



A Few of My Favorite Things

by

Josh Berrett

“How do you solve a problem like Maria ? How do you catch a cloud and pin it down?” So sings the Mother Abbess in the song “Maria,” one of the opening numbers from the 1959 musical *The Sound of Music*, the final collaboration of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II. While feeling genuine affection for Maria, she and the nuns at Nonnberg Abbey are perplexed by the lack of discipline of this spirited postulant—someone who doesn’t think twice about speaking her mind, loves music and the mountains. In fact, in the opening sequence of the 1965 movie version, we see her in the Austrian Alps in the person of Julie Andrews singing the show’s title song.

Believing Maria would be a lot happier outside the abbey, the Mother Abbess sends Maria to the villa of retired naval officer Captain Georg von Trapp to serve as governess to his seven children. Since the death of his wife, the Captain has been raising his children using strict military discipline. But Maria gradually changes the order of things, winning them over by showing them kindness and compassion. More than that, she shares with them something vital and vulnerable, how she copes with “feeling sad.”

That moment comes early on in the show with her song “My Favorite Things.” Disturbed by repeated ominous thunderclaps, the children rush to Maria’s bedroom, huddling

around her bed for safety. She offers them this crucial lesson: “When the dog bites, when the bee stings, when I’m feeling sad, I simply remember my favorite things, and then I don’t feel so sad.” But this happens only after we have been treated to something like a stream-of-consciousness statement of a free spirit enumerating a few of the joys she finds in the Christmas holiday season and beyond:.

Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens,

Bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens,

Brown paper packages tied up with strings,

These are a few of my favorite things.

Cream-colored ponies and crisp apple strudels,

Door bells and sleigh bells and schnitzel with noodles,

Wild geese that fly with the moon on their wings,

These are a few of my favorite things

Girls in white dresses with blue satin sashes,

Snow flakes that stay on my nose and eyelashes,

Silver white winters that melt into springs,

These are a few of my favorite things.

Now, becoming mindful of the musical craft behind all of this can bring rich cognitive rewards. “My Favorite Things” is waltz, a form of dance originating in the early 19th -century, if not earlier, when men and women “would embrace one another lustily in three-four time.”

For Rodgers himself, the waltz brought him back to his early impressionable years. He has talked fondly about childhood memories of hearing his father singing songs from the latest Broadway shows of the day, like from Oscar Strauss’s *The Chocolate Soldier* and Franz Lehar’s *The Merry Widow*.

And a significant number of Rodgers’s most memorable songs written over the years of his long career happen to be waltzes. They range from “Lover” from the 1932 movie *Love Me Tonight* to “Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin” from *Oklahoma!* of 1943 to *The Sound of Music* and songs like “My Favorite Things” and “Edelweiss.” And not to be

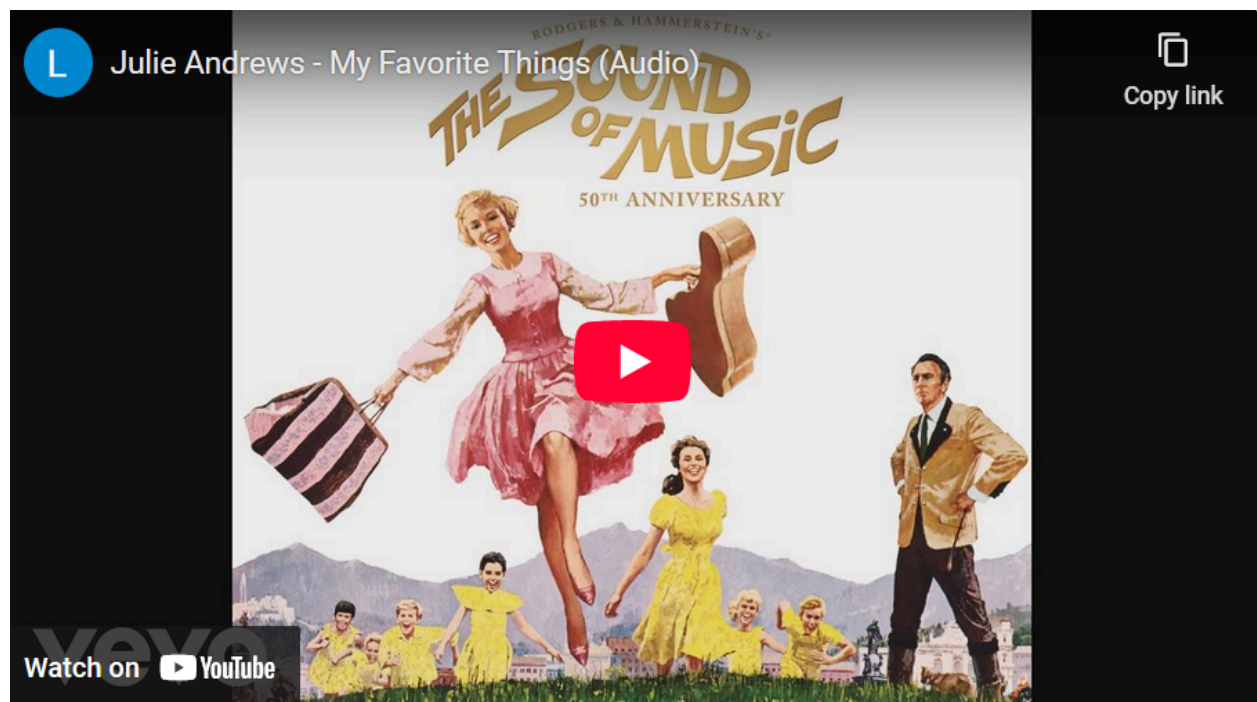
overlooked is the riveting purely instrumental waltz that serves as prologue to the 1945 *Carousel*.

The body of “My Favorite Things” has a buoyant, bouncy feel. In the movie version, Julie Andrews sings it in the key of E minor, jumping from the pitches of E up to B, down to F# and E, then down to the B below, and up again to E and F# By contrast, the synthesizing phrase “These are a few of my favorite things” almost entirely follows the notes of the ascending scale, step by step.

But when we get to the final takeaway lesson, there are many more repeated notes—as if demanding a certain focus on our part—and, starting with the words “I simply remember my favorite things...”, the melodic line moves simply stepwise. And finally, another telling detail is that the song’s ending suggests a transformation as we move from, E minor to its “relative” major, the key of G major.

In my next Substack post I plan to talk about some of the very special covers of the song, particularly the ones by the great jazzman John Coltrane.

Here is an audio from the movie version of “My Favorite Things” featuring Julie Andrews:



(Joshua Berrett has been creating music courses for Lifetime Learners Institute since 2012, after he retired as Full Professor of Music from Mercy University.)

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