

**Irving Berlin**  
**“This Is the Life!”**  
**The Breakthrough Years: 1909–1921**  
by Rick Benjamin

*“Irving Berlin remains, I think, America’s Schubert.”*

—George Gershwin

It was a perfect late summer evening in 2015. A crowd had gathered in the park of a small Pennsylvania town to hear the high-school band. I was there to support my trombonist son and his friends. The others were also mostly parents and relatives of “band kids,” with a sprinkling of senior citizens and dog walkers. As the band launched its “covers” of current pop hits toward the treetops, some in the crowd were only half-listening; their digital devices were more absorbing. But then it happened: The band swung into a new tune, and the mood changed. Unconsciously people seemed to sit up a bit straighter. There was a smattering of applause. Hands and feet started to move in time with the beat. The seniors started to sing. One of those rare “public moments” was actually happening. Then I realized what the band was playing—“God Bless America.” Finally, here was something solid—something that resonated, even with these teenaged performers. The singing grew louder, and the performance ended with the biggest applause of the night. “God Bless America” was the *grandest* music of the concert, a mighty oak amongst the scrub. Yet the name of its creator—Irving Berlin—was never announced. It didn’t need to be. A man on a bench nearby said to me, “I just love those Irving Berlin songs.”

Why is that, anyway? And how *still*? Irving Berlin was a Victorian who rose to fame during the Ragtime Era. That was all a very long time ago. To today’s listeners his music should be about as relevant as a Studebaker hubcap. Yet somehow, just under the surface it still lives. And *that* is a strange and wonderful thing. In an era seemingly devoid of greatness, Irving Berlin beckons. And that is one of the reasons for this album: to try to learn more about why Berlin’s music was—and is—so compelling. Our explorations here strip away a century of “updates” to experience his music as it was heard when new. With the use of rediscovered historic period scores, I have put together a program from what I consider to be Berlin’s “breakthrough” period—from 1909, the year of his first words *and* music hit, to 1921, when he became the first songwriter ever to build a Broadway theater to showcase his own creativity.

No full biography of Irving Berlin needs to be attempted here. However, for convenience and context, a few facts are in order: Berlin was born Israel Isidore Beilin in the spring of 1888 in a shtetl somewhere in Russia—perhaps in Tolochin in Belorussia or Tyumen in Siberia. (The exact date and location remain elusive; Berlin himself did not know and official records are murky.) Israel was the eighth and final child of Moses and Leah Beilin. Several years later, after their home was destroyed in a pogrom, Moses (a cantor) made the fateful decision to lead his family to America. After crossing thousands of miles of Europe by train, foot, and wagon, and the vast Atlantic Ocean by steamer, the Beilins arrived in New York in September 1893. At Ellis Island, immigration officials changed their family name to “Baline.”

And thus began a second and even more amazing odyssey: the molding of the artist eventually famous the world over as “Irving Berlin.” Such a thing was unimaginable as little Izzy Baline and his family entered their new lives in the tenements of Manhattan’s Lower East Side. Poverty and dislocation were still their daily experience, but America offered something wondrous—upward social mobility for those with talent and ambition. After the death of his father (1901), Izzy left school to work as a newsboy to help support his mother and siblings. But soon he struck out on his own, busking for coins and sleeping in flophouses. Once Izzy landed a job as a chorus boy in a traveling show. This led to work as a “song plugger” for a major Tin Pan Alley publisher. But both of these advances were temporary. Yet both planted big ideas.

In 1904 Izzy Baline took up a new line of work as a singing waiter in Chinatown’s gritty Pelham Café. At the keyboard of this saloon’s upright piano, he “taught himself music.” Soon Izzy could play his own simplified versions of the latest popular tunes in the finger-friendly key of “F-sharp” (technically speaking, G-flat). Simultaneously, he began to make a reputation for himself as a singer and, more importantly, as a clever man with words (another achievement, since English was his second language). Izzy remained an enthusiastic “student” of popular songs (collected by “ear” since he could not read music). And while at the Pelham Izzy wrote his first published song lyric—“Marie from Sunny Italy.” (The tune was by the joint’s resident pianist, Mike Nicholson.) The cover of the sheet music proclaimed: “Words by I. BERLIN Music by M. NICHOLSON.” (Whether “Berlin” was an error or a deliberate new Baline pseudonym remains a niggling, unanswered question.)

By 1908 Izzy—now known as “Irving Berlin”—had completed his amazing metamorphosis from singing waiter to professional lyricist. One day when he was shopping around a new lyric to the music publishers, Berlin dropped in at the recently opened Ted Snyder Co. The office manager there, Henry Waterson (1873–1933) listened as the twenty-year-old recited his poem. Waterson then asked to hear the music that went with it. Berlin had none, but determined to sell something, headed to a piano and quickly improvised some to fit his lyric. Duly impressed, Waterson promised Berlin \$25 for the song (a topical number called “Dorando”) and also hired Berlin as a staff lyricist.

For a time at the Ted Snyder Co. Irving Berlin stuck to writing words for other people’s melodies. But in December of 1909 another milestone was reached—Berlin’s first major success as a “Words & Music” songwriter was issued by the firm—“That Mesmerizing Mendelssohn Tune.” This was the beginning of a glorious cavalcade (more than fifteen hundred in all) that made Irving Berlin America’s beloved “Poet Laureate of Song.”

The usual starting place for genius is hard work. That was something Irving Berlin had a vast capacity for. His strong intellect and powers of concentration were relentlessly directed toward one goal—the creation of hit songs. As he told a 1915 interviewer, “I am, sometimes unconsciously, working on songs all of the time, at home and outside and in the office.” Even so, true inspiration rarely struck: “The most common way means brain torments and tortures before an idea comes. Sometimes I sit for hours laboring for an opening to put in a punch. Sometimes they come when I am ready to give up; more frequently they don't come at all. . . . So many of my songs are written under pressure that I can't trust to what is called inspiration. . . . I am kept under a nervous strain, and more often than otherwise I feel as if my life depends on my accomplishing a song.”

Part of that strain may have stemmed from Berlin's lack of musical training. Most aspiring musicians take lessons or go to special schools to learn how to better express their artistry. Berlin rejected that path. Indeed, throughout his over sixty-year career he never even learned how to read or write musical notation. That state of affairs may be hard to fathom (imagine Charles Dickens, for example, being illiterate); but Berlin developed a creative process that rendered note reading and music theory unnecessary. As he remarked to a reporter in the 1910s, ". . . I've never learned to read music. In this connection I may add that in my ignorance of the laws of music, I have often broken all laws, and the result was an original twist. I get an idea, either a title or a phrase or a melody, and hum it out to something definite. When I have completed a song and memorized it, I dictate it to an arranger."

