

## JEROME KERN

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**I**N the esthetes' rush to discover Wagners on Broadway and Stravinskys in Harlem, one of the most important figures in American light music has been overlooked. That figure, of course, is Jerome Kern, whose contribution to our commercial lyric stage has been a code of craftsmanship and a definite musical self-respect which is conspicuously lacking in most of our purveyors of shows.

Kern has devoted himself exclusively to musical comedy. He has composed no jazzonatas, no interpretations of the great, glowing heart of the Corn Belt, the Black Belt or even the Money Belt. For about sixteen years he has written shows, his first scores having been *The Red Petticoat* (1912), *Oh, I Say!* (1913) and *Nobody Home* (1914). Except for *Show Boat*, his most recent production, he has been involved in no opus that exhibits any symptoms of abnormal musical comedy longevity. His melodies and his amazing sense of the stage have helped many a workaday libretto to work longer than a day, but although many of his tunes have survived the confections in which they originated, no manager ever has revived a Kern score.

Quite a few composers have revived Kern scores, but this is not an essay on imitation, and I shall not attempt to trace the influence of the Kern idiom on his young contemporaries. Many a young man with a retentive ear has succeeded in patterning his efforts after the manner of Kern only to discover that they did not come to life. Kern, in German, means seed, and few foreign attempts to cultivate this seed have come to a respectable fruition. Kern, in his way, is as inimitable as Ring Lardner.

He is fundamentally a sound craftsman, and herein he differs from almost every other composer of musical comedy today. There are many who labor patiently over individual songs, but Kern is virtually the only one who looks on his score as an entity.

If theatrical circumstances permitted, he would dispense entirely with dialogue and convert light opera into what he has designated as *leit opera*. As it is, he has succeeded, in *Show Boat*, in kicking over, by sheer craftsmanship, most of the traditions that hampered him in his earlier career.

Perhaps one might help to place Kern in his proper light by sketching the process by which musical comedies of the common variety are generated. They are not composed; they are assembled. The composer, who rarely is a trained musician, is expected to manufacture two or three song hits. If he cannot produce these perquisites, other composers may be invited to submit their best melodies. The potential hits are "spotted," i. e., placed at various strategic points in the sequence of the book, and the other numbers are fashioned as painlessly as possible to occupy places in which music may be required. What the producers and writers expect to be the hits may be lyrically and musically quite alien to the story and completely out of tone with the libretto, but nobody worries unduly on that score. Appropriateness and characterization do not enter into the scheme. More than one musical comedy has been composed before it has been written. Composers complete scores before the idea for the book, if any, has been conceived. Eventually the songs are shoved into the manuscript like so many meat pies into an oven.

Kern, therefore, is working in a field in which musicianship is not regarded as an essential and in which any artistry on the part of a composer is likely to be considered something of an idiosyncrasy. This situation is no novelty. It existed when Kern first tried to interest managers in his music, and it will continue as long as the "book and music" entertainment can attract profitable patronage. Kern, a well-trained, practical musician, who not only knows what a fugue is, but even can write one without hiring a ghost composer, started his career as a staff musician for a producer who specialized in diversions imported from England. Because fashionable English audiences of several decades ago did not arrive until an hour's traffic had taken place on the stage, the opening scenes of English productions were lackadaisical stereo, designed principally to kill time for the gallery until the stalls put in their appearance. For American consumption this hour

of twaddle had to be rewritten and Kern was engaged to liven up and curtail the too pacific preliminaries.

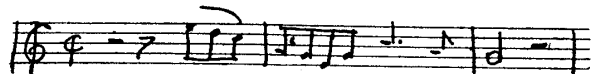
It soon became apparent that the new material interpolated by Kern was more attractive than the original score and managers were convinced that it might be worth while to entrust the whole job to the young American. Kern did not confine his attentions to English scores to which he added such miniature masterpieces as *They Didn't Believe Me*. More than one Austrian composer was credited by a non-program reading public with delightful airs which Kern had added. There was, for example, *You're Here and I'm Here*, a supplementary composition for Eysler's *The Laughing Husband*. This item even was considered radical by some musical comedy experts, who raised soggy eyebrows over the following passage:



In those days it should have read:



This little twist from the conventional is of no consequence in itself, but it serves to indicate Kern's bent for avoiding clichés. The lay auditor at musical pieces does not realize that there are little quirks in Kern's music which mark the composer as a craftsman, and as the dramatic critics are perhaps slightly less musical than the rest of the audience, he has received little attention for his eschewing of banalities. There is much in every Kern score that is composed solely for the satisfaction of Kern. In *Oh Boy!* the introduction to *When It's Nesting Time in Flatbush* was:



This quotation would raise a genial guffaw in a concert hall, but in a theatre it means nothing except to a few illuminati. Nevertheless, Kern included it for his own amusement and with no expectation of being hailed as a musical wit.

