kiss. When, as in some English-language performances, the second of these (“The Charm of Domesticity”) is given to Hanna and Danilo instead of Valencienne and Camille—following the logic that it is the second duet in Act I for the latter couple, whereas the ostensible stars have no real duet until Act II—it clearly violates the dramatic logic of Lehár’s schematic of interlocking romantic trajectories, and more particularly undermines the awakening of their dormant love during “The Merry Widow Waltz” episode in Act II.

♪ 1.17

♪ 1.18

♪ 1.19

Yet on a broader level, following another kind of logic, it scarcely matters which couple sings what, just so it all gets sung in the right order, for the combination of the two barely interlocking romantic trajectories provides precisely one fully satisfying romance, with the disappearance of Valencienne and Camille behind the closed doors of the pavilion providing the visual equivalent of the unspoken intimacies of “The Merry Widow Waltz” moments before. Lehár thereby makes it easy for us to follow our natural inclination to splice these two separate stories together as we take in the show, allowing the truncated romance of Valencienne and Camille to substitute, implicitly, for the missing “back story” of Hanna and Danilo. In the special logic of Viennese operetta, there is really only one love story, however rendered. Nor can it be otherwise if we in the audience are to believe that their romances might also be ours if we can but learn to dance their waltzes and sing their songs (or even, in this particular case, to wear their clothing; both the original American production and the 1952 film led to fashion crazes, for the “Merry Widow Hat” in the first instance [see figure 1.1] and the “Merry Widow”—the type of corset worn by Lana Turner in the film—in the second).¹⁸

The Merry Widow thus figures prominently in a developmental strand of the American musical of particular importance to the themes to be taken up later in this book: the relentless focus in musicals on the individual, at the expense of the larger issues redounding to the world at large. Tangentially related to this dynamic is another to be taken up in the epilogue (chapter 7): the halfway status *The Merry Widow* and other operettas have traditionally inhabited between high and low culture, at least in America. This relationship is perhaps more than tangential, since European operetta itself was born in a reactive move away from the grandeur of opera, in order to inhabit a more intimate space. But in America, the position of operetta has been less well defined, functioning both to mock high-art pretensions (as in Europe) and as something with the potential to elevate the more mainstream tradition. It is interesting to note, for example, that when *Little Mary Sunshine* sets out to mock operetta—albeit with dotting affection—half a century after *The Merry Widow*, it can do so only by being itself an actual operetta, or that *Kiss Me, Kate*’s equally gentle mockery of operetta in “Wunderbar” (1948; see chapter 6) is set within a complicated mix of high and low: back-



Figure 1.1. The craze for “Merry Widow hats,” with wide brims and elaborate feathers, inspired Bobby Heath and Gus Benkhart’s “Under My Merry Widow Hat,” published the same year that *The Merry Widow* opened in New York (1907; this publication thus predates what the *Oxford English Dictionary* reports as the first written use of the phrase “Merry Widow hat,” in 1908). The song’s lyric proposes the sheltering brim of the hat as a substitute for the bamboo tree in Bob Cole and J. Rosamond Johnson’s popular 1902 song, “Under the Bamboo Tree” (discussed in chapter 2, pp. 98 and note 69), and its music refers clearly to both the “Merry Widow Waltz” and “Under the Bamboo Tree.” Typical for the time, the sheet-music cover carries photographs not only of the song’s authors and publishers but also of a noted singer.

stage of the elevated Shakespeare's rather low comedy *The Taming of the Shrew*, as part of Cole Porter's most complexly realized score for a "mere" musical, in which the song functions as an "authentic" moment between two major poseurs.

More specific to *The Merry Widow* are the intriguing moments when symphonic music by major "classical" figures seems to allude to its tunes, which constitutes an exceedingly rare response to operetta. Mahler, virtually on the heels of the show that had so recently taken his adopted city of Vienna by storm (even if he was to abandon the city shortly after *The Merry Widow* had nearly completed its conquest of Europe),¹⁹ seems to allude to "Women" in a much-repeated passage in the third movement of his Ninth Symphony (composed 1908–1909), in a passage that Mahler's most serious interpretive critic, Theodor Adorno, singles out as particularly significant.²⁰ Better known are Shostakovich's apparent borrowing from "Maxim's" in his 1941 *Leningrad Symphony* and Bartók's notorious "response" in his 1943 *Concerto for Orchestra*.²¹ That some or all of these references might have been satirical should not distract us from noticing that their source material was itself presented with satirical intent, with a sophistication rivaling that of these more venerated "classical" figures, all of them noted satirists. The childish "Maxim's," for example, with its infantilizing refrain of "Lolo, Dodo, Joujou, Cloclo, Margot, Froufrou," provides a portrait of a regressed Danilo that repeats (and repeats) whenever he wants to escape painful realities, and serves as a foil for the later emergence of a more adult Danilo, who can once again trust his more mature response to Hanna. And "Women," however much it may masquerade as a rebuke to its subject, more fundamentally rebukes the characters who are singing by revealing them in a similarly regressed state—again as a foil, this time for the first "Merry Widow Waltz" sequence, immediately following. The number offers not only a sophisticated topical play on the cancan but also, in one passage, an almost Mahlerian blend of satire and musical sophistication, when a canonic descending chromatic scale ("Women, women, women, women") produces a harshly comic series of descending augmented triads (see example 1.2). The very longevity of *The Merry Widow* in the repertory bears witness to its ability to play both sides of the fence, whether as low comedy masquerading as high art or vice versa.²²

Emblematic of *The Merry Widow's* ability to play both sides of this divide, whether in Europe or America, is its double-edged treatment of its diva. In a manner highly characteristic of operetta more generally, *The Merry Widow*—named, as in so many operettas, for its female lead—is built around a female star persona who is accustomed to being the center of attention and given ample opportunities for vocal display, but who in the end needs the love of a man to whom she must accommodate, one who is often both less advantageously placed socially and more truly independent. Danilo is, to be sure, an important man (*Prince Danilo* in the Anglo-American version), yet in this situation not as important as Hanna, who ultimately makes conces-

♪ 1.20

♪ 1.21

♪ 1.22

♪ 1.23

♪ 1.24

♪ 1.25

The musical score is for an excerpt from "Women" in *The Merry Widow*. It features four vocal parts: Dan. (Dance), Pop. & Nis. (Popular & Nis.), St.B. & Khad. (St. B. & Khad.), and Cas. & Nov. (Cas. & Nov.). The music is in 2/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The lyrics are: "Wo-men, wo-men, wo-men, wo-men, wo-men, wo-men, ah!" for the Dan. part, and "Wo-men, wo-men, wo-men, wo-men, wo-men, wo-men," for the other three parts. The score shows a melodic line with various rhythmic values and dynamics, including accents and slurs.

Example 1.2. *The Merry Widow*: excerpt from “Women”

sions to win *him* (albeit in the form of a subterfuge), not the reverse. Importantly, this characteristic structure entails yet another shift from public to personal; more on the surface, it indulges an audience’s taste for feminine vocal display while putting that element “in its place.”

Both sides of this situation of “having one’s cake and eating it too” are crucial to the success of operetta in America. Perhaps the fullest expression of this dynamic occurs in the tradition of the “laughing song,” which in the case of *The Merry Widow* ends the second act (“In the Modern Style”). As in many such numbers, the heroine introduces extravagant material with much virtuosic work on repeated syllables (in this case “Tra la la la . . . la!” and “No! Oh, no! Oh, no, no, no . . . no!”), which the chorus takes over while she “improvises” above them, creating a feeling of virtuosic overabundance. In *The Merry Widow*, that effect is enhanced by a kind of virtuosic competition between Hanna and Valencienne, with each reaching her high A in turn, so that at every moment of the passage in question one of them is either sustaining the climactic pitch or singing rapid syllables below (Hanna, of course, “wins” the contest in the end). But implicit in this overabundance is the sense that it is, indeed, *too much*, a giddy moment of feminine (and operatic) ascendancy that must eventually be reversed.

 1.26

Naughty Marietta (1910) is widely regarded as the best work of the first great American composer of serious music, Victor Herbert (who also wrote, performed, and conducted concert music and operas; moreover, as is fairly rare in American musical theater, he mostly did his own orchestration). The show exemplifies the “in-between” aspect of American operetta, as it was the first work mounted by the impresario Oscar Hammerstein (grandfather to the eventual partner of Richard Rodgers) after he was “persuaded” through a large settlement not to stage operas in competition with the Metropolitan Opera Company, and since the show featured, in vocally demanding roles, the Italian opera singer Emma Trentini (who specialized in soubrette roles; see figure 1.2) and Orville Harrold, known as the

American Caruso. Despite a weak libretto by Rida Johnson Young, *Naughty Marietta* was a major success both in New York and on tour. Several of its tunes remain well known today, even if they have become to some extent laughable clichés. Thus, “Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life” served as the punch line to a crude joke at the end of Mel Brooks’s *Young Frankenstein* (1974),²³ quite a comedown from its function within *Naughty Marietta* as the celebrated climax of a kind of musical treasure hunt. “Italian Street Song,” too, has become irretrievably campy in performance, with men prancing around the stage, at one point booming the following lines with only the deeper instruments accompanying them in unison, and the women responding after each line:

♫ 1.27

MEN:	Mandolinas gay	Dancing as we play
WOMEN:	Zizzy, zizzy, zing, zing, zing	Zizzy, zizzy, zing, zing, zing

When staged with any skill and combined with a bravura performance by a capable coloratura (in male drag), the number provides a particularly potent mix for high camp, but only because it is no longer as familiar as “Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life.”

Numbers such as these two have in fact become emblematic of the other “in-between” position operetta has come to occupy, especially in later decades, when it acquired two overlapping audiences: those who took its absurdities seriously and relished the occasion they provided for beautiful virtuoso singing in the grand manner, and those who savored the campy mixing of overelaborate plots, setting, staging, and costumes—and of course virtuoso singing—with the laughably melodramatic situations they ostensibly supported. Two conclusions seem credible about this potential bifurcation of audience, which has long been a substantial component of Broadway shows more generally. Often, the assumption has been that the campy disjuncture between expressive means and dramatic substance is to be explained wholly in terms of historical distance; according to this assumption, these laughable artifacts would have been taken seriously in their day, as seriously as their extravagant accoutrement would suggest. Although this is certainly and obviously true—many did take them quite seriously, and many have continued to do so, even in revival—the historical validity of this receptive mode does not rule out the possibility that operetta’s expressive disjunctures were even in their day quite deliberate.