This anonymous "arranger" was the vital link in bringing the creations of many of the period's songwriters to the marketplace. From the 1880s until the late 1920s, the popular music industry was based on ink and paper: the physical "score"—i.e., "sheet music"—was their only product. To serve the huge public demand for this, a vast and profitable music publishing industry arose. For many years the printing and distributing of sheet music was the be-all and end-all of the "music business." For composers this meant that their new works had to be quickly and expertly notated; that was the only way to make them "real" and give them commercial value. Under these conditions composers who could neither read nor write music were at a disadvantage. However, the executives of Tin Pan Alley quickly realized that many of the best songwriters were (by whatever quirk of neurology) unable to read or write down their own creations. They played "by ear," and that was that. So to harvest this valuable musical "crop," the publishers developed the "musical arranger" system: Musicians of solid training, acute hearing, and a modicum of diplomacy were hired to stand by with pencil and music paper and transcribe into proper form whatever the "composer" sang, whistled, hummed, or banged out on a piano for them. This sketch was then revised, edited, and sent to the engravers. A beautifully printed piece of sheet music (perhaps with a colorful illustrated cover) was the final result.

Irving Berlin relied totally on his arrangers, and maintained long and exclusive relationships with several of them. His arranging staff was of two types: The closest were his "musical secretaries," some of whom literally lived with him. The second group was Berlin's orchestrators, specialists in the job of expanding his music from the piano to the wider possibilities of the band, orchestra, and (sometimes) chorus. The latter group was especially influential on the final sounds as perceived by audiences. But either by accident or design, the significant contributions of arrangers to Irving Berlin's music have usually been downplayed or overlooked entirely. Part of the purpose of this recording is to fill in the musicological record by acknowledging these fine unsung musicians.

The first arranger with whom Berlin worked extensively was William Schulz (1882–1945). It was he who assisted Berlin on that fateful day when the songwriter had walked into the Ted Snyder Co. with words but no music for "Dorando." Schulz's successful support of Berlin in that encounter was the nudge that helped secure Berlin's first position on Tin Pan Alley. Afterward Schulz—a specialist in orchestration—scored virtually all of Berlin's songs for the next seven years, including all of his biggest hits. (Four of these fine arrangements are heard on this recording.) Other veteran Berlin staff arranger/orchestrators whose work is featured here are Albert Lewis Moquin (1881–1949), Mornay D. Helm (1889–?), and Milton Ager (1893–1979).

Another unusual aspect of Irving Berlin's creativity was his status as a "words and music" songwriter. This was a considerably rare phenomenon; the gifts required are seldom found in one person. Songwriting was almost always a collaborative process: One partner composed the music and the other wrote the words. (The teams of Gilbert & Sullivan and Rodgers & Hammerstein are but two classic examples.) A person who could do both with virtuosity was nearly unique and enjoyed considerable advantages. Doing both jobs assured the best possible "fit" between words and music: The single creator did not have to call a meeting with his partner. He could work at any time, day and night, and plug away until the song was perfected. And if such perfection wasn't reached, the work in progress could be shelved and pulled out at a later time for further honing. This one-man method also assured that there could also be no "creative differences" (a common peril of songwriting teams). Conflict and compromise were inevitable facts for songwriting partners. Irving Berlin on the other hand enjoyed the luxury of being able to suit himself, and, especially later in his career, take whatever time he needed to do so. And when Berlin (a perfectionist) was pleased, oftentimes millions of other people were too.

One last facet to ponder while enjoying this recording is Irving Berlin's impeccable sense of melody. This indeed seems to be the most outstanding feature of his songs, and the attraction that first draws the listener's attention. An entire analytical book could be written on the nature of Berlin's melodies. But the upshot probably is that Berlin's tunes were wonderful because he was gifted with a superb, innate sense of *harmony*, from which his melodies sprang. Berlin's music itself presents us with quite a bit of evidence for that theory. He also made several statements (perhaps unwittingly) to support it. In an early interview about "Alexander's Ragtime Band" for instance, Berlin said, "I had long admired certain of its [harmonic] progressions, but the *melody* came to me right out of the air." Even stronger support comes later from Robert Russell Bennett (1894–1981), the master musician who arranged and orchestrated for virtually every major American songwriter and Broadway composer, including Berlin:

Irving Berlin, working with the arranger, would sometimes stop at a chord and say, "Is that the right harmony?" We would say, "It's probably not the one you want. How about this?" We would strike a chord and he would say, "No, that's not it," or his face would light up and he'd say, "That's it!" Which means that his inner ear was way ahead of his fingers on the black keys of the piano. The right harmony, as he called it, was part of the original inspiration, whether he could play it for you or not.

But however he achieved it, Irving Berlin's songs succeeded beyond his—and everyone's—wildest dreams. A simple and profound man, he has also left us with the best summation of his work: "My ambition is to reach the heart of the average American. Not the highbrow nor the lowbrow but that vast intermediate crew which is the real soul of the country. . . . My public is the real people."

## THE MUSIC

Irving Berlin's first true hit as a "words & music" songwriter was "**That Mesmerizing Mendelssohn Tune**" (1909). It appeared toward the end of his first full year on Tin Pan Alley. During that time his employers at the Ted Snyder Co. had confined him almost entirely to lyric writing. But Berlin also wanted to write music for his own words. Nothing if not persistent, he proved himself capable beyond any doubt by coming up with both the engaging melodies and clever rhymes of "That Mesmerizing Mendelssohn Tune."

This number is a fine example of a period "dialect song" featuring black protagonists. But it is more complex than its contemporaries; rather than focus on the stereotypically "comic" aspects of African-American life, it instead encourages cultural aspiration and assimilation: Its lead character adores that old chestnut of genteel (and waspish) parlor pianists, Mendelssohn's "Spring Song." This was a sentiment shared by millions of 1909 Americans, including Berlin and legions of his fellow immigrants. With "Mesmerizing Mendelssohn Tune" Berlin gives us the first full glimpse of his powers—charming, witty, tuneful, and yet transformative. In a simple pop song Berlin mixes several cultural themes, old and new, in a way that appealed to listeners from a diversity of backgrounds. And that is what made "That Mesmerizing Mendelssohn Tune" a great success and the banner signaling the arrival of a major new talent on Tin Pan Alley

More than a century after its appearance, "**Alexander's Ragtime Band**" is still one of the world's most familiar songs. It was also one of the greatest Irving Berlin hits and, as Alec Wilder put it, "a high point in the evolution of popular music." Yet for its apparent directness, "Alexander's" is also a work of surprising complexity.

