



HoustonGrandOpera

## **STUDY GUIDE**



# THE SOUND OF MUSIC

**A WORK OF MUSICAL THEATRE IN TWO ACTS, PERFORMED IN ENGLISH**

MUSIC BY RICHARD RODGERS (1902-1979)

LYRICS BY OSCAR HAMMERSTEIN II (1895-1960)

BOOK BY HOWARD LINDSAY AND RUSSEL CROUSE

SUGGESTED BY "THE TRAPP FAMILY SINGERS" BY MARIA AUGUSTA TRAPP

A CO-PRODUCTION OF HOUSTON GRAND OPERA AND THE GLIMMERGLASS FESTIVAL

WORLD PREMIERE: BROADWAY/ MANHATTAN, NEW YORK, 1959

# Welcome to the Opera!

We have gathered interactive **lessons**, along with **information pages**, **summaries**, and an array of recommended **videos** here to invite young people, families, and teachers into the world of opera. The information below can be used to help prepare students and families before (or after) watching HGO's *The Sound of Music* by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. You will also find answers to some basic questions about opera.

Looking for a chance to meet an opera singer? Email us at [community@hgo.org](mailto:community@hgo.org) to find out how!

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# The Piece in One Sentence

When Maria Rainer goes from an abbey postulant to a family's governess, she ends up falling in love with and marrying the children's father before they all flee the German Anschluss of Austria.



## Synopsis (*Spoiler Alert!*)

### ACT I

Maria, a postulant at the Nonnberg Abbey in 1938 Austria, regrets leaving the hills for the abbey. The other nuns debate what to do about Maria's free spirit. The Mother Abbess tells Maria that she should spend time outside the abbey to decide if it's the life she wants: she sends Maria to be the governess to the seven children of widower and Austrian Navy officer Captain Georg von Trapp. The Captain raises his children with militaristic sternness, and Maria openly disapproves. She slowly wins over the children by teaching them music, comforting them in a frightening storm, and—in the case of the oldest, Liesl—by keeping her rendezvous with her boyfriend Rolf a secret from her father. The Captain returns from Vienna with Baroness Elsa Schraeder, who wonders why he hasn't proposed to her yet. Elsa is suspicious of Maria, but Maria explains that she will soon go back to the abbey. When the Captain throws a party for Elsa, he and Maria end up dancing together, which confuses their feelings for one another. She slips out of the house and returns to the abbey, but the Mother Abbess tells her she is running from her feelings and should go seek her true destined life.

### INTERMISSION

### ACT II

The Captain's friend Max is impressed with the singing talent of the von Trapp children and enters the family into a festival competition. Now that the Captain and Elsa are engaged, Maria, who has returned to the family at the Mother Abbess's encouragement, decides to stay as governess only until they find a replacement. Upon learning that the Captain is opposed to the Nazi annexation of Austria, however, Elsa ends their engagement. The Captain and Maria are free to finally admit their love, and they marry. The Third Reich completes its annexation of Austria, and the Captain is offered a commission in the German Navy. Unwavering in his opposition to the Nazis, the Captain and Maria discuss fleeing Austria with the children. A German admiral confronts the Captain for his delay in reporting to duty, but Maria says he can't report for duty until after the singing competition that night. The admiral agrees to wait one night, but the von Trapp family does not appear when the judges announce their first prize victory: they have fled from the Nazi regime over the Alps.

# Cast



**ISABEL LEONARD**  
**MARIA RAINER**  
mezzo-soprano  
A postulant at Nonnberg Abbey.



**ALEXANDER BIRCH**  
**CAPTAIN GEORG VON TRAPP**  
baritone  
Submarine captain in the Austro-Hungarian Navy; a widower.



**KATIE VAN KOOTEN**  
**THE MOTHER ABBESS**  
soprano  
Head of the Nonnberg Abbey.



**TORI TEDESCHI ADAMS**  
**LIESL**  
soprano  
Daughter of Captain von Trapp, age 16.



**PETER THEURER**  
**FRIEDRICH**  
treble  
Son of Captain von Trapp, age 14.



**ANNIE VOORHEES**  
**LOUISA**  
treble  
Daughter of Captain von Trapp, age 13.



**ANTONIO RICO**  
**KURT**  
treble  
Son of Captain von Trapp, age 10.



**MACIE SPEER**  
**BRIGITTA**  
treble  
Daughter of Captain von Trapp, age 9.



**ABIGAIL LEE**  
**MARTA**  
treble  
Daughter of Captain von Trapp, age 7.



**LORA UVAROVA**  
**GRETLE**  
treble  
Daughter of Captain von Trapp, age 5.



**DANIEL BELCHER**  
**MAX DETWEILER**  
baritone  
Captain von Trapp's friend, a music agent and producer.



**MEGAN MARINO**  
**ELSA SCHRAEDER**  
mezzo-soprano  
Potential fiancée of Captain von Trapp; a wealthy and sophisticated baroness.