Indeed, the notion that all who enjoyed *Naughty Marietta* in 1910 took its melodrama seriously is on the face of it insulting to those early audiences; moreover, there is ample evidence that the show was played rather broadly even then. Thus, while to some extent the well-documented “acting up” or “clowning” of the original *Marietta* was a byproduct of performing the same material up to eight times a week, it was also a way of suggesting to an audience that it need not take everything seriously. It may be difficult to show—and for many to believe—that in 1910 “Mandolinas gay / Dancing as we play” was an inside joke, and that Herbert himself might have been

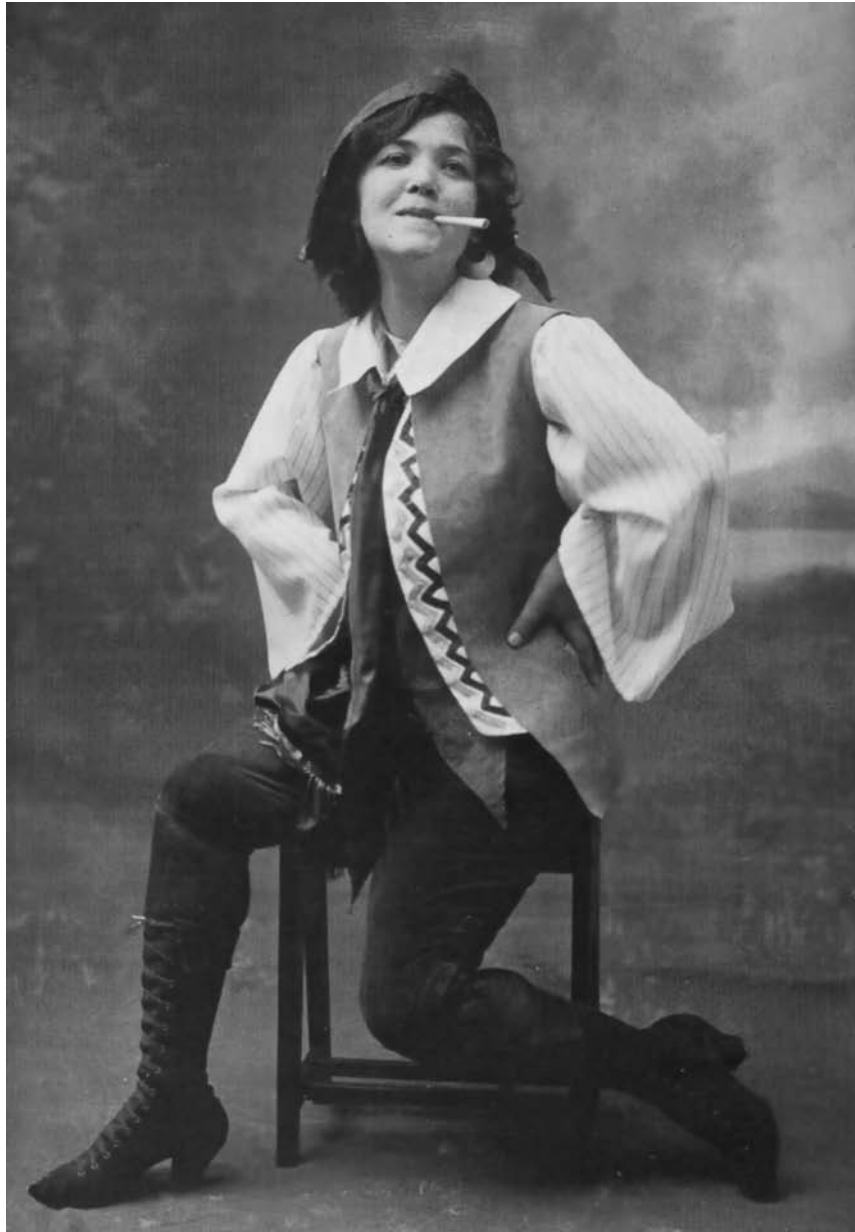


Figure 1.2. Italian-born Emma Trentini rose to stardom in New York as the original Marietta in *Naughty Marietta*, but her temperament so alienated Victor Herbert that he refused to compose for her again. She appears here in “Italian Street Song,” disguised as a Gypsy boy. (Photograph courtesy of Miles Kreuger and the Institute of the American Musical, Inc.)

in on it. But it seems foolish, and insulting to Herbert, to rule out that possibility. With Herbert, indeed, we are caught between his high-art aspirations (presumably *not* an appropriate background for indulging in camp) and his extremely competent and knowing deployment of musical tropes. Did his basic aesthetic preclude deliberate engagement with the 1910 equivalent of camp? Or did his knowingness extend to his management of a camp dimension, so that later generations merely rediscovered what he had deliberately fashioned, as part of the show? Perhaps the best way to respond to this dilemma is to note, once again, that the two audience perspectives on operetta *overlap* to a significant extent, for it is indeed possible to take operetta's content seriously and laugh at it, *both at the same time*—and it seems, moreover, an admirably human capacity to be able to respond in precisely this way.

From one perspective, *Naughty Marietta* marks the Americanization of Lehár's Viennese confections, a process that entails a kind of coarsening of the genre. Here, the show's plot contrivances and the other inadequacies of Young's libretto, when considered along with the obvious connections between this show and *The Merry Widow*, offer important evidence. Indeed, *Naughty Marietta* makes an overt mention of the earlier show during a conventional "Jewish shtick" number interpolated late in the second act ("It's Pretty Soft for Simon"; the "he" in question is Adonis): "Ant he danced der Merry Vidow Valse / Mit Frau Demosthenes." But there are many more substantial connections, as well. Like *The Merry Widow*, *Naughty Marietta* indulges a taste for the exotic musical colors offered by Gypsy music, Parisian cancan, and Viennese waltz. Also evocative of *The Merry Widow* are a raucous second-act men's number to establish a locale where respectable women normally do not venture ("New Orleans Jeunesse Dorée") and an "ethnic" segment of songs and dances that ranges much more widely than geography and history might reasonably allow ("Loves of New Orleans"), in this case concluding in a ragtime version of a melody first given as a seductively chromatic "quadroon" melody in thirds,²⁴ following episodes styled after a Spanish waltz, a dreamy "Island" number, and a French cancan. More basically, "Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life" in *Naughty Marietta* borrows the dramatic profile of the "Merry Widow Waltz," which is transformed from a mysterious melody to an actual song only at the end of the show, where it serves to enforce the union of the main romantic couple (a device also prominently featured in *Rose-Marie*, centering around "Indian Love Call" and later adapted to trace the central psychological journey of the heroine in *Lady in the Dark*, discussed in chapter 6). And, as in *The Merry Widow*, that couple earlier sings of the impossibility of their union; if "It Never, Never Can Be Love" seems considerably less subtle than the series of parable songs in *The Merry Widow*, such is only par for the coarsening many see in the American derivatives of Viennese operetta more generally.

Yet, the more basic way in which *Naughty Marietta* points to an Americanization of Viennese operetta concerns its conversion of the latter tradi-

♪ 1.28

♪ 1.29

♪ 1.30

♪ 1.31

♪ 1.32

♪ 1.33

♪ 1.34

tion's emphasis on personal issues and relationships into a thoroughgoing exploration of human slavery and freedom, quite daring and sophisticated in its way, even if placed at a safe remove from 1910 America and seldom dealing overtly with the racial component of the issue in America. At every turn and with every situation in *Naughty Marietta*, personal freedom is the basic concern. Already in the opening sequence, in a "daybreak" number based largely on the street cries of early-morning vendors, we hear them proclaim their commitment to freedom in response to watching the Creole convent girls on their way to prayer:

 1.35

To Smile they are afraid.
 Oh! la! la!
 Oh! la! la!
 I wouldn't be a convent maid!

Since basing musical numbers on the street cries of "costermongers" (street vendors) partakes of a long European tradition dating from the thirteenth century, the number foregrounds New Orleans's cultural connection to the Old World, but it also Americanizes that tradition in its emphasis on personal freedom.²⁵

With the main characters, the fierce commitment to freedom is even more overt. Marietta (the disguised Italian Countess d'Altena, rendered French in both the 1935 film and the 1955 televised version)²⁶ escapes one kind of servitude in Europe—in which she would be forced to marry against her will—for another, disguising herself as a "casket girl" (or "casquette girl"), sent from France to New Orleans with a small dowry on condition that she marry someone among its female-starved population (which Marietta refuses to do). Richard Warrington (Captain Dick) and his "rangers" eschew allegiance to any particular government (touting themselves as "Planters and Canucks, / Virginians and Kaintucks"), preferring to work as freelance mercenaries. The commission they have undertaken is to capture another "freelance" adventurer, the notorious pirate Bras Piqué (the name refers to his "needled"—or tattooed—arm), who in reality is Etienne, the son of the Lieutenant Governor, plotting to establish an independent Louisiana. Etienne is romantically involved with Adah, a quadroon who is also his slave, whom he threatens to sell when he tires of her. The symbolic image of the puppet, obviously relevant to the underlying theme, occurs throughout. Thus, Marietta joins a marionette troupe to escape detection and performs in "Dance of the Marionettes," which in turn inspires Etienne to sing "You Marry a Marionette," whose title describes the only way to remain free while committing oneself to a woman, who will otherwise pull the strings.

The frequent claim that the plotline of *Naughty Marietta* is confusing—fair enough as far as the claim goes—stems partly from a certain ineptitude on the part of the librettist and partly from a habit carrying over from opera more generally, but more importantly from two exterior sources, both deriving from an unwillingness on the part of the show's critics to credit the show

with a guiding intelligence. First of these is the failure to grasp the show's thematic consistency, thereby missing the point of its otherwise odd refusal of a conventional conclusion. According to the conventions of melodrama, which we tend to assume must apply to operetta automatically, Etienne, who has seemed amply villainous in his treatment of Adah and who plans to escape prosecution by forcing himself on the highborn Countess d'Altena (Marietta), must obviously be either captured or killed by Captain Dick. Instead, Warrington recognizes in Etienne a kindred free spirit—whose larger political aims are pointed after all in the direction of political freedom for his adopted land—and so allows him to escape, thereby also refusing to accept the will of existing governmental authority. The second basis for faulting the show's plot stems from a more basic failure to accept one of the governing principles of operetta: to wit, its focus on the personal dimension, which means, ultimately, that its apparent ties to real situations in the real world (or to history) are in the end beside the point. American operetta, like its Viennese antecedent, points to reality and history, but in a deliberately vague way, so as not to be held accountable to either. Thus, to reject *Naughty Marietta* because its New Orleans setting never existed in any particular historical moment—its events officially take place between the American and French Revolutions, but the show borrows situations (and, of course, musical modes) from both later and earlier times—is to miss entirely the point of American operetta's elaborately evasive dance with reality.²⁷

We might in this regard usefully contrast operetta with French grand opera, which also mixes the historical and the personal. In the latter, produced mainly in the middle decades of the nineteenth century, as in many operettas, historical settings typically provide the backdrop for a personal drama, yet the dynamic between the two is almost precisely the opposite. In French grand opera, history functions as a determining force that overwhelms the lives of its foregrounded individuals with a sense of inevitable fate; for this dynamic to work well, the history in question must be fairly accurate, at least according to the preconceptions of its audience. In operetta, however, which insists on the ability of the individual to determine his or her own fate, it helps tremendously both to evoke the powerful imperatives of history and geography and to blunt their controlling power through a variety of devices, which might include precisely the kind of historical confections we find in *Naughty Marietta*.²⁸

Another intriguing point of reference for operettas, particularly those that trade in disguises to make political points, is Rossini's *Barber of Seville* (1816), an *opera buffa* (derived from the same series of political comedies by Beaumarchais as Mozart's earlier *Marriage of Figaro*) in which the Count, with the aid of Figaro, disguises himself in order to woo his future Countess. While the situation in *Barber* is seemingly resonant with the disguises undertaken by Countess d'Altena in *Naughty Marietta*, or Sonia (Hanna) in the later film versions of *The Merry Widow*, there is again an important difference: whereas in *Barber* the Count's authority, as Count, is

Cpt. Dick

Andante Ah! sweet mys-ter-y of life, at last I've found thee Ah! I know at last the se-cret of it all. All the

Marietta

Ah! at last I've found thee! found thee! at last!

long-ing seek-ing, stri-ving, wait-ing yearn-ing, the burning hopes, the joy and i-dle tears that fall!