1911 America was awash in lively popular songs. But from its arrival early that year, "Alexander's" stood out because it truly was different. Like "That Mesmerizing Mendelssohn Tune," it features African-American characters in a non-demeaning, even celebratory manner. This alone was unusual for that era. Even more unusual and perhaps unprecedented was the song's essential "gesture," which as Charles Hamm put it, was "a first-person exhortation to anyone and everyone within earshot." This direct call to action—inviting the listener to be *a part of a song*—was something new, at least for Tin Pan Alley.

"Alexander's" was also exceptional because Berlin did not struggle with it: "I wrote the whole thing in eighteen minutes," he admitted, "surrounded on all sides by roaring pianos and roaring vaudeville actors." Instinctively Berlin knew he had a hit. But his bosses at the Ted Snyder Co. were concerned that "Alexander's" chorus was too long—thirty-two bars, double the customary length. But Berlin insisted and prevailed, establishing the short verse, long chorus song model that was to serve him so well. "Short verses put the singer into the chorus and the song-idea quickly," he explained, "Yet all of my songs run to long choruses. Short choruses, I argue, are over too quickly; they don't carry enough sustained interest."

While not an overnight success, "Alexander's" caught on fairly quickly. It was a perfect vaudeville song, which is why Berlin "placed" it first with Emma Carus (1879–1927), the famous "female baritone" whom he had met during one of his own brief "turns" as a vaudevillian. (Carus may have even been the song's inspiration.) The first performance of this iconic song is unfortunately not known. Carus's first documented performance of it occurred on May 25, 1911, but she had been singing it for several weeks beforehand. In any case, "Alexander's Ragtime Band" was a "wow!" Within weeks, every stage act that could arrange to do so was featuring it.

Within a month the song was a confirmed hit; sales of sheet music sales and phonograph records were brisk. (One million sheets were sold within its first sales quarter.) By the end of the summer of 1911, *Variety* quite correctly proclaimed “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” as “the musical sensation of the decade.”

That decade has now lengthened beyond the century mark, yet “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” is still amazingly alive and well within our national consciousness. Along the way it has accumulated quite a bit of “mythology” that should be corrected. One is the oft-repeated claim that the song started America’s ragtime craze. That is obviously not true; the Ragtime Era had of course been booming along for at least a dozen years before “Alexander’s” came on the scene. A second common fallacy is that “Alexander’s” is ragtime music. (Some older texts even cite it as an archetypical “rag.”) But since the song has hardly any syncopation—the very hallmark of true ragtime—that claim is also incorrect. Instead, “Alexander’s” is, as Irving Berlin once succinctly put it, a “song about ragtime.” And a very great one at that, which you will perceive if you will kindly “come on and hear” it played from William Schulz’s original 1911 vaudeville orchestration here on track 14.

While “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” was carrying him closer to fame, Irving Berlin began one of his experiments with the more serious forms of musical expression. In the early fall of 1911 he wrote “**My Melody Dream**,” the first of what would eventually be a set of three art songs. Its contemplative, non-commercial nature suggests that Berlin had decided to expand his creative horizons. Having mastered the lively, extroverted pop song, he was now perhaps ready to evoke something more reflective of his own quiet, introspective personality. Perceptively, Berlin realized that the typical verse/chorus pop song format would hardly be suited to the delicacy required for his “Song Poem.” Instead, “My Melody Dream” unfolds in its own way, compactly and very unusually, in three oddly barred sections: phrases of ten, seventeen, and ten bars, respectively. (To give some idea of the strangeness of this, recall that all American popular music going back to its beginnings was built on eight, sixteen, or very occasionally, thirty-two bar phrases. Non-conformance results in a lopsided or tentative-feeling composition.) The tonality of “My Melody Dream” is equally idiosyncratic, drifting measure to measure from major to minor. Also notable, the song’s predominant rhythms are ragtime—*andante* and *legato*—but nonetheless ragtime. Berlin’s use of these figures in this context brings to mind the music of another composer who even better understood the expressive possibilities of syncopation—Scott Joplin (c.1867–1917). “Respectfully dedicated to my pal Wilson Mizner,” this intriguing Irving Berlin rarity is gorgeously reclaimed from the mists of time here by soprano Bernadette Boerckel, accompanied by yours truly.

“**Everybody’s Doin’ It Now**” was Irving Berlin’s third major success of 1911. With it he once again proved his keen awareness of public sentiment and better still, an uncanny ability to get ahead of the curve of emerging trends. The “Doin’ It” in this case refers to a mania for dancing that was just beginning to grip the nation. Known as the “Dance Craze,” this phenomenon was one colorful manifestation of early 20th-century America’s break away from Victorian ideals and morals. In the 19th century dancing had been an occasional, formal, highly ritualized type of public gathering. With the nation’s evolution from an agricultural/rural society to an industrial/urban one, the customs of dancing also changed radically. The new steps were performed by male/female “couples” rather than with large group formations. Dances were simplified, ballrooms and dance halls sprang up, and “tripping the light fantastic” with *strangers* became an acceptable (or nearly so) behavior. By 1911 the public was warming to the idea of

dancing as casual recreation and with that, racy ragtime steps and the “Animal Dances”—including the Turkey Trot, became the rage.

This subject matter was particularly attractive to Irving Berlin: “I wanted a dance song; everybody was doing it. I just sat down and wrote the thing as it was. It was the dance craze put to music and words. Even the lyrics have the swing:

*Everybody’s doin’ it,  
Doin’ what?, doin’ what?  
Everybody’s doin’ it,  
Doin’ what?, doin’ what?  
Ain’t that music touchin’ your heart?  
Hear that trombone bustin’ apart.  
Come, come, come, come, let us start.  
Everybody’s doin’ it now!”*

“Everybody’s Doin’ It Now” may also have been one of Berlin’s earliest songs written specifically for a full-length stage production, rather than as a stand-alone pop or vaudeville song. It was premiered by Lydia Barry in the *Revue of Revues* at the Winter Garden Theatre on September 27, 1911. The published sheet music for the song did not appear until more than a month later.

Our performance of “Everybody’s Doin’ It” heard on track 1 is played from the original, official 1911 dance orchestra score by William Schulz. It is delightful to play and no doubt made dancers equally excited. Some of the changes Schulz made in converting the song into a dance number were standard practices which, for historical purposes, should be mentioned: First, to make it suitable for the Animal Dances (like the Turkey Trot), the tempo of the music had to be increased. So the song’s 4/4 meter was halved to 2/4, and the speed of the harmonic accompaniment (the “Oom-pah”) under the melody was doubled. The original song also included many dotted rhythms, which for an up-tempo performance had to be smoothed out into “straight” eighths. These were standard but important alterations seen in literally a thousand 1900s and 1910s dance arrangements of songs. However, Schulz does inject a few surprises: One instructs the musicians to put down their instruments and shout during the refrain (“*Doin’ what?!?*”). Also, to extend the duration of the piece to fit the duration of the dance, Schulz composed new music to serve as a trio—a sixteen-bar serving of real high-stepping ragtime that does not appear in the original Berlin song.