**ADAM KRAL**  
**ROLF GRUBER**  
tenor  
Boyfriend of Liesl von Trapp; a delivery boy for the Nazis, age 17.



**RENÉE RICHARDSON**  
**SISTER BERTHE**  
soprano  
Mistress of Novices for Nonnberg Abbey



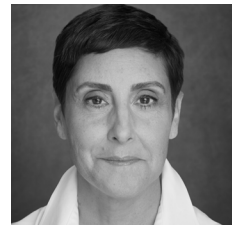
**ERIN WAGNER**  
**SISTER MARGARETTA**  
mezzo-soprano  
Mistress of Postulants for Nonnberg Abbey.



**ANI KUSHYAN**  
**SISTER SOPHIA**  
mezzo-soprano  
A sister at Nonnberg Abbey



**SPENCER PLACHY**  
**FRANZ**  
actor  
Captain von Trapp's butler



**PAMELA VOGEL**  
**FRAU SCHMIDT**  
actress  
Captain von Trapp's housekeeper.



**SCOTT CLARK**  
**HERR ZELLER**  
baritone  
Regional leader of the Nazi party.



**JOHNNY SALVESEN**  
**ADMIRAL VON SCHREIBER/ LIEUTENANT**  
bass  
A high-ranking member of the German Navy.

For more cast details, please visit our website:  
[HGO.ORG/ON-STAGE/THE-SOUND-OF-MUSIC](http://HGO.ORG/ON-STAGE/THE-SOUND-OF-MUSIC)

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# Creative Team



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**MARK MCCULLOUGH**, LIGHTING DESIGNER

**ANDREW HARPER**, SOUND DESIGNER

**KAREN REEVES**, PRINCIPAL CHILDREN MUSICAL PREPARATION

**HGO ORCHESTRA**

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## Setting

Salzburg, Austria, just prior to World War II.

## Background

The background of this beloved musical goes all the way back to 1880, the year that Georg von Trapp was born. He became a Captain in the Austrian Navy (a U.S. Navy rank equivalent of lieutenant commander), and he had seven children with his first wife, Agathe Whitehead, a British-Austrian aristocrat. When Agathe died of scarlet fever in 1924, Captain von Trapp moved the children from Klosterneuberg, near Vienna, to a villa near Salzburg. He asked the Nonnberg Abbey to send a tutor for one of his children, and they sent Maria Kutschera. He proposed to Maria, and she fled back to the Abbey for counsel, hoping she would be told to stay and become a nun. Maria wrote in her autobiography, “I really and truly was not in love. I liked him but didn’t love him. However, I loved the children, so in a way I really married the children. I learned to love him more than I have ever loved before or after.” They married in 1927.

Georg and Maria had three more children together, born in 1929, 1931, and 1939. By 1936, famous soprano Lotte Lehmann had heard the children sing, and suggested the family perform concerts for pay after most of their inherited fortune was wiped out. After the German annexation of Austria in 1938, Georg was offered a commission in the German Navy, but he was fiercely opposed to the Nazis and the family fled to the United States at the end of 1938. The “Trapp Family Singers,” as they were known, continued to perform in the United States and Europe until 1957. In 1949, Maria wrote a memoir—a bit reluctantly, under affectionate pressure from a close friend—titled *The Story of the Trapp Family Singers*, which inspired two German movies: *The Trapp Family* in 1956 and its 1958 sequel, *The Trapp Family in America*. Broadway directors and producers read the memoir and thought that the lead character would be a perfect vehicle for the musical’s first Maria, famed theater star Mary Martin. Originally conceived as a play with only a few musical numbers, the musical’s book authors Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse eventually decided it needed to be a full musical. Opening on Broadway in 1959, it was the final collaboration of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, who were household names for their previous works *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, and *The King and I*. Lyricist Hammerstein sadly passed away only nine months after *The Sound of Music* opened, cutting short their illustrious partnership.