Example 1.3. *Naughty Marietta*: excerpt from “Ah! Sweet Mystery of Life”

a necessary adjunct to the successful resolution of the plot, in operetta the restoration of the “real world” through the stripping away of a character’s disguise represents the single most potent threat to the only resolution that truly matters.

In *Naughty Marietta*, the emphasis on the personal is couched, musically, within two kinds of “quest” scenarios, realized side by side. In the most obvious of these, Marietta, haunted throughout by a fragment of a melody, whether sung as vocalise or presented instrumentally, seeks to find its completion, both as a melody and as a song with meaningful words. This quest reaches its completion in the finale, led by Captain Dick in rhymes as forced and sentiments as banal as in most translations of *The Merry Widow*’s “I Love You So.” If the arrival point is the same—that is, “Love” as “The Answer”—the point is made much less subtly; nevertheless, Herbert does a creditable job of emphasizing key words by rendering them as dissonant appoggiaturas (i.e., accented nonharmonic tones that resolve downward into alignment with the harmony; these syllables are emphasized here in bold italics, and the dissonant appoggiaturas correspond to the texted arrivals in example 1.3):

Ah! sweet *mystery* of *life*, at last I’ve found thee,
 Ah! I *know* at last the secret of it all.
 All the *longing*, seeking, *striving*, waiting, yearning;
 The *burning* hopes, the joy and idle tears that fall!

♪ 1.36

♪ 1.37

For 'tis *love*, and love *alone* the world is seeking;
 And 'tis *love*, and love alone, that can repay!
 'Tis the answer, 'tis the end and all of living,
 For it is love alone that rules for aye!

This familiar tune is built out of a string of simple melodic units, each of which might function as a dissonant appoggiatura; since only a few of them actually function that way, what emerges is a clear progression: “*mystery of life*”—“*I know* at last” / “*longing*”—“*striving*”—“*burning*” / “*love . . . alone*”—“*love*.” The rest tends to fade into the generalized unison concordance of arrival, particularly in the final two lines, where the long-avoided cadence to the tonic actually occurs.

If we might here observe, as in music more generally, the frequent banality of actual resolution after an extended and significantly more engrossing quest for resolution, that pattern is even more deliberately realized within the other quest scenario, in which an early “striving” chromatic movement upward is finally brought to resolution within a conventional waltz idiom. Examples of this chromatic “questing” motive (generally three notes) are legion early on, including most prominently “Tramp, tramp, tramp,” which begins the overture and soon after introduces Captain Dick and his men (bracketed words in bold indicate rising chromatic motion; braced italics indicate its inverted or retrograde form, a falling chromatic motion):

♪ 1.38

[**Tramp, tramp, tramp**] along the {*highway*
 [*Tramp*], tramp, tramp], the [road is free]

The motive appears in many contexts, such as the beginning of “Taisez-Vous,” where the men’s ardor provokes the response of “taisez-vous” (“be quiet”) from the Casket girls:

♪ 1.39

MEN: [Oh! Maiden fair, oh, maiden fair],
 Won’t you marry me? Won’t you marry me?
 WOMEN: Taisez-vous, taisez-vous, we’ll see!

More playful hints of the motive, where it is “resolved” through its inverted form, occur in Dick and Marietta’s duet, “It Never, Never Can Be Love,” which traces the upward-chromatic motion within questions (“You’ll never try just to kiss my hand?”) and offers pat reassurances that reverse the chromatic motion into a three-note repeating motive:

♪ 1.40

{*Then I’m sure*}, / {*if you’re sure*},
 {*And I’m sure*}, / {*I am sure*},
 {*That we mu*}tually understand.

The climax of this quest scenario occurs shortly before the finale, with Captain Dick’s “I’m Falling in Love with Some One,” where symmetrical chromatic motion yields to a simple, even, stepwise descent in waltz time,

directly reminiscent of the phrase endings of “The Merry Widow Waltz” (beginning here with the repeated words “some one”):

 1.41

[For I'm fall]*(ing in love)* with some one, some one . . .

Here, the musical profile is a deft realization of the text, turning from the “quest” motive to its realization on the second syllable of the word “falling.” Aligning the descending version of the motive with the actual word “falling” is an example of “word painting,” a kind of musical literalism that on its own might seem almost comic (especially since the word “falling” is set to a *rising* fifth). But here the gesture also encapsulates the larger motivic progression, balancing with one simple gesture the rising chromatic opening. Moreover, the chromatic descent, in performance (where it is often slowed down), comes across as an initial reluctance, which then yields to a more accepting free fall regulated by the waltz idiom (“some one, some one”); here Herbert is taking advantage of the typical Viennese waltz pattern of holding back before arrivals—the *Luftpause*—which gives a feeling of release to the return of the faster tempo.²⁹ (Significantly, the overture is built around these two quest scenarios, beginning with “Tramp, tramp, tramp,” which resolves into “I’m Falling in Love with Some One,” and ending with the same pairing that will conclude the finale, “Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life” and “Italian Street Song”; the latter song does not, however, otherwise figure in either quest scenario.)

As with *The Merry Widow*, the larger romantic trajectory receives implicit support through the secondary romantic interest, in this case through “’Neath the Southern Moon,” sung by Adah; the song also indirectly helps to validate Etienne, who would in most respects otherwise come across as simply bad (as opposed to “complicated bad, with possibilities for redemption”). And again, the two romantic trajectories are interwoven sufficiently that this ultraromantic number, with its chromatically inflected harmonic shifts by thirds, might serve partly as Marietta’s background, by association, and so displace both the sauciness of the number that officially introduces her (“Naughty Marietta,” which imagines two Mariettas inside her heart, one well behaved, the other more hotly tempered: “So when I am good, I am very good indeed, / But when I am bad, I’m horrid!”) and the frivolity of her more elaborate numbers, such as “Italian Street Song.”³⁰

 1.42

 1.43

The critical musical number that serves to intertwine the two stories is the impressive quartet “Live for Today,” just before “I’m Falling in Love with Some One,” in which both Adah and Marietta, motivated by feelings of betrayal by their respective lovers, insist on a wanton indulgence in the moment. Although Captain Dick (but not Etienne) stands somewhat apart from this sentiment, the number insists, as does operetta more generally, on the here and now over the supposedly larger context. Not for nothing is “Live for Today” the most exaggeratedly “Viennese” number in the show, with its supple waltz idiom pausing to dwell deliciously on one anticipatory moment

- ♪ 1.44 after another. In dramatic terms, the intertwining of the two stories within this number both deepens the main love story and provides the necessary (and specifically musical) motivation for Captain Dick's decision to allow Etienne to escape at the end.

Little Mary Sunshine (1959), with book, music, and lyrics by Rick Besoyan, marks an important point of articulation in the historical management, within operetta, of its coexisting “straight” and “camp” dimensions. As with nearly all staged musical traditions in New York, going well back into the nineteenth century, a variety of modes of reception were available for Viennese operetta and its American offshoots. Thus, operetta might be taken to be either high art or “mere” entertainment, or both at once; either serious or campy, or both at once; either a musical drama to be taken more or less at face value or a heavily coded performance of a variety of tropes and double entendres—or both at once. In more recent decades, operetta has become most accessible to gay readings through its camp dimension (although other dimensions continue to matter), but even here, gay associations are rarely made explicit, since the multivalent interpretive possibilities of operetta depend on the genre's refusal to acknowledge, through explicit content, the very possibility of gay readings. As Matthew Bell puts it regarding the gay presence in American musical theater more generally, “Perhaps no other modern art form succeeds so thoroughly in appealing, at the level of reception, to a gay (and implicitly male) ‘sensitivity,’ and in refusing, at the level of denotation, gay content.”³¹

A central marker for this disjuncture between reception and the lack of explicit gay content in American operetta is the genre's frequent use of the word “gay” as part of a heavy emphasis on long-A rhymes in its lyrics. One striking example of the latter is the overuse in American operetta of the affected phrase “for aye” (meaning “forever”), which seems at times to stand as a verbal sign for the exaggerated vocal dimension of the genre. Thus, the phrase ends “Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life” in *Naughty Marietta* (see above) and is almost immediately echoed in the final syllable of the brief reprise of “Italian Street Song” that ends the operetta. Although it might be debated just how much the “gaiety” of American operetta was being read both ways as early as 1910, the word itself—a particularly useful “hinge” for the kinds of double meanings gay readings must depend on—has a prominence in this repertory that is difficult to ascribe to chance. Rather, it seems to point to an environment in which the word “gay” was, in a sense, still fully closeted, completely innocent to some, and an open secret to others.

By the mid-1930s this particular verbal closet was beginning to open. It was on the heels of the film-operetta revival that Cary Grant (as the sexually repressed David Huxley in the 1938 film *Bringing Up Baby*) famously answers the door in a spectacularly feminine negligee, for which his only explanation is “I just went *gay*, all of a sudden!” accompanied by a dancelike leap on the word “gay.” Given Grant's previous career on the musical stage

(which began not that long after *Naughty Marietta*) and other bits of recently recovered evidence, it seems reasonable to conclude that “gay” had a fairly long history as a code word for homosexual, at least within New York’s theatrical circles.³² In any case, the potential to associate operetta with gay sensibilities was both indulged and guarded against in the operetta films of the mid-1930s, whether by using them as Shirley Temple vehicles (which was both a guarantee of innocence and a shameless indulgence in itself) or through the naturalizing that took place in the drastic revisions made to their situations and plots. The latter process, a common feature of the Jeanette MacDonald adaptations, provided a contextual foil that could (depending on the viewer’s predisposition) either mask or accentuate Nelson Eddy’s prettiness and the coded “male bonding” within the group of men he led, who in their quaint costumes and behavior tended to resemble a theatrical troupe more than a military troop. Nelson Eddy, in particular, is fascinating to watch in these films. With familiarity (or, perhaps, the right perspective), his infamous “woodenness” as an actor often comes across as a bemused reaction to MacDonald’s curious obliviousness to her principal dramatic function, as the “serious” center for camped-up melodrama, a function not that different from Margaret Dumont’s in the Marx Brothers’ films of the same era.³³

The revisions to the plots of these shows in their film revivals stemmed partly from a felt need to make them more “cinematic,” to remove them from the stage into a semblance of the real world. But the impulse to revise was probably also based on a growing uneasiness about their double nature. Although elevated above mere “musicals,” operettas were, for some, made suspect by their appeal to a gay-inflected theatricality and seemed, to others who may have been oblivious to this dimension, simply laughable in their conceits and pretensions. These disquietudes reflect a strong tendency, especially for “straight” audiences, to see such things as relics of a bygone aesthetic, so that what once might have functioned as quasi-natural conventions appears stilted and artificial to later audiences. And this perception was true as far as it went, since these “artificial” components were indeed more readily accepted as generic conventions by similarly mainstream audiences of an earlier generation. Yet this rather complacent view of things, also common among later gays, is naive in its failure either to notice the important payoff of such “conventions” for much of their earlier audiences or to imagine that this payoff was actually intended.