1912 was a time of triumph and tragedy for Irving Berlin. Apart from his song successes he was becoming a sought-after vaudeville performer, singing his own hits for enthusiastic audiences. Things were going well at the office too: Berlin had been promoted from hired hand to partner at the Ted Snyder Co. (duly reorganized as “Waterson, Berlin & Snyder”). But most importantly, Berlin had fallen in love with Dorothy Getz, the comely nineteen-year-old sister of one of his associates. After a “whirlwind romance,” Irving and Dorothy were married in February 1912. Afterward, following the fashion of the day they honeymooned in sunny Havana, Cuba. The newlyweds then returned to New York eager to begin the rest of their lives together. But heartbreakingly, Dorothy fell ill with what was diagnosed as typhoid fever, apparently contracted in Cuba. Despite the efforts of several of Manhattan’s best physicians, she languished and then died on July 17, 1912.

The devastated songwriter attempted to carry on, cranking out cheery songs at his Weser transposing piano. But the spark was gone. Berlin went to Europe for a long rest. When he returned he had still not found his equilibrium; then, in the chilly autumn he thought of something he needed to do for Dorothy that he had not yet done—a song. The result was **“When I Lost You.”** Years later Berlin admitted it was the only song he had ever written about his own life. Its creation was cathartic; in the words of Alexander Woollcott, “He had to write [it]. It gave him his first chance to voice his great unhappiness in the only language that meant anything to him.”

*I lost the sunshine and roses,  
I lost the heavens of blue,  
I lost the beautiful rainbow,  
I lost the morning dew.  
I lost the angel who gave me  
Summer the whole winter through.  
I lost the gladness that turned into sadness  
When I lost you.*

Musically, “When I Lost You” was Berlin’s first truly great ballad. His friend George M. Cohan (1878–1942) went even further, calling it the prettiest song that he had ever heard. Indeed, its melodies and harmonies are both so perfect that here we highlight them with an orchestral presentation of the song, featuring a deeply moving solo by our trombonist, Mike Lormand.

**“The International Rag”** was one of Irving Berlin’s best ragtime songs, and one of his most successful. It is also an example of the excellence that the songwriter was capable of achieving under pressure: In the summer of 1913 he traveled to London to star in the Hippodrome revue *Hullo, Ragtime!* However, upon arriving he discovered what he perceived to be a problem:

The night before my first appearance, I discovered that all of my songs were known in England and that I needed a new one for an opening number. I wanted something that would give London a local flavor, yet would carry out the syncopated idea. I had used the word “raggedy” in another song, not a success. I just liked it. I felt free to use it again, and with it and the London-interest suggestion, I went to work and stayed up most of the night composing “The International Rag.”

The following evening, July 7, 1913, Irving Berlin mounted the Hippodrome stage and put his spanking new creation “over” in the grand American show-biz tradition. West Enders—excited enough over their opportunity to see the “Ragtime King” in person—were ecstatic to find themselves also getting a world premiere.

“The International Rag” went on to become a favorite of other vaudevillians on both sides of the Atlantic. Part of its attraction came from some rhythmic novelty Berlin injected into its chorus, “. . . I got my ‘punch’ by means of my melody. I used the triplet, the freak, from out of my bag of tricks: *Raggedy melody, Full of originality.*” For years “The International Rag” was the specialty of many famous duo acts, and so here we are delighted to present our own resident vaudeville team, Boerckel & Marcus, “delivering the goods” accompanied by William Schulz’s original 1913 orchestration. (Oh, if only you could have seen their dance routine!)

Like all of his successful Tin Pan Alley rivals, Irving Berlin's early songs were often built upon stereotypes of ethnic humor. There were many stock categories—the Italian song, the Hebrew song, the Negro song, the Irish song, the German song, and so forth. But as the 20th century dawned, a new type—the “Rube song” appeared. These poked fun at an even earlier immigrant group, the old New England “Yankee.” Slangily referred to by others as “Rubes,” these rural folk were supposed to be, as Charles Hamm put it, “Poorly educated but shrewd, gullible yet resourceful . . . [and] comically out of their element if they happen to wander into the modern urban world.” In other words, the perfect target for millions of recently arrived, city-dweller immigrants looking for someone *else* to poke fun at.

Berlin came a bit late to the Rube song genre, but took to it with gusto. He wrote several of them during his breakthrough years, but undoubtedly the best was **“This Is the Life!”** It must have been a pet project of his as well, because Berlin expended considerable effort and expense on it: After publishing the song in late January 1914 with an extremely unusual fifty-six-bar chorus, he withdrew it, shortened the chorus to a still-unusual forty bars, had everything re-engraved, and published this improved edition three weeks later. That sort of meticulousness was unheard of in the popular music trade, but it says much about the perfectionism of Irving Berlin.

Of course, his impulses were correct, and “This Is the Life!” became another smash. Its theatrical qualities made it a natural favorite of stage performers, including a rising young star named Al Jolson (real name: Asa Yoelson, 1886–1950). Berlin explained why:

As we depend on vaudeville singers . . . to advertise our songs, we must write words and music so that they can be sung to the best advantage. Players [stage performers] must make good on songs before the public buys. Therefore the songwriter must put attention and attraction features near the end of his chorus—not too far away from the end, the climax, so that the auditor will forget them while the song is being finished. These we call ‘punch lines.’ For instance, in ‘This Is the Life:’

*I love the cows and chickens—  
But, this is the life, this is the life.  
I love to raise the dickens  
While I'm cabaretting, where the band is playing.  
I love the home-made cider, but I'd rather have wine.  
No more picking berries; Me for cocktail cherries!  
This is the life,  
This is the life for mine.*

Daniel Marcus proves the song's continuing appeal with a vibrant performance accompanied by William M. Redfield's (1867–1938) sparkling original 1914 vaudeville orchestra score.