## What to Listen For

Sharing its title with the name of the musical itself, Maria’s opening number is the most famous of them all. As she wanders and takes comfort in the foothills of the Alps, Maria’s vocal melody in the number’s opening verse remains static and nearly monotone, only occasionally flirting with higher and lower notes. But when she reaches the momentous “The hills are alive with the sound of music,” listen to how Rodgers paints the words into the contour of the hills themselves, reaching the peaks and valleys of the highest and lowest notes of the song in that one line, then back up and down again for another hill in the melody. The song returns near the end of the first act, when Maria is leading the children in a music lesson. Von Trapp, overwhelmed with the sound of music echoing in his home, bursts into song—a revelation for him of the importance of family and, perhaps, a revelation of Maria and Georg’s budding love for one another.

# Fun Fact:

Both the musical and the eponymous movie from 1965 are well decorated. The musical won five Tony Awards, including Best Musical and Best Actress, out of nine nominations. The movie won five Academy Awards, including Best Picture and Best Director, out of ten nominations. In 2007, the American Film Institute placed the movie as number 40 in the top 100 movies of all time.

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## THE COMPOSER RICHARD RODGERS

Along with writing a great number of songs and musicals and being a recipient of countless awards, including Pulitzers, Tonys, Oscars, Grammys and Emmys, Richard Rodgers' (1902-1979) extraordinary contributions to musical theater continue to influence the genre how it is today..

Richard Rodgers began writing shows with Lorenz Hart while attending Columbia University. Their breakthrough came with the score for a 1925 charity show, *The Garrick Gaieties*, which introduced the classic valentine to their hometown, "Manhattan." Over the next five years they wrote 15 musical comedies for Broadway and London's West End before relocating to Hollywood in 1930, where they contributed songs and wrote the scores for several movie musicals, most notably *Love Me Tonight*, starring Maurice Chevalier. In 1935 they returned to New York to write the score for Billy Rose's circus musical *Jumbo*, launching a golden era that included *On Your Toes*, *Babes In Arms*, *I Married An Angel*, *The Boys From Syracuse*, *Pal Joey* and *By Jupiter*. In 1943 the partnership disbanded temporarily when Rodgers collaborated with Oscar Hammerstein II on *Oklahoma!*, but it resumed with a revision of their 1927 hit *A Connecticut Yankee*, which opened on November 17, 1943 – less than a week before Lorenz Hart's death. For the next two decades Richard Rodgers collaborated exclusively with Oscar Hammerstein II on such musicals as *Carousel*, *Allegro*, *South Pacific*, *The King And I*, and *The Sound of Music*. Collectively, their musicals have garnered dozens of awards, including Pulitzer Prizes, Tonys, Oscars, Emmys, Grammys, and Drama Desk, Drama Critics' Circle, Outer Critics' Circle, Laurence Olivier, and Evening Standard Awards. After Hammerstein's death in 1960, Rodgers continued to write for the musical stage, including *No Strings*, and collaborations with Martin Charnin, Stephen Sondheim and Sheldon Harnick. His fortieth, and final, Broadway musical, *I Remember Mama*, opened on Broadway less than eight months before his death on December 30, 1979. The Richard Rodgers Theatre on Broadway was renamed in his honor, and Rodgers and Hart were each commemorated on a US postage stamp at the end of the last century.

## THE LYRICIST OSCAR HAMMERSTEIN II

Oscar Hammerstein II, born on July 12th, 1895, started writing lyrics for the Columbia University Varsity shows while studying law. His earliest works included musical comedies written with a Columbia undergraduate seven years his junior named Richard Rodgers. In 1919 Hammerstein's first play, *The Light*, lasted four performances. Undaunted, he continued to write both lyrics and librettos, principally with songwriter Otto Harbach as his collaborating author. His first success, with Harbach, Vincent Youmans and Herbert Stothart, was *Wildflower* in 1923. Hammerstein found his niche with some of the greatest composers of his day, breathing new life into the moribund artform of operetta with such classics as *Rose-Marie* (music by Rudolf Friml), *The Desert Song* (Sigmund Romberg), and *Song of the Flame* (George Gershwin). With Jerome Kern, Hammerstein wrote eight musicals, including *Sweet Adeline*, *Music in the Air* and their masterwork, *Show Boat*. His last musical before embarking on an exclusive partnership with Richard Rodgers was *Carmen Jones*, the highly-acclaimed 1943 all-black revision of Georges Bizet's tragic opera *Carmen*.