If the 1930s operetta films achieved some success in wrestling with this duality, by the 1950s operetta had come to seem impossibly quaint and old-fashioned to mainstream sensibilities, with two seemingly inevitable consequences. Already in the 1940s (as Gerald Bordman has argued), much of the tradition had been salvaged and brought back into the mainstream, most notably by Rodgers and Hammerstein, whose reliance on operetta was disguised somewhat through an apparent newness of approach and a much ballyhooed aspiration to elevate the American musical. But performances of

older operetta in revival meanwhile lost a dimension vital to the genre's ability to maintain its double audience, as fewer and fewer could take them seriously, both because of the alternative Rodgers and Hammerstein were industriously providing and through the rise of "method" acting, which made operetta's theatricalities seem all the more absurd. Simply put, performances of operetta tended increasingly to give audiences permission to laugh at them, and so they did. Thus, the scrolling (and pompously recited) text that introduces the 1955 televised version of *Naughty Marietta* reads:

New Orleans
1790

While the Paris
of the New World
still flew the flag
of Louis the XVI
of France,
America had
just won it's [sic]
independence
from England!
The Old City
was a cauldron
of intrigue,
hot tempers,
cold steel and
fiery passions,
which can only
lead to one thing

Operetta!

Thus, operetta itself bifurcated into a set of features central to Rodgers and Hammerstein's "elevation" of the mainstream musical, on the one hand, and an increasingly ridiculous genre that mixed operatic singing and woefully outmoded melodrama, on the other. The latter development provides the direct basis for *Little Mary Sunshine*, which, by frankly leaving aside all possibility of being taken seriously as drama, managed nevertheless to maintain the bifurcation of the remaining audience into those who, within a camp dynamic, might or might not "get" the gay component. Key to the show's ability to do this is its deft engagement with the operetta tradition, extending especially to its music, which to a large extent thereby continued to yield the pleasures of "serious" operetta in significant measure. Perhaps most important, the show safely removed American operetta from the awkwardness of having to feign serious engagement with its situations and plots in order to satisfy those audience members who could not easily relinquish the heroic dimension of its dramatic action—a dimension that

outside a camp context was absolutely required as a justification for the extravagant singing.

Markers for those inclined toward understanding *Little Mary Sunshine* as specifically gay are plentiful. Within the song lyrics, for example (given here in the order they appear in the show), the Rangers “march on, man to man, to man, to man, / To man” (“The Forest Ranger”); Mary encourages them to “Please be gay” (“Look for a Sky of Blue”); “Big Jim” Warington recites a long list of flowers for Mary, including “frilly Phlox,” “Poppies of fairy gold,” promiscuously “teasing Tulips,” and “pampered Pansies” that “bring us to our knees” (“You’re the Fairest Flower”); Mme Ernestine von Liebedich hopes to make each “precious little nutting” “gay,” ending with the admonishment to “[t]ake it vile you may” (“Every Little Nothing”); Nancy Twinkle substitutes “men” for “eats,” “dainty little sweets,” “drinks,” and “frill” in a song celebrating a particularly “gay” party (“Such a Merry Party”); and Mary asserts that “the world is for the birds,” with their “merry song” that is “like a fairy song” (“Coo Coo”). If only some of the early examples register, we might well begin to wonder what Mme Liebedich’s German pronunciations are really about (including her name, if one really wants to be wicked), so that “nutting” becomes a genuine gerund to which we can apply her later suggestion to “take it vile.” Moreover, the recurrence of key words, by association, quickly spreads the double meaning of “gay” over virtually everything. “Merry,” for example, already a synonym for “gay” in a straight context and ostentatiously used that way in one song (“Such a Merry Party”), is rhymed later with “fairy” in another song extolling birds, which brings to mind the “gay” congruence of “fay” (derived from “fairy”) and the common Yiddish term for male homosexual, *fagele* (pronounced “fay-ge-lay” or “fay-ge-la” and variously spelled, deriving from the German “Vöglein”); both terms also have an obvious assonance with “faggot.” Once “merry” is thus given a securely gay connotation, the game becomes an especially easy one, since the title character’s name is but a normalized version of her Indian name, Little Merry Sunshine (who, in the song “Little Mary Sunshine” is deemed to be “very merry all the time”). Suddenly, the whole tradition is marked as gay through verbal association, from *The Merry Widow* through *Naughty Marietta* and *Rose-Marie*, and including a great many other operettas along the way.³⁴

All of which is, of course, eminently deniable. As with most gay camp, *Little Mary Sunshine* does not have to be understood as in the least bit gay. As D. A. Miller notes in a discussion of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope* (1948), “Until recently, homosexuality offered not just the most prominent, it offered the only subject matter whose representation in American mass culture appertained exclusively to the shadow kingdom of connotation, where insinuations could be at once developed and denied, where . . . one couldn’t be sure whether homosexuality was being meant at all, but on the chance it was, one also learned, along with the codes that might be conveying it, the silence necessary to keep about their deployment.”³⁵ And connotation can

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be particularly slippery when the gay dimension is not made concrete enough to raise questions about dramatic identity (thus, “Are they or aren’t they homosexual?” in the case of *Rope*) but is instead heavily mediated, dramatically impossible, or fairly occasional. For example, in operetta, a gay sensibility can easily be embodied through a woman, and it is much safer to do so than it would be to present a possibly gay man. Nancy Twinkle in *Little Mary Sunshine* is not a man and is not homosexual, yet she easily channels gay attitudes and sensibilities because of the overall campy context, the specific choice of name (both evoking the gay designation “Nancy-boy” and suggesting, through “Twinkle,” a parallel to Little Mary’s “Sunshine”), and the over-the-top expression of admiration for men (as in “Such a Merry Party”). Moreover, she doesn’t have to sustain this dimension consistently in order to serve it; indeed, it is again safer if it emerges only at key moments, preferably within particularly “safe” sequences of song and dance, where exaggeration is already to be expected. Dramatically, Nancy “redeems” herself, in terms of either her channeled “gayness” or her promiscuous heterosexuality, by assuming great personal risk to rescue her beloved Billy—no matter that this takes her to a moment in which she, Billy, and Yellow Feather, identically clothed, circle each other in a “Shell Game”!

Accordingly, the gay associations suggested here are in each case and in each particular easily denied. In a strictly literal sense, none of these means what a gay sensibility might take it to mean. “Man to man to man” is merely a comically extended cadence. “Gay” means “happy and carefree.” Flowers are flowers (even “Poppies of fairy gold” and “pampered pansies”). And Mme Liebedich’s “nutting” means nothing, both literally and figuratively. Nor does the show as a whole have to be understood as camp, since other categories also apply, such as the respectably straight designations “spoof” and “parody.” Indeed, much of the charged verbal play in *Little Mary Sunshine* is very specifically overdetermined. For example, its overuse of the word “gay” on one level simply reproduces an element of the genre’s quaintness (along with such phrases as “Our love today / Shall rule for aye” at the end of the second-act reprise of “Colorado Love Call”). And Mme Liebedich is there to evoke the Old Country and specifically Vienna (in “Do You Ever Dream of Vienna”), with “unintentional” wordplay manifest mainly in idiomatic nonsense, such as when the American phrase “precious little”—which would normally mean “extremely little,” with a sarcastic emphasis—emerges to undermine the saccharine sentiment of “Every Little Nothing.” In this way, *Little Mary Sunshine* manages to be both safely and scandalously funny at the same time, with very few of those awkward moments when only part of the audience laughs.

But the show’s basic means for keeping both parts of the operetta crowd happy is the adroitness with which it refers to the tradition. In its many knowing references to American operetta’s best-known shows (mainly *Naughty Marietta* and *Rose-Marie*), *Little Mary Sunshine* rewards all fans of the operetta tradition, whether gay or straight, by addressing them as

insiders, and thereby also may slightly mollify those who object to the very idea of spoofing a venerated tradition. In this context, another bifurcation of audience takes place, between those who know the tradition and those who don't, or have only the vaguest sense of what operetta is about. With *Little Mary Sunshine*, "straight" operetta fans are in this respect as much on the inside as gays, if sometimes uneasy or in denial about that closeness of sensibility. Moreover, in its thoroughgoing parody of the type, the show also encourages relative outsiders in the audience to believe they might come to know the American operetta tradition inferentially (or at least what they need to know of it), by extrapolating back from the show's exaggerations. It is, however, important to note that *Little Mary Sunshine* spoofs much more than the operetta tradition, repeatedly referring as well to later, more mainstream shows. Although this is probably little more than shameless opportunism, it may also be seen as a way of "playing safe," by ensuring a somewhat larger "in" component to the audience; it may also be construed as an implicit commentary on how much the mainstream musical theater in America has been influenced by operetta.

Although the plot of *Little Mary Sunshine* can hardly be said to matter in a conventional sense, it does bring together quite well a number of important points of reference in its characters and situations. The name of the male lead, Captain "Big Jim" Warrington, derives from his counterparts in *Rose-Marie* and *Naughty Marietta*—Jim Kenyon and Captain Richard Warrington (Captain Dick), respectively—a cross-referencing that confirms, for those who might need such confirmation, what precisely is meant by the "Big Jim" nickname. Mary is, of course, an Americanized derivative of both earlier titles, and "Little Mary Sunshine" has become a generic term of mockery akin to "Pollyanna," a usage that may have come specifically from the name of a very popular 1916 silent film that starred Baby Marie Osmond, the Shirley Temple of her day (a film and personage still well known within some gay circles). Even more intriguingly in the present context, the name Mary Sunshine seems to have served at times as a transgender cover: thus, it is the "sob-sister" byline of a male reporter in the 1932 Frank Capra film *Forbidden*, and a cross-dressing role in the 1975 musical *Chicago* (also a reporter).³⁶ Indeed, by some reports "Mary Sunshine" had additional currency in the 1950s within some gay communities, where one might use it to refer sarcastically to a "Mary" who is less than "gay" in the mainstream meaning of the word; perhaps, though, that currency was more broadly based, owing to the sustained popularity of a children's song, "Good Morning, Merry Sunshine," which figured in many morning rituals.³⁷

The Forest Rangers themselves also seem to refer to 1950s realities, in that they more clearly evoke the Boy Scouts of America—an organization that is both homophobic and a well-known refuge for closeted gays—than any historical reality. Thus, the "Scout Law," a list of a dozen attributes for Boy Scouts to aspire to ("trustworthy, loyal," etc.), is virtually recited in "The Forest Ranger," if sometimes out of order and not quite complete:



Figure 1.3. Eileen Brennan, as Little Mary, in a publicity photograph for *Little Mary Sunshine*. Her pose on a flower-bedecked swing recalls a similar publicity still, of Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy, for *Maytime* (a 1937 operetta film by Robert Leonard with a composite score drawing on the music of nineteenth-century composers Léo Delibes, Giacomo Meyerbeer, Robert Planquette, and Pyotr Ilich Tchaikovsky, as well as twentieth-century operetta composers Sigmund Romberg and Herbert Stothart). (Photograph courtesy of Miles Kreuger and the Institute of the American Musical, Inc.)