It was the dream of every songwriter—no matter how successful—to “graduate” from writing individual pop tunes to composing full-length *scores* for the musical theater. In the early 1900s musical comedy and operetta were the very pinnacle of the entertainment business; the movies were still short, primitive, and “silent”; broadcast radio was still years away, and of course TV and the Internet were not even dreamt of. And so Broadway was the most exciting, glamorous, and profitable (sometimes) place in the world, and a magnet for talent, real and imagined. Although hundreds of songwriters attempted to make the transition, very few succeeded. The

skill set required was just too different: cranking out a single pop tune—even a great one—was a far cry from creating an entire evening’s worth of dramatic, unified theater music. That was why nearly all of the notable Broadway composers were classically trained, accomplished musicians, rather than illiterate barroom “ticklers.”

Nevertheless, Irving Berlin yearned for the bright lights of Broadway. And, by 1914 public tastes had changed enough that it seemed the attraction could be mutual. Early in that year veteran Broadway producer Charles Dillingham (1868–1934) began contemplating his next project (show number forty-two). And he was thinking outside the box: For leads, rather than the usual star singers or comedians, he hired exhibition dancers Irene and Vernon Castle (certainly a nod to the ongoing Dance Craze). And for music, rather than one of his usual contract composers (Victor Herbert was one), Dillingham approached Irving Berlin. This was another breakthrough moment, and the songwriter took up the challenge with great enthusiasm. By September 1914 he had completed—in what was undoubtedly the hardest job he had yet undertaken—most of the words and music for an entire “syncopated musical show in three acts” called *Watch Your Step*.

This production, more or less a revue rather than a true book musical, had somewhat stormy development and rehearsal periods. But it survived to open in the opulent New Amsterdam Theatre on the night of December 8, 1914. Fortunately, it was an instant smash, both with audiences and critics. The *New York Times* proclaimed the show “. . . as gay, extravagant, and festive an offering as this city could possibly hope to see.” But the *Times* reserved special praise for the nerve-wracked songwriter: “More than to any one else, ‘Watch Your Step’ belongs to Irving Berlin. He is the young master of syncopation, the gifted and industrious writer of words and music for songs that have made him rich and envied.”

The **Overture to *Watch Your Step***, heard here in its world-premiere recording, offers seven melodies from the show’s full score: “The Syncopated Walk,” “What Is Love?,” “When I Discovered You,” “I Love to Have the Boys Around,” “The Minstrel Parade,” “Settle Down in a One-Horse Town,” and “Play a Simple Melody.” Although no arranger is credited on the score, this overture was obviously the work of the legendary Frank Saddler (1864–1921), the man who orchestrated the show and assisted Berlin in various other, uncredited ways. (As the songwriter admitted years later, “I learned a lot from him.”) Saddler was Broadway’s first great orchestrator, and in his day the job required the arranging of all of the songs, dances, and production numbers, as well as the “composing” of the overture and various incidental pieces.

Historical perspective: Since its opening, *Watch Your Step* was widely touted as Broadway’s first ragtime or “syncopated” show, but that is really far from the case. Ragtime music had been a feature of the American theater since the turn of the century, most notably through the groundbreaking and enormously popular work of Berlin’s friend and mentor George M. Cohan. (To sample, see the Paragon Ragtime Orchestra’s *George M. Cohan: You’re A Grand Old Rag*, New World Records 80685-2.) Rather, the true significance of Irving Berlin’s first musical was as a laboratory for the expansion of his powers of synthesis. In the words of Alec Wilder, *Watch Your Step* demonstrated, “a vitality and awareness of shifting musical fashions” which were not based in “an operetta world of dying subservience to European culture. Berlin, musically, was a street Arab, spinning through the musical by-ways listening to all the new sounds about him and trying to put his reflections and conclusions down on paper.” Above all, this show was Berlin’s gateway to bigger and better things.

The most ingenious part of *Watch Your Step* was the astounding **“Finale to Act II,”** otherwise known as the **“Opera Medley”** or “Old Operas in a New Way.” This very likely is Irving Berlin’s only true “extended work.” (Its score spans forty-two pages.) It was also the part of *Watch Your Step* that attracted the most attention and prompted the most critical commentary. Even today, the “Opera Medley” remains an impressive piece of work: Written for five soloists and chorus, it spans eight different sections with elaborate transitions, modulations, and meter changes, all brilliantly burlesquing some of the most famous moments from grand opera.

Irving Berlin had something of a “complex” about opera. Its supposed pretensions had been the target of several of his earlier pop songs, culminating in 1912 with his “Opera Burlesque”—a fourteen-page parody of the “Sextette” from Donizetti’s *Lucia*. (What is apparent from all of this is that Berlin possessed a working knowledge of the standard operatic repertoire.) That same year Berlin also created a scene for the Ziegfeld *Follies* entitled “Old Operas in New Ways,” which might have been a trial run for what followed.

For *Watch Your Step*, Berlin returned to this obsession, and in the most complex manner yet. To conclude Act II, five of his characters head to the Metropolitan Opera House to take in a performance. But instead of respectfully listening, each interrupts with demands that the immortal melodies of Verdi, Puccini, Gounod, Bizet, and Leoncavallo be converted into current Dance Craze tunes: “Stella Sparks” (sung here by Bernadette Boerckel) starts the ruckus by insisting that *Aida* should be made into a rag (here Berlin shows the depth of his awareness of pop trends by inserting short quotes from W.C. Handy’s just-off-the-press “Saint Louis Blues”); “Ernesta Hardacre” (Heather Hill) then hijacks *La Bohème* with the claim that it is perfect for the new Hesitation Waltz. Not to be outdone, “Algy Cuffs” (Daniel Marcus) commandeers *Faust* with the intention of doing the Castle’s new “Latin” dance—the maxixe (pronounced “mäk ‘SHĕSHĕ”)—to it. But wait, there’s more!: “Birdie O’Brien” (also sung here by Boerckel) elbows her way in to exclaim how suitable the “Toreador’s Song” (from *Carmen*) is for tangoing. At this the chorus crashes in with a one-step rendition of “Vesti la giubba” from *Pagliacci*. That outrage is finally too much, and the “Ghost of Verdi” himself (Thomas Carle) descends on the Met to rebuke the miscreants and warn them away from his beloved *Rigoletto*. This results in a pitched battle (pun intended) between “Verdi” and the insolent youngsters (joined by baritone Edward Peasant to form a mischievous quartet). The struggle crescendos until at last, with one clamorous chord (with “Verdi” and “Ernesta” matching high B-flats), the defeated wraith vanishes in a puff of smoke! Gleefully the youngsters resume their dancing to “Vesti la giubba” (“*Oh, you Pagliacci, Because your melody mellow, by Leoncavallo, affords us something new, and so we’ll one-step, to you!*”) until the orchestra disintegrates in a series of inane modulations to a final, hysterical, quote from the show’s opening number, “The Syncopated Walk.” CURTAIN!