The Rodgers & Hammerstein partnership began with *Oklahoma!* (1943). Like Hammerstein's *Show Boat* and Rodgers & Hart's *Pal Joey*, the first Rodgers & Hammerstein musical was a groundbreaking milestone, blending musical comedy and operetta into a whole new genre - the musical play. *Oklahoma!* was also the start of the most successful partnership in Broadway history and was followed by *Carousel*, *Allegro*, *South Pacific*, *The King And I*, *Me*



*And Juliet, Pipe Dream, Flower Drum Song* and *The Sound of Music*. Rodgers & Hammerstein wrote one musical specifically for the big screen - *State Fair* - and one for television - *Cinderella*.

As producers, Rodgers & Hammerstein presented plays, musicals and revivals, including John van Druten's *I Remember Mama*, Anita Loos' *Happy Birthday*, Irving Berlin's blockbuster *Annie Get Your Gun*, the national tour of *Show Boat* (1947-49) and six of their own stage musicals (from the Pulitzer-winning *South Pacific* in 1949 to the Tony-winning *The Sound of Music* ten years later). They also produced the motion picture version of *Oklahoma!* and founded their own music publishing firm, Williamson Music (basing the name on the fact that both of their fathers were named William.)

Oscar Hammerstein II received many personal honors and awards including five honorary degrees, two Pulitzer Prizes, two Academy Awards and five Tony Awards. His last musical was *The Sound of Music*, written with Richard Rodgers in 1959; his last song was "Edelweiss," written for that musical during its Boston tryout. Oscar Hammerstein II died at his farm in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, on the morning of August 23, 1960.



## MARIA KUTSCHERA

Maria Augusta Kutschera was born on a train en route to Vienna on January 26th, 1905. Her mother died in a tragic accident when Maria was only two years old, and Maria was raised by her father's elderly cousin. She would visit with her father periodically, but he was nearly a stranger to her, and he died while Maria was still relatively young. She lived in a strict household, raised as a socialist and atheist, cynical toward religion. Her love for music pulled her into a church, thinking she was attending a concert by Bach. Instead, Maria found herself caught up in the words of the priest and was overwhelmed. The course of her life was changed, and she would devote herself to the Nonnberg Benedictine Convent. Having previously spent her entire life devoted to outdoor activities, the sudden change to the confinement of the convent severely affected her health. This played a large part in the decision that would send Maria to the von Trapp home.

## THE VON TRAPP FAMILY

George von Trapp was born on April 4th, 1880. He carried the title of Ritter von Trapp, which, translated to English, is the equivalent to being knighted. He was awarded knighthood for his actions at sea, serving as a Captain in the Austro-Hungarian Navy. As a U-Boat commander, he sunk or captured over a dozen enemy vessels in World War I. He married his first wife, Agathe Whitehead, on January 10, 1911. She was the daughter of Robert Whitehead, who invented the first self-propelled torpedo. Together, George and Agathe had seven children. While caring for the children, Agathe contracted Scarlet Fever, and consequently died September 3rd, 1922.



Julie Andrews portrayed Maria von Trapp in the movie *The Sound of Music*. Watch this brief YouTube clip where the real Maria was a guest on *The Julie Andrews Show* and gave Andrews a lesson in yodeling: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g6j376yOIm4>

This is a longer clip where in addition to the yodeling lesson, Trapp shares her family's journey after what is portrayed in the opera: <https://youtu.be/09h-Dt1uxYM?si=uYxxUckBQUdQ4dB2>



# Vocabulary

**Abbey:** a religious community where women would go to live their lives as nuns

**Governess:** a lady employed to take charge of a child's upbringing and education, often living in the same house

**U-Boat:** a type of submarine developed in Germany

**Fraulein:** a German term, equivalent to "Miss" (a young lady or woman who is not married)

**Telegraph:** a way to communicate over long distances, transmitting and receiving messages using Morse code

**Edelweiss:** a plant with small white flowers

"The musical, and then the movie, were both based on a book published by von Trapp in 1949 titled ***The Story of the Trapp Family Singers***. That book told the story of how Maria Augusta Kutschera grew up as an orphan raised by a court-appointed guardian before entering a convent as a novitiate and being sent by its abbess to tutor one of the children of Baron Georg von Trapp. (In the version you're probably familiar with, she becomes governess to all the children.)"