Stout hearted is the Forest Ranger / He's a scout:
 He's thoughtful, friendly, courteous and kind,
 He's reverent and grave
 He's healthy and he's brave
 He's clean in soul and body and mind / Yes, Sir!
 He's cheerful, honest, thrifty and obedient.³⁸

 1.51

But operetta aficionados will recognize the troop as a conflation of Captain Dick's rangers and the Mounties of *Rose-Marie*, even if the style of their marching tune, especially through its 6/8 meter, is more evocative of the Sousa-derived "Seventy-six Trombones" from Meredith Willson's *The Music Man*, which was then halfway through its four-year run. Similarly, *Little Mary Sunshine*'s Indians derive from *Rose-Marie*, although its two scenarios of Indian adoption (for both Mary and Corporal Billy Jester) are more clearly referential to the 1946 Irving Berlin musical *Annie Get Your Gun* (cf. the latter's "I'm an Indian, Too" and "Me a Heap Big Injun," the latter left off the original cast album of *Little Mary Sunshine*). "Naughty, Naughty Nancy" seems more purely operetta, mainly because it virtually steals the conceit and melodic profile of the title song of *Naughty Marietta* (see example 1.4). The most impressive dual borrowing—that is, from both Broadway and operetta—is the three-part combination song "Playing Croquet," "Swinging," and "How Do You Do?" The principal target of this tour de force, however, is unmistakably the Victorian sensibilities basic to American operetta, even predating the influence of *The Merry Widow*. Thus, the specific point of reference here is "Sweet" Rose Maybud of Gilbert and Sullivan's *Ruddigore* (1887), who lives her life according to a book of etiquette; more generally, the larger sequence spoofs the Gilbert and Sullivan penchant for bringing together rather unlikely groupings of men and women for the purposes of group courtship, evoking in particular the first-act combination songs of *Pinafore* and *Ruddigore*.³⁹ (Thus, in this extended number, the Forest Rangers meet up—and pair up—with a vacationing group of young women from the "Eastchester Finishing School.")

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Intriguingly, the shadow of Cole Porter's 1948 *Kiss Me, Kate*—Porter's homosexuality had long been an open secret, at least among gays—hangs over many numbers in the show, although there are ample ties to the older operetta tradition in each instance. Among the most prominent Porter derivations are *Little Mary Sunshine*'s archly retrospective look at Viennese operetta (cf. Porter's "Wunderbar" and *Little Mary Sunshine*'s "In Izzenschnook on the Lovely Essenzook Zee" and "Do You Ever Dream of Vienna"); the situation explored in "Once in a Blue Moon" between the second male lead (Billy) and his promiscuous love interest, Nancy Twinkle (cf. Porter's "Always True to You" and possibly also Rodgers and Hart's "Blue Moon"); and the overblown "Colorado Love Call," whose lyrics often seem to parody Porter (thus: "And for your sake / My lonely heart will ache /

Molto rubato

Marietta

"Naught-y Ma - ri - et - ta, come be good," says she,

Detailed description: This is a musical score for a vocal line. It is written on a single staff in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C). The tempo/mood marking is 'Molto rubato'. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes with accents over the first seven notes. The lyrics are: "Naught-y Ma - ri - et - ta, come be good," says she,

Example 1.4a. *Naughty Marietta*: excerpt from “Naughty Marietta”

Rubato

Little Mary

Naught - y, Naught - y Nan - cy, you're so mis - chiev - ous, it's true;

Detailed description: This is a musical score for a vocal line. It is written on a single staff in treble clef with a key signature of three flats (Bb, Eb, Ab) and a 4/4 time signature. The tempo/mood marking is 'Rubato'. The melody consists of quarter and eighth notes. The lyrics are: Naught - y, Naught - y Nan - cy, you're so mis - chiev - ous, it's true;

Example 1.4b. *Little Mary Sunshine*: excerpt from “Naughty, Naughty Nancy”

And quake and break. / If you do not return, / My heart will yearn, / And burn, / So please return”).

In the case of “Colorado Love Call,” it is seemingly Porter’s influence that transforms an obvious allusion to “Indian Love Call” (from *Rose-Marie*) into a posturing, melodramatic love anthem—with a little help from the hackneyed device of modulating upward by half step, which the number does, ostentatiously, three separate times, so that we hear the big tune in D, E \flat , E, and F, each time more majestically than the last. Although the style of “Colorado Love Call” is much more ponderous, its motivic derivation from “Indian Love Call” is clearly stated, as it moves up to the sixth scale degree in a dramatic opening arpeggio and settles back through the same scale steps (five and three), with a hint of its predecessor’s distinctive chromaticism and vocalizing on the syllable “you.” (See example 1.5; note that “Indian Love Call” falls back, echolike, from D to C to A, with the latter move stretched out chromatically [C–B–B \flat –A]; whereas “Colorado Love Call” falls back more quickly through the same basic pitches, subsequently adding its chromaticism in a lower octave [D–D \flat].) Related to this process of generic aggrandizement is Mary’s song, “Look for a Sky of Blue,” introduced fairly innocently, but then converted at a moment of duress into a rather inadequate inspirational “hymn” to close the first act, and recalled once again, with a patriotic overlay, to close the show—all of which clearly evokes one of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s borrowings from operetta, the heroic “inspirational” number.

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♪ 1.62

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♪ 1.64

Notwithstanding copious references to later Broadway, *Little Mary Sunshine* maintains its primary allegiance to American operetta in various ways: through its many waltz songs, its recurring Indianist element (that is, clichéd “American Indian” music, such as may be heard in *Rose-Marie*, but also, by 1959, in countless film Westerns), its enchantment with disguise, and its idiomatic “laughing” songs. The first example of the latter type sets the tone for the whole, as Mary interpolates her “Ha, ha, ha, has” a shade too neatly between the lines of the Forest Rangers’ “Little Mary Sunshine,” just miss-

Example 1.5a. *Rose-Marie*: excerpt from “Indian Love Call”

Example 1.5b. *Little Mary Sunshine*: excerpt from “Colorado Love Call”

ing—and probably intentionally so—the sense of overabundance typical of operetta’s laughing songs at their best. Regarding the enchantment with disguise, it is significant that Nancy’s big number, “Mata Hari”—in which she evokes “European” intrigue as she adopts her Indian disguise—appropriately combines an East European exoticism redolent of *The Merry Widow*’s “The Cavalier” with Indianist idioms.⁴⁰ Governing all this is a plot that combines the least believable aspects of its two principal models, so that Yellow Feather, who has waited (rather gallantly) to make his move on Mary until the Forest Rangers are around to defend her, is destined not to die or otherwise pay for his villainy but rather to remain in custody only “until the Forest Rangers have returned him to the world as a useful member of society.”

The key to *Little Mary Sunshine* is provided, up-front, in Rick Besoyan’s opening instruction to the performers:

It is absolutely essential to the success of the musical that it be played with the most warm-hearted earnestness. There should be no exaggeration in costume, make-up or demeanor; and the characters, one and all, should believe, throughout, in the perfect sincerity of their words and actions.

And thus are the precarious dualities of American operetta to be maintained, as camp that refuses to acknowledge that it is camp, even at the rather late date of 1959.

♪ 1.65

♪ 1.66

♪ 1.67

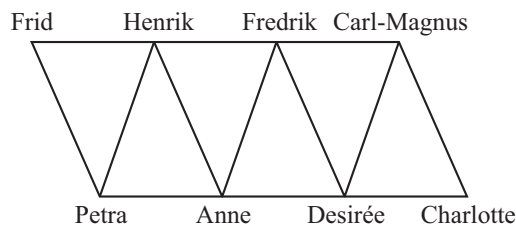
A Little Night Music (1973) seems in many ways designed to be the end piece of the Viennese operetta tradition in America, to serve as the summation and culmination of the European tradition while ignoring the American tradition in between.⁴¹ This summational quality, typical of Sondheim's work more generally, may be seen most vividly in the show's nearly strict adherence to triple meter (often compound), which led many to claim it as a return to the Viennese "waltz musical."⁴² But its actual waltzes are relatively few,⁴³ and the tradition it supposedly returns to used duple meters quite often. Thus, the return is a *stylized* return, entirely retrospective, yet using that perspective to great advantage in its idiosyncratic focus on the individuals caught in its plot machinations.

But the show was first and foremost a fairly faithful adaptation of Ingmar Bergman's 1955 film *Smiles of a Summer Night*. Bergman's title refers most immediately to the stratagem of explaining its plot developments in terms of three "smiles" of the seemingly perpetual twilights characteristic of Swedish summers (thus Sondheim's lyric for the "Night Waltz": "The sun won't set. . . . It's dark as it's going to get").⁴⁴ But it also refers obliquely to Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which the long *English* summer evening (however short by Scandinavian standards) similarly provides the backdrop for a game of romantic mix and match among the main characters, a connection acknowledged by Woody Allen in the title of his much looser adaptation of the Bergman film, *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy* (1982).⁴⁵ Characteristic of all of these is a plot dynamic that Mozart had already shown to be particularly well suited for musical comedy, especially in his 1790 *Così fan tutte*. In "sex comedies" generally, the configuration of the couples tends to be such that an audience will anticipate an inevitably "natural" alignment, which the characters generally do not see quite so clearly or in the same way, with some of them resisting the inevitable or angling for a different alignment.⁴⁶

Thus, in the best examples of this genre, we are made intensely aware of both the neatness of the inevitable outcome and the human need to protest against that deadening neatness, to resist being reduced to a mere pawn in a sexual game of chess. In *Così fan tutte*, Mozart not only showed just how human such chess pieces can be made to seem through their music, but also proved how disturbing the result can be for an audience to watch; thus, even today, wonderful and admired as it is, *Così fan tutte* has relatively few ardent fans. Viennese operetta, taking its cue from Mozart—but from a different page of the score, as it were—places less emphasis on resistance and pain and more on what actually compels humans to behave like chess pieces, arguing through its music that there is no alternative, and that we should be glad of it, whatever the resulting pain. It is no wonder, then, that in Bergman's film, Fredrik Egerman (the central male character) whistles a bit of "Là ci darem la mano" from Mozart's 1787 *Don Giovanni* (the instructions in the script of the musical are to whistle "a bit of Mozart"). And, more generally, this is why the waltz became so central to Viennese operetta, a

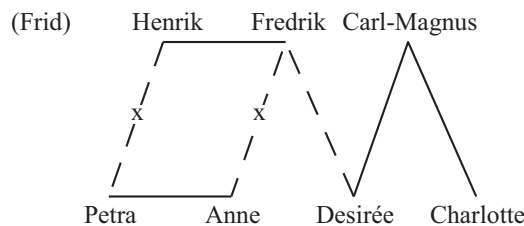
genre that already overlaps significantly with the sex comedy in its typical plot dynamic. While virtually compelling its characters to “dance” to its tunes, Viennese operetta softens the pill by making dance seem the most delicious imaginable activity, offering a means to experience more fully not only the exquisite loveliness of the music but also one’s basic humanity.

In his introduction to the published play of *A Little Night Music* (book by Hugh Wheeler), Sondheim’s orchestrator, Jonathan Tunick, produces a neat diagram of the triangular relationships that determine the situation and plot of *A Little Night Music*, which in this respect has a structure nearly identical to that of Bergman’s film:

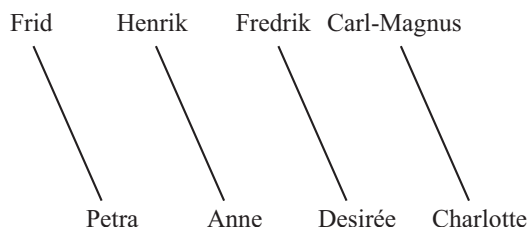


Thus, at the beginning, each of the main male characters is inclined in the wrong direction (Henrik toward Petra, Fredrik toward Anne, and Carl-Magnus toward Desirée), so that resolution can come only through a reorientation to an already available choice.