It is curious to realize that while Berlin’s “Opera Medley” was the most talked about number of *Watch Your Step*, it was also the first to fade from public memory. Yet as it vanished, the production’s least-cheered number, **“Play a Simple Melody,”** blossomed into worldwide fame. Indeed, today “Simple Melody” is the only remnant of *Watch Your Step* that is familiar to the public. (And at that, hardly anyone recalls its stage origin.)

Coming as the penultimate number of the show’s final act, “Play a Simple Melody” was another musical duel of sorts: “Ernesta Hardacre” (an ingénue role played by Sallie Fischer, 1880–1950), enters the scene and, perhaps regretting her earlier indiscretions with Puccini and Verdi, laments the sorry state of current popular music. “Won’t you play a simple melody,” she pleads, “like my

mother sang for me?” The answer comes swiftly, as an unrepentant “Algy Cuffs” (tenor Charles King, 1886–1944) bounds in to give her a syncopated scolding. However, “Ernesta” is unmoved, and reiterates her “Simple Melody” whilst “Algy” simultaneously weaves around her in ragtime counterpoint: “If you will play from a copy of a tune that is choppy you’ll get all my applause— And that is simply because—I want to listen to rag!” The final result seems to have been the happy co-existence of traditional with “today.”

“Play a Simple Melody” really is a splendidly conceived work, and one of the best of Irving Berlin’s long career. Most historians credit it with being his first “counterpoint song”—that is, one having two equally important melodies composed to fit together while sung at the same time. (Some also credit Berlin with bringing this effect to Broadway, which is going just a little too far.) While listening to Bernadette Boerckel and Daniel Marcus thrillingly revive it here in its original stage version, it is really difficult to imagine why “Play a Simple Melody” was not a showstopper back in 1914.

To be able to so astutely comment on American life through words and music, Irving Berlin must have been an avid observer of current events, trends, and ideas. This awareness formed the reservoir from which he drew the timely themes for his songs. Berlin was reportedly well informed on a wide variety of subjects, in the peculiarly intense manner often seen in highly intelligent yet self-educated people. Berlin’s growing fame also gave him entrée to some of the best and brightest minds of his generation, providing him with further stimulation. One of these belonged to his friend Wilson Mizner (1876–1933), the adventurer, playwright, and widely quoted wit. Sometime around 1910 Mizner mentioned to Berlin a magazine article he had seen regarding a penniless ex-attorney who died leaving a fanciful “will” bequeathing life’s simple pleasures to the world at large. The songwriter was momentarily intrigued but then returned to livelier subjects. However, several years later, a more reflective Berlin recalled the conversation, and became enthused about basing a song on the story. He began a search for the article, which after considerable effort he finally located early in 1915.

Irving Berlin’s own reading of the sad saga of the late “Charles Lounsbury, Esq.” did indeed inspire **“When I Leave the World Behind.”** In the process Berlin expanded the story a bit, combining a lovely poem with two gorgeous melodies. The result is one of his very best ballads. Berlin thought so highly of it that he very carefully engineered its May 3, 1915 premiere: The young, stylish opera star Fritzi Scheff (1879–1954) was engaged to sing it in New York’s grandest vaudeville theater, the Palace. And, according to *Variety*, after the soprano’s performance, she pointed out Irving Berlin (seated in the house) for an “author’s bow.” Then Scheff asked Berlin from the stage if he would kindly oblige everyone by singing the song himself. Would he? Yes! The diminutive songwriter (and not-so-ex-song plugger) scrambled to the center aisle and did just that—twice—to the delight of the huge Palace audience.

A point of historical interest: The original 1915 orchestration of “When I Leave the World Behind” heard here is by Milton Ager, an Irving Berlin amanuensis who went on to huge songwriting success of his own (with “Happy Days Are Here Again,” among others) in the 1920s and ’30s.

*Watch Your Step* was still playing to sold-out crowds when Charles Dillingham, like all successful producers, began to build his follow-up. Since Irving Berlin himself had proven to be his main attraction, Dillingham naturally reengaged him for the sequel, along with the rest of the *Watch Your Step* creative team, librettist Harry B. Smith (1860–1936) and director R.H. Burnside (1873–

1952). Hewing closely to the successful formula of the previous show, the new one—*Stop! Look! Listen!*—starred another celebrated team of exhibition dancers, Gaby Deslys (1881–1920) and Harry Pilcer (1885–1961).

There were some improvements though: *Stop! Look! Listen!* benefited from a stronger book (although of the standard “chorus girl rises to stardom” type) and included seventeen new Berlin songs with an even greater emphasis on syncopation. Opening on Christmas Night, 1915 at the Globe Theatre, *Stop! Look! Listen!* unfolded in eight scenes over three acts. Critics and audiences were generally pleased, and the show ran for a respectable one-hundred-five performances.

Curiously, despite the number of fine Berlin songs in the score, only one was to break out as a major hit—“**I Love a Piano.**” This was introduced near the close of Act I by tenor Harry Fox (1882–1959), accompanied by the theater orchestra *and* six onstage grand pianos! Here, using the original 1915 orchestration by Al Moquin, our own Daniel Marcus propels “I Love a Piano” with such vitality that I couldn’t image a better performance. But what about those six pianos? For this recording we had something better—Steinway’s #446, a near-legendary instrument more usually found on stage at Boston’s Symphony Hall. The good folks at New World Records somehow had it for us at the American Academy, where our own ensemble pianist, Diane Scott, played it with great élan. After take one of this number, she exclaimed, “I love *this* piano!”

“**Smile and Show Your Dimple**” is included to remind us that, like nearly every composer, Irving Berlin maintained a stash of musical ideas that were too good to discard yet which had not quite found their proper situation. Classical composers often call these “sketches”; songwriters call them “trunk songs.” Irving Berlin had many of these, some actually on paper, and others stored in his prodigious memory. At least one of them received a second chance at fame and glory.

The First World War was a profound tragedy for many, but an incredible boon to the American popular music business. Literally thousands of songs were written to build morale and to capitalize on the “martial spirit” sweeping the country. As usual, Irving Berlin made busy providing “product” (as he called it) to fit the prevailing mood. On August 20, 1917 he offered up his latest war number, “Smile and Show Your Dimple.” It was the story of a girl whose boyfriend is in the Army “Over There.” As Berlin remarked, “It was the kind of cheer-up song that civilians wrote for the boys who were going to do the fighting. The song was plugged by the Waterson company but got nowhere.” And so “Smile” joined the long list of Berlin back-catalog numbers.

