



BOOK REVIEW: The Oxford Handbook of the British Musical

Edited by Robert Gordon and Olaf Jubin

Review by Brian Manternach

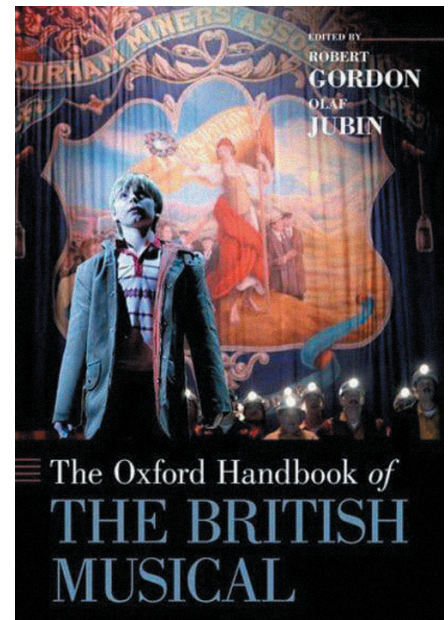
What are the most important criteria upon which works of a given genre should be evaluated? Is it sufficient to consider the time period in which the pieces are written, or should equal or greater emphasis be given to the nationality of the creators and the intended audiences for whom the pieces are written?

Consider, for example, Claude Debussy's *La Mer*; Gustav Mahler's eighth symphony, the "Symphony of a Thousand;" and Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. All three are orchestral works (*The Rite of Spring* is considered a ballet as well as an orchestral concert work) that had their debuts within eight years of each other. The works, however, use vastly different musical language, which is almost certainly influenced by each composer's country of origin.

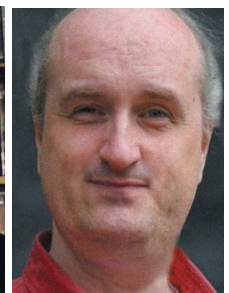
The question of nationalistic influence is at the heart of the collection of essays found within *The Oxford Handbook of The British Musical*. As editors Robert Gordon and Olaf Jubin argue, British musicals are not fairly evaluated if one only considers the success they achieve once they are produced in the United States. As they explain in the Introduction, "Popular entertainment grows from the soil that produces it, which is why it is reductive and extremely misleading to view British musicals merely within a perspective provided by Broadway." The handbook is, therefore, published to provide a British context as a lens through which British musicals may be viewed. It is also published to intentionally promote academic research on British musical theater, of which the editors believe there is a paucity of resources.

Originally published in 2016 by Oxford University Press, the book was released in a paperback edition in 2019. Twenty-eight contributing authors provide as many chapters in this nearly 800-page tome. Gordon and Jubin, who also author individual chapters, have arranged the volume into six parts.

Part One, *Britannia Rules: The Early British Musical and Society*, includes five essays that explore musical forms (ballad opera, comic opera, English musical comedy, etc.) ranging chronologically from the 1700s to the years immediately following the First World War.



Robert Gordon



Olaf Jubin

Part Two, *British or American: Artistic Differences*, begins to delineate nationalistic traits as found in musical comedy in the 1920s and 1930s and English operetta from 1917 to 1951. The section further provides an alternative perspective on what has been dubbed the “American Invasion” of West End theater. Specifically, Dominic Symonds challenges the notion that the success of *Oklahoma!* and *Annie Get Your Gun* in London caused a thirty-year dormancy of the British musical, which ended only with the rise of the megamusical. Symonds makes this case in part by noting the comparatively equal statistical success of many British shows during that same period.

Part Three, *New Approaches to Form and Subject Matter*, examines how British theater changed as a result of the influence of shows like *Look Back in Anger* and *Oliver!* and the concept musicals of Anthony Newley and Leslie Bricusse. It also explores the relationship between the pop-music industry and the British musical, in part by investigating the rock operas *Tommy* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*.

Part Four, “The British are Coming!” delves into the “epic” aspects of *Les Misérables* and examines how scenography contributes to the “spectacular” qualities of musicals like *Cats* and *Lord of the Rings: The Musical*. Meanwhile, Part Five, *Trailblazers*, profiles seminal figures in British musical theater, including writer-composers Noël Coward and Lionel Bart, lyricist Tim Rice, and producer Cameron Mackintosh. David Chandler’s concluding chapter on Andrew Lloyd Webber details the composer’s tremendous success with *The Phantom of the Opera*, his “badly judged sequel,” *Love Never Dies*, and his “unprecedented international appeal,” all while writing musicals that are the product of “a distinctively British sensibility.”

Finally, Part Six, *The Art of the Possible: Alternative Approaches to Musical Theatre Aesthetics*, provides essays that highlight the lasting influence of John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera*, the aesthetics of 21st-century jukebox musicals like *Mamma Mia!*, and the draw of cross-generational musicals that appeal to the family market, among other topics.

The editors and authors of *The Oxford Handbook of The British Musical* reveal the inherent bias at play when American audiences insist that British musicals meet Broadway standards without factoring in whether or not it was the intent of British creators to emulate those standards. A clear example is Lloyd Webber’s *Starlight Express*, which ran on Broadway for only 761 performances but was the West End’s second-longest-running musical after *Cats* (another Lloyd Webber show). In fact, assuming that every creator of a show that opens on the West End hopes for an eventual move to Broadway reveals an American bias that, at the same time, reduces the London



Brian Manternach, tenor, a member of the voice faculty of the University of Utah’s Department of Theater, maintains a private studio, and serves as Utah District Governor for the National Association of Teachers of Singing (NATS) and Western Governor for the Pan American Vocology Association (PAVA). His students have been cast in professional productions in the US and abroad and have earned top honors in vocal competitions from the local to international levels. A recipient of the NATS Voice Pedagogy Award, he has given national/international presentations for the Voice Foundation, the Voice and Speech Trainers Association, PAVA, the National Center for Voice and Speech, the University of Utah Voice Disorders Center, TEDxSaltLakeCity, and NATS at chapter, regional, and national conferences.

An associate editor of the *Journal of Singing*, he also authors “The Singer’s Library” book review column for *Classical Singer* magazine. Manternach has made solo appearances with the Milwaukee Symphony, Cleveland Chamber Symphony, and Sinfonia Salt Lake, among others, and his stage credits range from Eisenstein in *Die Fledermaus*

theater scene to a stepping stone to New York City. This negates—or at minimum, ignores—the consideration that many British composers may actually prefer to premiere their shows in their home country.

Definitions are most useful when they are able to define what something *is* and not simply what it *is not*. The essays that make up *The Oxford Handbook of The British Musical* offer a strong case that, regardless of what is happening on the Great White Way, British musicals constitute a relevant, stand-alone genre that deserves to be evaluated as such.

to Miles Gloriosus in A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum to Belmonte in Die Entführung aus dem Serail. For two seasons, he served as apprentice-artist at the Skylight Opera Theater in Milwaukee.

Originally from Iowa, his degrees in voice performance include a BA from St. John's University/College of St. Benedict of Minnesota, an MM from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and a DM from the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music. He has completed additional training at the CCM Vocal Pedagogy Institute at Shenandoah Conservatory and the Summer Vocology Institute.

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