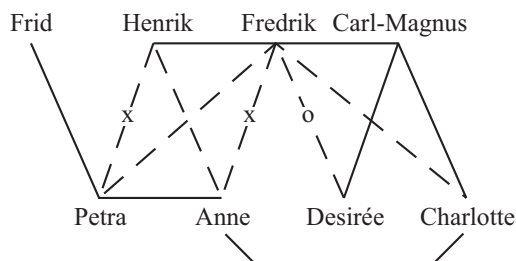
Useful as this chart is, it is still more useful to adapt the chart so as to distinguish the nature of the developing connections among the characters.⁴⁷ Thus, the opening condition for the story is pointedly imbalanced and dysfunctional:



As indicated, Frid (the Armfeldt butler) is not yet a “player,” and the horizontal lines have for the most part not been activated. Neither Fredrik Egerman (a successful lawyer) nor Henrik (his eighteen-year-old son) has made real headway with, respectively, Anne (Fredrik’s very young wife) or Petra (their maid). Fredrik’s affair with the famous (but now touring) actress Desirée Armfeldt is long a thing of the past. And Carl-Magnus (Count Malcolm, a dragoon) is openly unfaithful to Charlotte (his wife), in an obviously mismatched affair with Desirée. Yet, once Frid makes his first move on Petra, the “solution” to the puzzle becomes as obvious as if a switch has been thrown:



But this is, of course, neither a chess game nor a logic puzzle, and although the romantic issues are clear enough on this schematic level, the situation becomes a good deal more complex once Fredrik tries to reactivate his connection with Desirée (an attempt consummated in *A Little Night Music*, though not in the original film), and other considerations and plot machinations have been added to the mix:



In the original film (but less so in the musical), Petra flirts openly with Fredrik, in a bit of saucy verbal byplay and a series of speculative glances.⁴⁸ Much later, Charlotte, too, will flirt with Fredrik, in an effort to make Carl-Magnus jealous. Desirée, as it turns out, has a child by Fredrik, of whom he has been unaware (Desirée is coy about this, but her boy in the film is named Fredrik, and her daughter in the musical is named Fredrika). And although Anne and Desirée form no bond, it turns out that Charlotte is the older sister to a childhood friend of Anne, so that they easily become co-conspirators. (Although Desirée and Charlotte are the main co-conspirators in the film, the musical does not develop the connection; I have therefore left that line out of the chart.) And (not shown), Fredrika becomes Henrik's confidante in the musical, reinforcing the potential for them to fall easily into their roles as half siblings (a potential already suggested by their parallel introductions, playing the piano and cello, respectively).

Aside from Fredrik's obviously pivotal position within this precarious set of intertwined relationships (notwithstanding the "end run" of Charlotte to Anne), it is clearly a very messy situation indeed. In fact, each line in the chart, as indicated, makes the situation more tangled for the two involved, so that Fredrik, who connects with every other character (except Frid), has the messiest life of all. Desirée's choice is easier, at least in theory, yet her

apparent isolation, as shown in the chart, is counterbalanced by her interactions with her mother and her daughter, a dimension much expanded in the musical, which also includes pivotal dialogue between Fredrika and her grandmother.⁴⁹ But Desirée's isolation is nevertheless quite real, and sharply contrasted with the situation of the other women, each of whom has a close relationship with at least one other woman, to the extent of indulging (especially in the Bergman film) in a touch of homoeroticism. The latter, in turn, sharply contrasts with the extremely contentious relationships among the male characters.

In converting Bergman's scenario into a musical, Wheeler and Sondheim made many adjustments, two of which are particularly important to the special dynamic of the show as a sex comedy. In Bergman's film, Desirée is the main conspirator, inviting both parties (the Malcolms and Egermans) for a weekend so as to unfold her scheme for winning Fredrik back; there is even a strong suggestion that she has enlisted Frid's help so as to pry Petra away from Henrik, which will in turn pry Anne away from Fredrik. Addressing the other end of the schematic, she enlists Charlotte's help to make her husband (Carl-Magnus) jealous through Charlotte's flirting with Fredrik, with the aim of forcing the count to give up his affair with Desirée. In the film, then, the tidiness of the outcome is conceived initially as a scheme engineered by Desirée, reinforced as "natural" through Frid's explanations to Petra about the three "smiles" of the summer night; to chart the relationships in the film, then, one would need to draw lines linking Desirée to both ends of the chart, through which she sets up two dominolike chain reactions with herself as the beneficiary.

But in the musical, where Desirée is more isolated, there is no mastermind for the plot, only a series of missteps that somehow manages to come right by the end.⁵⁰ Thus, Desirée invites only the Egermans, who have determined not to go until Charlotte's intervention. Charlotte, desperately unhappy, subsequently (but still within the same song, "A Weekend in the Country") tries to make Carl-Magnus jealous by telling him about the invitation, which backfires when he insists that the two of them also go, unannounced. The plot to seduce Fredrik is not Desirée's but Charlotte's (with the collaboration of Anne), but it seems to produce no effect beyond increasing her own humiliation. As in Bergman's film, Henrik's immediate response to his witnessing Petra with Frid is not to pursue Anne but to attempt suicide (an attempt that is diverted in the film with particular charm). And Fredrik is unable to make the choice of Desirée over Anne, even though he knows it is his familial obligation and perhaps his only path to personal salvation (hence, "Send in the Clowns")—until he sees Anne running off with Henrik, which initially sends him into such despair he almost welcomes the opportunity to play Russian roulette with Carl-Magnus. In the musical, no one is orchestrating these events, so that their elaboration comes across much more as an unraveling of plots than as a progression toward resolution.

What the musical offers instead of a mastermind is a master perspective: that of Desirée's mother, who watches everything with exaggerated disapproval, knowing that the only way the game can come out right is if all the players gracefully accept their roles within it, which they mainly refuse to do through most of the show. In the musical, she and the benign providence of the "summer night" seem to merge; as the night comes to a close and the couples have aligned properly—last of all her daughter and Fredrik—she dies. While Mme Armfeldt's elevation within the story's hierarchy eliminates Frid's pivotal function (leaving him with nothing to do beyond seducing Petra, scarcely a challenge), it gives both an increased presence to an older sensibility and an authoritative voice to the ache for something irretrievably lost. The symbolic point of the smiles also changes to accommodate this changed configuration, in part to reflect Mme Armfeldt's personality (as opposed to the more generous Frid), and in part to align with the thematic texture of the show and its retrospective view of operetta. In the film, the smiles—which seem to bestow an unearned happiness on their recipients—correspond to three stages in the coupling process: the first is for young love (Henrik and Anne), the next is for fools (Petra and Frid, Charlotte and Carl-Magnus), and the last is for the sad and lonely (Fredrik and Desirée).⁵¹ In the musical, the smiles trace a similar but importantly different trajectory: the first is for the "young, who know nothing" (not quite the same as young love; this smile is for Fredrika), the second is for the "fools who know too little" (all four sets of lovers; in Mme Armfeldt's words at the end of the show, "The smile for the fools was particularly broad tonight"), and the third is for the "old, who know too much"; thus, with the final smile, Mme Armfeldt dies knowing that her daughter and granddaughter are on course toward a more fulfilling future.

The nostalgic perspective of Mme Armfeldt, tinged with a profound regret for a lost world and sensibility, is echoed within the personal perspective of the most agonized member of each "natural" couple: Charlotte, who desperately wants to become once again the focus of her husband's romantic attention; Henrik, who is trying too hard to be older and is caught between his religious training and his "sinful" impulses; and Petra, whose fertile mind and fervent spirit imagine more possibilities than really exist for her ("The Miller's Son"). Naturally enough, Mme Armfeldt's perspective is echoed most importantly within the angst of the lead couple, Desirée and Fredrik, each equally agonized, who know they have let their lives slip away and do not until the very end fully believe in the possibility of their personal redemption through a shared future. Mme Armfeldt's perspective is echoed as well on a larger scale, as the entire show seems to ache for the return to the world it evokes (the beginning of the twentieth century) and the musical modes then operative. The questions that seem to hang over the show are, Can we go back? Can we return to the blithe assurances of happy endings? Can we recover the optimism of youth? Can we still waltz? Can we, in these senses, go back to operetta?⁵² And the answer Wheeler and Sondheim pro-

The sun sits low,

Example 1.6a. *A Little Night Music*: excerpt from “Night Waltz”

Example 1.6b. *The Merry Widow*: excerpt from “Merry Widow Waltz”

vide—characteristically ambiguous—is something between “No, but . . .” and “Yes, but . . .”

The “No” is perhaps most clearly stated in the ache of the music, whose eminently singable melodies, some of which would be right at home in *The Merry Widow*, are trapped within bittersweet minor-mode harmonies laced with pungent dissonances. Thus, the first melodic phrase of the “Night Waltz” reproduces the contour of the repeated culminating gesture of “The Merry Widow Waltz” (see example 1.6), but within a more veiled harmonic idiom, slanted toward the minor mode. More specifically, the “veiled” nature of these dissonances derives from Sondheim’s use of a device known as a double tonic, in which (in this instance) the established orchestral key of D \flat major is at odds with the melodic key and its most immediate support, in F minor, creating a layered harmonic effect and enhancing the sense of a troubled distance between gesture and reality.

Confronted with this conjunction of allusion and dissonance, one may wish to recall that the Viennese-oriented Arnold Schoenberg and Gustav Mahler were working with such dissonances as these at precisely the time of *The Merry Widow*—indeed, Mahler was a bit of a specialist in the use of double tonics—so that profound existential doubt had, through them, already found a musical voice at the same historical moment as the second great flowering of Viennese operetta. And one might also wish to recall that Mahler’s and Schoenberg’s contemporary Richard Strauss—the composer of such disturbing operas as *Salome* (premiered in 1905, the same year as *The Merry Widow*) and *Elektra* (1909)—managed, shortly afterward, to score a huge success with his contemporary operatic response to operetta,

♪ 1.68

♪ 1.69

Der Rosenkavalier (1911), which also looked back to Mozart and which “A Weekend in the Country,” “Now–Later–Soon,” “Remember,” and “Perpetual Anticipation” all seem to refer to.⁵³

But if *A Little Night Music* nevertheless has seemed to be the first real attempt to conflate a modernist musical temperament with operetta, it is because it does so from the perspective of a musical tradition—the American musical—that had not found a place for such dissonances until the renewal of modernism after the Second World War—and then only occasionally, most notably with Marc Blitzstein and Sondheim’s early collaborator, Leonard Bernstein. However easily we might imagine Lehár writing the tune to the “Night Waltz” or Lehár’s contemporaries providing its dissonant harmonies, context tells us that those harmonies come from a much later age. Because the show is grounded in the musical comedy traditions of Broadway, the felt perspective of *A Little Night Music* fuses with that of *Mme Armfeldt* in yet another way, as the ache for something lost seems neither borrowed nor imposed from without, but *remembered*. Through her persona, through Sondheim’s own progression from the musicals of the 1940s on, and through his working securely within the generic traditions of Broadway, Sondheim seems to put us in the presence of an operetta sensibility that has somehow survived the evolution into modernism and is now reaching back for that lost world through the dissonant haze that has evolved around it.

But the possibility of answering “Yes” to the questions posed earlier is also implied throughout the show, first through the important *act* of remembering, and last through the equally important *fact* that the plot does, after all, work out—not because its characters deserve it in any real sense, but because of a natural benevolence that continues after all this time to smile benignly on them (and also, presumably, on us).