Sixteen years later Irving Berlin was finishing work on *As Thousands Cheer*, his second Broadway revue with librettist Moss Hart (1904–1961). This time the duo had come up with a novel premise for a show—it was to represent a giant living newspaper, with performers imitating the front page, the “funnies,” the sports pages, and so on. The production went together smoothly, except that Berlin could not come up with an “old-fashioned-type song” that was needed for the closing scene of the first act. After several false starts Berlin remembered “Smile and Show Your Dimple” and dug it out of the files. The first measures of its refrain were exactly what he had been searching for, and Berlin quickly reworked these into a new song he dubbed “Her Easter Bonnet.” Introduced in *As Thousands Cheer* as “Easter Parade,” it has gone forth to become one of Irving Berlin’s best-loved signature songs.

Here we present the precursor of that wonderful song in William Schulz's vibrant 1917 one-step dance arrangement of "Smile and Show Your Dimple." It's a charming piece that proves that Berlin had been on the right track—musically at least—from the very start.

Incredibly, in 1917 the rich and well-known creator of the songs beginning to define the American experience was still a Russian resident alien. With the World War came the impetus for Irving Berlin to change that status. On October 15, 1917, Berlin petitioned through his attorneys to become a naturalized citizen of the United States. This was granted on February 18 of the following year. But the U.S. Government had even more paperwork in store for citizen Berlin: In May 1918 the thirty-year old songwriter was flabbergasted to receive notice that he been drafted into the U.S. Army. This bit of even-handed democracy was eagerly reported by newspapers from coast to coast, many repeating the same droll headline, U.S. TAKES BERLIN!

Private Berlin was not, however, amused. Reporting to Camp Upton in Yaphank, Long Island, he found Army life no harder than the conditions he had grown up with on the Lower East Side. But the hours were far worse: Berlin, a confirmed "night owl," now had to wake up at 5:00 AM for reveille. "I hated it so much" he later grumbled, "that I used to lie awake at night thinking how much I hated it."

Fortunately, not long into Berlin's basic training the commander of the post, Gen. J. Franklin Bell, pulled him from the ranks, promoted him, and detailed him to entertain the troops. Sgt. Berlin's first "mission" was to put together a show to raise funds for an Army charity. Berlin attacked his new objective with zeal, requisitioning other personnel with musical or theatrical backgrounds, and tapping into his Broadway contacts. His finished all-soldier show—*Yip, Yip, Yaphank!*—opened at Broadway's Century Theatre on August 19, 1918. Its utter novelty—three hundred soldiers on stage (some in drag as chorus "girls"), with Sgt. Berlin as the star, all belting out an entire evening of new Berlin songs—could hardly have failed to spell success for the enterprise.

*Yip, Yip, Yaphank's* score featured fourteen Berlin numbers, but the standout was his march-song, **"Oh! How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning."** This was an off-the-cuff creation that had come to him shortly after his arrival at Camp Upton (he dedicated it to "Private Howard Friend who occupies the cot next to mine and feels as I do about the bugler.") But Berlin's comrades caught wind of it and soon it became Upton's unofficial "camp song." "Oh! How I Hate..." is an inspired, ironic work, pitting stirring 6/8 military music against an openly insubordinate lyric. Heard here sung by Eddie Pleasant using the song's original 1918 theater orchestration (by Everett J. Evans, 1868–1951), it is easy to understand why millions of American's agreed with Alexander Woollcott's view that it was, "The best and truest thing that America contributed to the songbook of the war."

With the end of the "Great War," Sgt. Berlin lost no time in returning to his former pursuits. But recent experiences seemed to have sharpened his musical artistry in some way: I am convinced that Berlin's melodies of 1919 and 1920 took on a new depth and beauty that had not been evident before. Indeed, several of his most exquisite songs appeared during those two years.

One of Berlin's first post-service assignments was for Florenz Ziegfeld's (1867–1932) upcoming *Follies of 1919*. Although the great producer had engaged thirty-two songwriters for the show, Berlin led the pack with fourteen musical contributions (several were recycled from *Yip, Yip, Yaphank!*). The first to be heard was Eddie Cantor's (c.1892–1964) legendary rendition of **"You'd**

**Be Surprised.**” This was a “skirt song”—a male performer voicing the thoughts of a comical female character. And it was a winner; Berlin himself had been performing it in vaudeville prior to giving it to the *Follies*. The sexual suggestiveness of “You’d Be Surprised”’s lyrics was a departure for Berlin, and indeed for much of the country (the song was attacked by press and pulpit). And musically there were differences too: The song’s swiny verse shows Berlin’s awareness of a recent American musical fad—“jass” or jazz. (Its refrain reverts into tried and true ragtime.) Daniel Marcus’s marvelous rendition here is a masterpiece of historic recreation, blending the styles of several 1919 phonograph performances of the song (including Cantor’s) along with his own encyclopedic knowledge of early-20th-century theater singing. It’s a “wow!” (The orchestration is the original crafted by Berlin staffer Mornay Helm.)

The *Follies of 1919* also ushered in another Berlin success, but a much more enduring one—“**A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody.**” This song became the unofficial theme of the *Follies*, and a work that the songwriter himself regarded as one of his five most important. But unlike “You’d Be Surprised,” “A Pretty Girl” was specifically written as a production number for the show. The version that has come down to us though is actually quite condensed: In the 1919 *Follies* it was an extended work designed to feature the famous Ziegfeld showgirls. Tenor John Steel (1895–1971) sang the verse and refrain of “A Pretty Girl,” and then five stunning showgirls, each costumed as a famous classical melody—Offenbach’s “Barcarolle,” Dvořák’s “Humoresque,” Schuman’s “Träumerei,” Mendelssohn’s “Spring Song,” and Massenet’s “Elégie”—paraded onto the stage as Steel sang new lyrics that Berlin had fitted to those venerable melodies. In the scene’s climax, Steel grandly reprised the refrain of “A Pretty Girl” surrounded by these five classical beauties. The effect was of course, electrifying, and launched both the song and Steel’s career.

But “A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody” is such a truly marvelous song that it transcends all of those Ziegfeldian bells and whistles. The melody of its refrain is particularly inspired, as is the chord progression leading up to it. Indeed, the music alone is so fine that we’ve elected to present the song instrumentally, using the official 1919 Irving Berlin, Inc. foxtrot arrangement by Mornay Helm. In our performance, cornetist Paul Murphy (using a 1919 Conn “New Wonder” cornet) and pianist Diane Scott give us an incredibly warm and elegant reading of the song’s famous refrain; the full orchestra joins in on the repeat. Is it any wonder that “A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody” has remained one of the keystones of the “Great American Songbook”?