—*The Real-Life Story of Maria von Trapp*. Smithsonian Magazine, Nov. 16, 2017

Referenced from *Lyric Theatre of Oklahoma*

## Fact from Fiction

### IN THE OPERA

Max Detweiler, a charming, energetic family friend, and Elsa Schraeder's sidekick. He is always looking out for himself, but still likeable, and pushes to promote the talent of the von Trapps.

V.S.

### IN REAL LIFE

Dr. Franz Wasner, a priest, who recognized the family's musical talent and taught them varied repertoire. He traveled with them when they left Austria, serving as their music director for 20 years (in addition to being a cherished family friend).

### IN THE OPERA

Elsa Schraeder, a wealthy, attractive and sophisticated Baroness engaged to Captain von Trapp. She is unaccustomed to having children in her life.

V.S.

### IN REAL LIFE

Princess Yvonne was supposed to be the future mother of the Trapp children. She continuously gave the Captain excuses as to why they should postpone their engagement. She informed Maria that the children would not be present when Yvonne and the Captain married, and that the children would be sent away to school as soon as they returned from their honeymoon.

## Fact from Fiction (*Continued*)

- The musical and movie portray Maria as a governess to all seven children, when in fact, she was hired to take care of one child who was bedridden with rheumatic fever.
- Maria and Georg married in 1927, 11 years before the family left Austria, not right before the Nazi takeover of Austria.
- There were 10, not 7, von Trapp children.
- The names, ages, and sexes of the children were changed. The real eldest child was a boy, but the oldest child is portrayed as a girl in the opera.
- The family was musically inclined before Maria arrived, but she did teach them to sing madrigals.
- The family did not secretly escape over the Alps to freedom in Switzerland, carrying their suitcases and musical instruments. As daughter Maria said in a 2003 interview printed in *Opera News*, “We did tell people that we were going to America to sing. And we did not climb over mountains with all our heavy suitcases and instruments. We left by train, pretending nothing.”

National Archives. Movie vs. Reality: The Real Story of the von Trapp Family. *Prologue Magazine*. Winter 2005, 37, 4.  
<https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2005/winter/von-trapps-html>

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## Activities

### FAVORITE THINGS

Take a close look at the words of the song “My Favorite Things.” Count how many of Maria’s favorite things are from nature (like raindrops and whiskers), how many are things you can touch, and how many are her very own belongings. Is the song mostly about having and owning things, or is it more about appreciating beauty and special moments, finding joy in interesting or special things? What does Maria’s list tell us about her?

Now, think about what “favorite” means. How do things become our favorites? How do we decide what’s “good” for us or for everyone?

Try making a list of your favorite things. You can write it like a song, using phrases that might rhyme. Include things you like and how they make you feel, not just objects. What are your favorite activities and experiences?



## HISTORY & SOCIAL STUDIES

Look into how the Trapp family from *The Sound of Music* helped Austria after the war while they were in the U.S. working on becoming citizens. Even though they were far from home, they still cared about their country. Find out what things were like in Austria back then. Also, think about whether the strong family values shown in the opera are similar to how the real Trapp family lived.

## LANGUAGE ARTS

Read “The Real-Life Story of Maria von Trapp” by Kat Eschner, published in *Smithsonian Magazine*, Nov. 16, 2017. Use the article to compare and contrast the lives of the fictional and historical “Marias,” and summarize your findings.

## SCIENCE

“Edelweiss,” the flower Captain von Trapp sings about, is a real plant that grows in the high mountains of Europe and Asia. It is also the national flower of Austria. Research what characteristics Edelweiss has that allow it to survive at such a high altitude and cold climate. What other plant and animal species can be found in the mountains of Austria?

## MATH

In “Do-Re-Mi,” Maria and the children sing through the notes of a major scale. What is a musical scale? You may have heard of the “Pythagorean theorem,” but did you know that the Greek mathematician Pythagoras also made important theories about music? Research Pythagoras’s studies on music, and how they laid the foundation for the musical scale heard in “Do-Re-Mi.”

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## REFERENCES

<https://www.concordtheatricals.com/a/103119/richard-rodgers>

<https://www.concordtheatricals.com/a/2264/oscar-hammerstein-ii>

## SPONSORS

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