The importance of memory is established at the outset and maintained throughout. The overture, sung rather than played—by the “Liebeslieder singers,” a chorus of five commentators who are at once the ghosts of operetta and the innermost thoughts of the “real-life” characters in the show—begins with “Remember” (after a vocal “warm-up”) before reversing temporal directions with “Soon” and taking us directly into the moment with “The Glamorous Life” (with its imperative “Bring up the curtain”).⁵⁴ But what that curtain opens to is a danced instrumental number, “Night Waltz,” which looks back to *The Merry Widow* not only in the specific way already mentioned but also in its device of introducing its central song as an intimate wordless dance; notably, the “Night Waltz” ends, in its first appearance in the second act, with a hummed version of the tune, and returns as an instrumental number at the end of the show (Sondheim eventually backed away somewhat from this concept, adding words to the opening waltz number for the 1977 film version of *A Little Night Music*).⁵⁵ Throughout the show, memory will be seen to be key, denied to the Egerman family at the opening in the elaborate tour-de-force “Now–Later–Soon”—an unusual combination song that knows no past tense—and to Desirée in her mad rush into the

♪ 1.70

♪ 1.71

♪ 1.72

♪ 1.73

future (“The Glamorous Life”). Both the quintet’s “Remember” and Mme Armfeldt’s “Liaisons” counteract these with their phantasmal series of vignettes—ending with the latter’s regretful pronouncement:

In a world where the kings are employers,
 Where the amateur prevails and delicacy fails to pay,
 In a world where the princes are lawyers,
 What can anyone expect except to recollect
 Liai . . . (she falls asleep).

♪ 1.74

♪ 1.75

Her last full word, “recollect,” echoes the quintet’s “Remember” and emphasizes that the point of the song is not its ostensible content (that is, the remembered liaisons) but the act of remembering itself. Significantly, Sondheim guards against our hearing the complete word “liaisons” in his setup of the final rhyme, since the lyric is complete with the second syllable; even on this level, what is being remembered is not as important as the activity of remembering.

Time is the central issue throughout the show, which amounts to an extended fermata on twilight. Always, the show looks forward or back, rooted in its moment, imprisoned by its characters’ seeming inability to find their way to a coherent link between past and future. And nearly all the songs reflect this temporal hiatus, not only in those already mentioned (and “The Glamorous Life” is no exception), but in such obvious anticipatory songs as “A Weekend in the Country,” “Perpetual Anticipation,” and “The Miller’s Son,” which are in turn balanced by the redemptive backward look of “Send in the Clowns,” with its rueful consideration of bad timing and opportunities missed. And yet, there are two important mitigating considerations—pulling in opposite directions, of course—that the show elaborates for us. First, the past as it is reconstructed in memory turns out to be as negotiable as the future. Throughout “Remember,” for example, the details seem oddly disjunct from the larger shapes of the memories, ready to reattach themselves to an entirely different situation with entirely different players (thus such concluding lines as “I *think* you were there”). Second, the story embodies a fundamental irony: only by letting go of the past—symbolically realized through Mme Armfeldt’s death—may the future be enabled. Put differently, time may seem to stop, in a perpetual twilight, but it can never rewind. And death—the final proof of this—has been a preoccupation throughout, offering ultimate resolution to a series of intolerable situations. Charlotte sings “Every Day a Little Death” to a mostly uncomprehending Anne—and it is the touch of actual death she means, not the “little death” by which sexual coitus was once euphemistically referred to (except, perhaps, in the release, when she sings “but first I die”)—whereas both Henrik and Fredrik come uncomfortably close to succeeding in their respective suicide attempts.

Particularly deserving of attention in Sondheim’s score is the unusual joining together of “Now” (sung by Fredrik), “Later” (Henrik), and “Soon” (Anne). This is the first and most literal of several “triangle” songs in the

show; although not restricted to the triangles in the earlier charts, these songs do map that terrain fairly thoroughly, since they include “You Must Meet My Wife” (Fredrik and Desirée, about Anne), “In Praise of Women” (Carl-Magnus, about Desirée and Charlotte), “Every Day a Little Death” (Charlotte and Anne, whose disconnect stems from a double image regarding the third member, Carl-Magnus for Charlotte, and Fredrik for Anne), and “It Would Have Been Wonderful” (Fredrik and Carl-Magnus, about Desirée). Each individual song in the “Now–Later–Soon” complex details both musically and verbally the managerial style of its singer. As with Carl-Magnus’s prosaic managerial style,⁵⁶ Fredrik’s suits his profession, as he judiciously considers nested possibilities for seducing Anne in the best lawyerly fashion, a series of nested As and Bs that reduce in the end to the default position of an afternoon nap.⁵⁷ Musically, the song proceeds as a series of patter-song bursts describing alternatives within alternatives, well within the tradition of Gilbert and Sullivan and on the same level of verbal cleverness (reminding us, perhaps, that Gilbert was a lawyer by training)—all in counterpoint with Anne’s seeming nonsense, which is, however, clearly designed both to tease and to fatigue him. Henrik’s song “Later” also proceeds against a controlling counterpoint, in his case provided by his own playing of the cello (“It isn’t gloomy, it’s profound”), which has already been established through dialogue with Anne as a stand-in for the strict Lutheran training he is receiving from Pastor Ericson.⁵⁸ Caught between that training (the cello), the urges of the flesh, and being perpetually put off by Anne, Petra, and his father, Henrik, in this ruminative song, proceeds in a series of fitful bursts, reaching two agonized climaxes; for the second of these, he reverses roles with the cello, imagining himself lying on his deathbed after a long life of unrelieved “later.”

♪ 1.76

♪ 1.77

Both father and son, in their different but similarly ruminative ways, express frustration at the endless tease of their lives, seeking “now” but always getting “later.” With Anne’s “Soon,” however, we first hear the perspective of control as she puts off “now” with a softer, seemingly more yielding form of “later.” Perhaps surprisingly, her insistence on the indefinite is endorsed as the “right” response to badly managed passion. Thus, hers is the most songlike of the three; it is also the most spontaneous in effect, changing rhythmic style and key several times as an emblem of impetuous femininity (which finds an echo in other songs in the show that originate from a youthful feminine perspective: Fredrika’s “Ordinary Mothers,” which introduces the various tempi and perspectives of “The Glamorous Life,” and Petra’s “The Miller’s Son”). And it actually manages to *manage*, which neither Fredrik’s “Now” nor Henrik’s “Later” can seem to do. Thus, when the songs combine, hers is the only one that emerges intact and assured, with Henrik’s plaint bending to its changing moods and Fredrik’s dream version of “Now” drifting in and out of focus, at a slower pace, at times incoherent, and (as appropriate for a dream that turns out to be about Desirée) more graphic in its sexual images. Sondheim’s combination song therefore becomes a matter not just of presenting two or more contrasting points of view simultaneously

♪ 1.78

♪ 1.79

(according to the conventions of the type) but also of projecting a hierarchy between and among them that is at once against the grain of assumed masculine control and “natural,” since Anne is singing the upper, most “melodic” part. Moreover, there is a dramatic reason that Anne’s control should seem complete at this point, since the payoff of the song is the shattering of that control—and with it Anne’s sense of security—at its end, when Fredrik sings the name *Desirée* where he had previously sung Anne.⁵⁹

 1.80

Hierarchy is also an important consideration in Carl-Magnus’s “In Praise of Women,” set to the rhythms of an imperial polonaise, in which he tries, somewhat confusedly, to sort out the possibilities after he discovers Fredrik in *Desirée*’s rooms, dressed in his (Carl-Magnus’s) dressing gown.⁶⁰ First, of course, there is the simple lawyerly management of facts and testimony, which seems beyond him but which we already know to be Fredrik’s stock-in-trade. More subtly, the song denies him the strongest military possibility—the march, proscribed here by virtue of its being in duple time—by taking the form and style of a polonaise. The latter type befits Carl-Magnus’s position and demeanor and is even historically accurate, as by the late nineteenth century (through Chopin and the Russian imperial tradition) it had acquired a strong ceremonial role supported, as here, by fanfarelike figures. Moreover, its traditionally “softer” middle section (its “trio”) allows Carl-Magnus to express, in counterpoint to his growing mistrust of *Desirée*, his generalized admiration of “Capable, pliable, women.” But the polonaise setting denies him the possibility of dynamic action, freezing him, temporally, within the inactivity of ceremony and posturing, rather than motivating him into activity in the way that a march might. As it happens, Sondheim will soon enough provide him with at least the semblance of such a march in “A Weekend in the Country,” which serves as the first-act finale. Set to a rollicking 6/8 meter just slightly slower than, for example, Meredith Willson’s “Seventy-six Trombones” (and the Sousa marches that the latter recalls), “A Weekend in the Country” has the effect of a march on Carl-Magnus, finally galvanizing him into action, however blundering it might be.⁶¹

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 1.82

 1.83

Of all the backward looks in the show, that of “Send in the Clowns” is the most important, even though its engagement with the past is quite oblique.⁶² Introduced in the second act as a “false resolution” of the main couple’s story, the song mirrors the “bad timing” of its subject in two ways, through placement, in coming too soon within the plot structure, and through musical detail, in its insistent duple-meter countermelody placed against the triplets in the melody and accompaniment (see example 1.7). Its immediate successor, “The Miller’s Son,” also indulges in duple meter (in fact, these are the most prominent duple-meter passages in the entire score), as if to ground its fanciful dreams within the realities of sexual encounters:

 1.84

It’s a wink and a wiggle and a giggle on the grass
 And I’ll trip the light fandango,
 A pinch and a diddle in the middle of what passes by.

Is-n't it bliss? Don't you approve? One who keeps

Example 1.7. *A Little Night Music*: excerpt from “Send in the Clowns”

But in “Send in the Clowns” such realities seem remote, leaving us with a wistful duple-meter descent in the clarinet, lamenting lost opportunities. Thus, the song’s evocations of the characteristic pauses of the Viennese waltz anticipate their ecstatic arrivals in vain and are simply left hanging, like unanswered questions.⁶³ Even more vividly, the song’s tracing and retracing of such pauses and arrivals betray Desirée’s natural affinities for the world of operetta (much like, for example, Adelaide’s bump-and-grind “Lament” in *Guys and Dolls* betrays her milieu),⁶⁴ pulling against the resigned text with a taste of the sexual release being denied. And the point is scarcely lost on Fredrik, who hears both words and musical gesture, unable to contradict the former or partake of the latter. The song, introduced late in the second act, is nonetheless the first in the show to behave like a love duet—there is, for once, no third party being discussed—but he is unable to join in, and she is left to finish the song on her own.