The craftsmanship of Kern is brought into relief throughout the introductions to his songs. Most composers use the last four

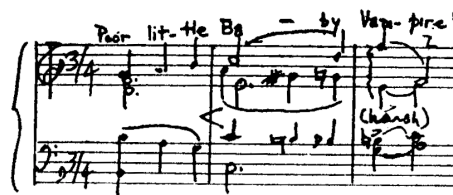
measures of the refrain but Kern invariably composes a little prelude that establishes the mood. The transition from verse to refrain (Kern does not like this word and with characteristic whimsicality calls it "burthen,") also departs from the orthodox repetition of the dominant and provides an instrumental passage that is apposite. Frequently Kern does not follow the verse-refrain formula at all and starts with the refrain, arriving at the verse later in the show. His verses are quite as important, however, which is contrary to the accepted standards of musical comedy. In *Show Boat*, the verse of *Ol' Man River* is a leit-motif generally associated with the negro's labor.

Kern has two qualities—apart from his craftsmanship—which most of his contemporaries apparently never heard of. One is characterization and the other is humor. In *Oh Boy!* there is a song, *An Old-Fashioned Wife*, the burthen of which begins:



This is, musically, a complete characterizer. It happened to become a reasonably popular waltz, but it was not composed with that happy end in view.

The humor of Kern's music is an integral part of it. It does not depend upon obvious quotations. It is the humor of character. He can achieve his effect by short and yet not too broad strokes, as in *The Baby Vampire*, from *Love O' Mike*. Here she is in less than three measures:



*Show Boat* is an epitome of Kern, although I suspect that he will surpass even this score when he finds a libretto which is designed as a vehicle for music rather than as a piece for popular

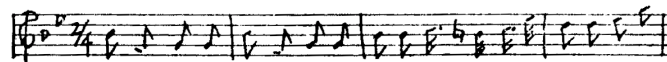


approval. Not, I add, that *Show Boat* is not a masterpiece of its kind and a refreshing innovation in libretti. It probably goes as far to the left as possible, for a libretto has to be produced by a manager who expects a fairly certain return on a large investment.

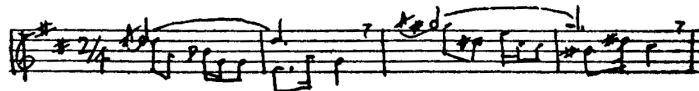
In *Show Boat*, Kern has an opportunity to make much of his dramatic gift. The action is accompanied by a great deal of incidental music—although “incidental” is a misleading trade term, for Kern’s music heightens immeasurably the emotional value of the situation. For example, there is the passage that accompanies the second appearance of Julie and which foreshadows, in the midst of a gay scene, her forthcoming disaster:



Themes are quoted and even developed in almost Wagnerian fashion throughout *Show Boat*. Here is the theme that accompanies Captain Andy Hawks:



Here it is, when Cap'n Andy is acting frisky and his wife does not quite approve:



Here is a remarkable use of the same theme in the convent scene. The little girl, Kim, is the grand-daughter of Cap'n Andy, and the Andy theme is varied simply but effectively to indicate her ancestry against a *Te Deum*—the first *Te Deum*, I believe, that ever found its way into a Ziegfeld production:

An examination of the full score will reveal dozens of interesting passages which testify to the composer's skill. They may not be apparent to the casual customer, who does not know what it is that is gripping him; but the musician will find much to admire.

That most of Kern's craftsmanship and sensitivity has been employed in the service of the commercial stage is regrettable, although it is heartening to know that it has enabled him to become one of our foremost collectors of first editions. (He reads them, too.) He has been dismissed too lightly by commentators as a mere melodist, and his genuine merits have been permitted to remain *in camera* between him and his scores. That his music has been the companion of libretti of a frivolous and unsubstantial nature (except in *Show Boat*) is a bit of melancholy history which explains why he never appears in lists of leading American composers although this year a courageous English commentator has discoursed learnedly upon "Schubert vs. *Show Boat*."

Kern seems to be at the turning point of his career. If he makes the transition from a sort of opera-comique—and *Show Boat* is exactly that, in the classic sense of the term—to "leit opera" we may finally have opera which is thoroughly and indigenously American. It also is likely to make a small fortune for everyone concerned!