Wrenching as this song is in itself, it is the key to Fredrik’s and Desirée’s redemption in two ways. First, it reveals them as self-acknowledged fools (“clowns”), unable to do what is best for them, however sad and lonely the alternatives might prove to be; surely they are in line for the second of the night’s smiles. Second, it sets up its own reprise—arguably its most important function within the show—by establishing an extended moment that can be returned to from a more satisfactory vantage point. Thus, shortly after the song, the requisite sequence of recouplings flies by in rapid order, accompanied by brief reprises from the first act, courtesy of the Liebeslieder singers: “Soon” (Anne and Henrik), “You Must Meet My Wife” (Fredrik, with Charlotte, observing Anne and Henrik leaving together), “Liaisons” (Carl-Magnus seeing Fredrik with his wife), “A Weekend in the Country” (the Russian roulette challenge), and “Every Day a Little Death” (Charlotte’s realization that Carl-Magnus has “become a tiger” for her). Suddenly, the quickly unfolding plot leaves Fredrik and Desirée no choice but to embrace their chance for happiness—against all odds, but according to the laws of musical theater, which demand that they reprise their big tune, and this time together, as a genuine duet. And in the enhanced orchestration of “Send in

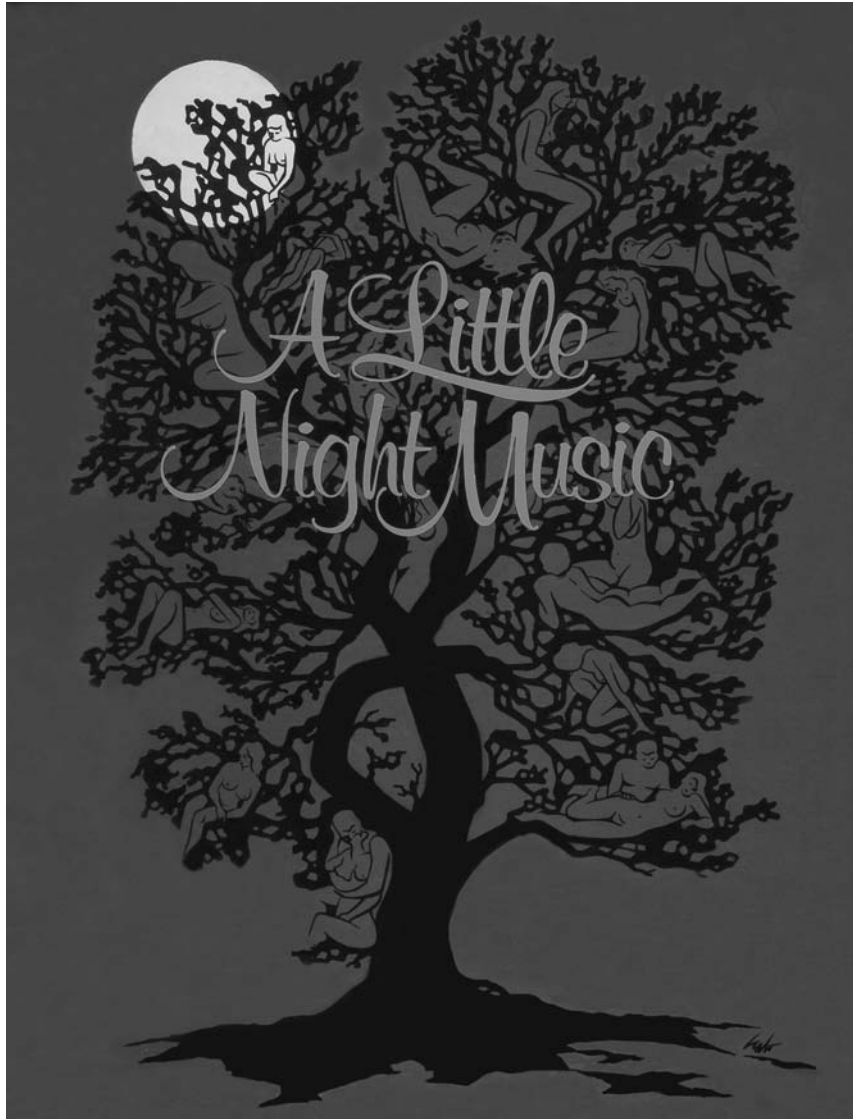


Figure 1.4. The inspired artwork for *A Little Night Music* (used, with slight variations, for playbills, posters, and the covers of sheet music and cast albums) hides its panoply of nudes and lovers—the latter in various poses ranging from pre- to postcoitus—within the branches of a silhouetted tree (easier to spot here than in the original, with its dark blue, starlit background). While providing a suitable icon for a sex comedy set in Sweden, with the summer sun hovering low in the sky, the image also evokes the Tree of Knowledge from the Garden of Eden. Thus, the bright orb of the perpetually setting sun substitutes for Eve’s apple (both as an image and by revealing Eve’s nudity), and the serpentine interweaving of the tree’s lovers and odalisques proffers, as the tree’s forbidden fruit, a knowledge that is specifically sexual (that is, “knowledge” in the biblical sense).

the Clowns,” the wistful clarinet obbligato countermelody is transformed into an assured part of an enriched orchestral fabric.

♪ 1.87

In presenting a stylized version of Viennese operetta, *A Little Night Music* serves to some extent to idealize operetta, imagining it to be something it never was. In place of the inadequate translations of actual Viennese operetta or the somewhat coarsened American product that took its place, Sondheim offers his own exquisite verbal control, and he bypasses altogether the characteristic laughter of operetta—its cherished gaiety, in both senses of the word—which has little place in *A Little Night Music*. Thus, once the warm-up exercises conclude at the beginning of the show, we are virtually finished with the element of vocal display indulged for its own sake, and there is no hint of the traditional laughing song (except, perhaps, in “The Glamorous Life”—the point of which is how bereft of laughter Desirée’s life actually is, a perspective rendered musically by the labored offbeat awkwardness of the repeated refrain “la, la, la”). In fact, we have, especially in Glynis Johns, who created the role of Desirée, a diva who does not really sing, at least according to the standards of operetta, notwithstanding the verve and pathos with which she delivers her songs. And as Stephen Banfield has pointed out, *A Little Night Music* is a “waltz musical” without a ballroom scene.⁶⁵

♪ 1.88

Yet, in one core respect *A Little Night Music* is unimaginable except as a latter-day Viennese operetta, and it is fully consistent with the type. In *A Little Night Music*, as in *The Merry Widow*, it is ultimately the women who control what is ostensibly a man’s world. *A Little Night Music* is framed by Mme Armfeldt passing her wisdom on to her granddaughter Fredrika. The Liebeslieder singers are overbalanced in favor of the women.⁶⁶ Early on, the Anne-dominated trio of “Now–Later–Soon” gives way to the daughter-mother-grandmother dynamic of “The Glamorous Life.” Even the men’s songs are about the women (“You Must Meet My Wife,” “In Praise of Women,” “It Would Have Been Wonderful”—all essentially versions of *The Merry Widow*’s “Women,” if considerably less raucous). Given traditional societal hierarchies, it is perhaps inevitable that operetta, in its pulling the focus from larger concerns to a more personal dimension, must also shift its focus to the exercise of womanly control.

Equally intriguing is operetta’s tendency to focus on the past, and here it is useful to note yet one more parallel between *A Little Night Music* and *The Merry Widow*. In both shows, the seemingly impossible undertaking of the lead romantic couple is to recover a love they once shared. In *A Little Night Music*, there simply is no story if Fredrik and Desirée have no past together, or if that past is happily *in* the past. And precisely the same can be said regarding Danilo and Hanna. Already with *The Merry Widow*, our gaze is directed toward something lost in a seemingly irretrievable past. And so also does *A Little Night Music* look back, its longing amplified by improbability and distance, from beneath a veil of melancholy dissonance prescribed by modernity and the unstoppable passage of time.

**For Further
Consideration**

El Capitan (1896), *The Fortune Teller* (1898), *Babes in Toyland* (1903, films 1934 and 1961), *The Dollar Princess* (1909; originally *Die Dollarprinzessin*, 1907; German film 1971), *The Chocolate Soldier* (1909, film 1941, television 1955), *Gypsy Love* (1911; originally *Zigeunerliebe*, 1910), *Alma, Where Do You Live?* (1910), *The Pink Lady* (1911), *The Firefly* (1912, film 1937), *The Merry Countess* (1912; based on Johann Strauß's *Die Fledermaus*, 1874), *The Count of Luxembourg* (1912; originally *Der Graf von Luxemburg*, 1909), *Sweethearts* (1913, film 1938), *Sari* (1914; originally *Die Zigeunerprimas*, 1912), *Maytime* (1917, film 1937), *Apple Blossoms* (1919), *Blossom Time* (1921; based on melodies of Franz Schubert; film 1934), *Rose-Marie* (1924, films 1936 and 1954), *The Student Prince* (1924, films 1927 and 1954), *The Vagabond King* (1925, films 1930 and 1956), *Countess Maritza* (1926; originally *Gräfin Mariza*, 1924), *The Desert Song* (1926; films 1929, 1943, and 1953; television 1955), *A Connecticut Yankee* (1927), *Show Boat* (1927; films 1929, 1936, and 1951; television 1989), *The Three Musketeers* (1928), *The New Moon* (1929, films 1930 and 1940, television 1989), *Bitter Sweet* (1929, films 1933 and 1940), *San Francisco* (film 1936), *The Girl of the Golden West* (film 1938), *Oklahoma!* (1943, film 1955, television 1999), *Song of Norway* (1944, film 1970), *Yours Is My Heart* (1946; based on Lehár's *The Land of Smiles*, 1929; films 1930 [in German], 1952 [in German], and 1974 [in German]), *Brigadoon* (1947, film 1954, television 1966), *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948, film 1953, television 1958, 1968, and 2003), *Kismet* (1953, film 1955), *The Girl in Pink Tights* (1954), *My Fair Lady* (1956, film 1964), *Candide* (1956, television 1986 and 1989), *Gigi* (film 1958, staged 1973), *The Sound of Music* (1959, film 1965), *On the Twentieth Century* (1978), *Into the Woods* (1987)

See Also

Regarding operetta in America generally, see Gerald Bordman's *American Operetta: From H.M.S. Pinafore to Sweeney Todd*, chapters 4, 6, and 20 in Ethan Mordden's *Better Foot Forward: The History of the American Musical Theatre*; "American Operetta" and "Broadway," in Richard Traubner's *Operetta: A Theatrical History* (pp. 356–421); and, from *The Cambridge Companion to the Musical*, Orly Leah Krasner's "Birth Pangs, Growing Pains and Sibling Rivalry: Musical Theatre in New York, 1900–1920" and William A. Everett's "Romance, Nostalgia and Nevermore: American and British Operetta in the 1920s."

Regarding operetta films, see chapter 6 of Rick Altman's *The American Film Musical* and pp. 58–60 in Everett's "Romance, Nostalgia and Nevermore."

Regarding *The Merry Widow*, see “The Merry Widow and Her Rivals,” in Traubner’s *Operetta: A Theatrical History* (pp. 242–73) and pp. 35–40 of Krasner’s “Birth Pangs, Growing Pains and Sibling Rivalry.”

Regarding *Naughty Marietta*, see Frederick S. Roffman’s extensive and illuminating notes to the Smithsonian complete recording, pp. 354–62 of Edward N. Waters’s *Victor Herbert: A Life in Music*, and pp. 20–21 of Ethan Mordden’s *Broadway Babies*.

Regarding *A Little Night Music*, see especially chapter 18 of Craig Zadan’s *Sondheim & Co.*, chapter 7 of Stephen Banfield’s *Sondheim’s Broadway Musicals*, chapter 5 of Steven Swayne’s *Hearing Sondheim’s Voices*, chapter 13 of Meryle Secrest’s *Stephen Sondheim: A Life*, and chapter 5 of Joanne Gordon’s *Art Isn’t Easy: The Achievement of Stephen Sondheim*; see also pp. 200–12 of Stephen Citron’s *Sondheim and Lloyd-Webber: The New Musical*, pp. 101–06 of Ethan Mordden’s *One More Kiss*, and, for a discussion of the Liebeslieder singers (as chorus), pp. 230–34 of Barbara Means Fraser’s “Revisiting Greece: The Sondheim Chorus.”