Coming a bit later in the year 1919 was a winsome Irving Berlin song that is a particular favorite of mine—“**Nobody Knows (And Nobody Seems to Care).**” This was an independent pop tune rather than one created for a specific stage production. Nonetheless, it was heard from many stages anyway. Irving Berlin himself started that trend, singing it for his own “turns” at America’s “Mecca of vaudeville”—the great Palace Theatre.

“Nobody Knows” clearly displays a distinctive thread running through Berlin’s oeuvre—the expressing of downcast moods through rhythmic, cheerful music. It’s a curious juxtaposition that his friend Alexander Woollcott suggested was the product of Berlin’s Jewish heritage: “It is in the blood. . . . Back of him are generations of wailing cantors to tinge all his work with an enjoyable melancholy.”

My first encounter with “Nobody Knows” was anything but melancholy: My grandma, Alida P. Benjamin, was still enjoying it on her parlor piano when I was a child in the 1970s. She could really “sell” it, too (something she had been practicing since purchasing the sheet music in 1919); I can still hear the sound of her singing and playing echoing across those warm summer nights:

“*Many’s the time I feel so lone-some; But nobody knows, and nobody cares. . .*” It is that very bittersweetness that the orchestra and I have tried to capture here instrumentally with our rendition of “Nobody Knows,” from the original 1919 orchestral setting by Mornay Helm.

With the tremendous success of his 1919 revue, like clockwork Flo Ziegfeld began work on his *Follies of 1920*. The theater business was flush that season, and once again the great producer sought to outdo himself and his growing field of competitors. For the 1920 edition Ziegfeld had more than forty stars, including Fanny Brice, W.C. Fields, John Steel, and Eddie Cantor. His stable of fifteen composers and songwriters was equally glittering, once again boasting both Victor Herbert and Irving Berlin. The latter contributed the most, though, with nine new songs. Two of these were, musically speaking, among the most beautiful of Berlin’s career. “**The Girls of My Dreams**” arrived first, introduced in the seventh scene of Act I by John Steel and (obviously) a bevy of gorgeous females billed as the “Cloud Girls.” This part of the program was something of a sequel to the previous *Follies* staging of “A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody,” and at least one major critic thought that the earlier song was better. Nevertheless, I believe that “The Girls of My Dreams” is certainly as strong, and in certain respects stronger: Its pensive and harmonically rich verse gives way to a marvelously bouncy refrain, here played as a violin duo by two of my musical dream girls, Caroline Chin and Bryony Stroud-Watson. By way of historical interest, the arrangement we’re playing is the song’s first published orchestral setting, as scored by Al Moquin and issued by Irving Berlin, Inc. in September 1920.

The second wonderful Berlin song to grace the *Follies of 1920* was “**Tell Me, Little Gypsy.**” Like “The Girls of My Dreams,” Berlin conceived of it for performance by John Steel. The tenor did indeed introduce it in a fanciful vignette playing a young man who consults a Gypsy fortune-teller to find true love. During the number Steel was “transported” around the “world”—courtesy of the theatrical magic conjured by Ziegfeld’s superb design, lighting, and stage direction team. But the Berlin song is just as magical, and was acclaimed by several contemporary critics as one of the true highlights of the show. More recent experts have upheld that opinion: Alec Wilder has called it “. . . another pure melody, a perfectly beautiful melodic line” showing “a marked Kern influence in its extreme sparseness (only fifty-seven notes), its independence of harmonic influence, and its inevitability.” Once again, having access to another finely-shaded 1920 orchestral setting by Moquin, we’ve elected to spotlight Irving Berlin’s musical depth by presenting “Tell Me, Little Gypsy” here as an orchestral intermezzo.

Although Irving Berlin kept his finger on the pulse of American life and adapted to most of the major musical trends, there was one he did not enthusiastically embrace: the blues. This strange and ancient Negro music swept into notoriety in the late 1910s as the essential element of jazz. But Berlin kept his distance. He did make some attempts to assimilate the style—a tiny handful of his 1910s blues sketches survive. But this new music, with its peculiar tonality and phrase structure must have struck Berlin (as it did many of his Alley contemporaries) as too exotic to become widely popular.

But it did, and by 1920 it was obvious that there was indeed a large and growing market for the blues. Finally Berlin acted, or perhaps was coaxed by his new “musical secretary”—Harry Akst (1894–1963). An Army buddy from Berlin’s Camp Upton days, Akst had been a top vaudeville pianist accompanying major stars like Nora Bayes (1880–1928) and Al Jolson. And as a “hot tickler,” Akst undoubtedly came into contact with African-American pianists, show-folk, and songwriters, surely making him aware of the blues. Furthermore, W.C. Handy (1873–1958), the

“Father of the Blues” himself, had moved his publishing company to Manhattan in 1918, literally just a few doors down from Irving Berlin’s office. It is impossible to think that these men did not come into contact.

Midway through 1920 these influences and the exploding pop music “Blues Rush” prompted Irving Berlin’s first public attempt at the new style. On November 24 he issued **“Home Again Blues,”** with the copyright claim of “Words and music by I. Berlin and Harry Akst.” The song is a solid example of early commercial blues, and very much along the lines of Handy’s offerings. “Home Again Blues” covers all the stylistic bases: “blue notes,” “breaks,” and twelve-bar phrases (the refrain reverts to the standard thirty-two bars). One advanced touch was the “four-beat” bass accompaniment in the chorus. This was a novel effect in 1920, but one that would soon supplement the old “two-beat,” “Oom-pah” bass line that had propelled much of American dance music.

The “who wrote what?” aspects of “Home Again Blues” can probably never be unraveled. But no matter—it was a hit for Irving Berlin, Inc. The sheet music enjoyed solid sales, and recordings of it were the No. 2 best sellers of 1921. Nevertheless, with few exceptions, Irving Berlin kept his distance from the blues. Akst on the other hand (after leaving Berlin) successfully employed it several times later with his own song hits like “Am I Blue?” (1929).

The 1920 orchestration of “Home Again Blues” we’ve recorded here is itself significant: It was the work of Charles N. Grant (1887–1937) an important Broadway orchestrator who also worked in the Berlin office. His foxtrot scoring of “Home Again” introduces quite a few innovations, including the continuous use of muted brass (with “flutter tonguing”), swooping *glissandi* for the strings, and various atmospheric percussive touches. Grant’s aim was to simulate improvisation. Yet, ironically, to achieve that effect, every trombone moan and piccolo shriek had to be carefully calculated and precisely notated.

1921 was the greatest year yet for Irving Berlin: He became the first American musician to have built his very own Broadway theater to showcase his very own songs, music, and shows. This unprecedented event triumphantly signaled the end of Berlin’s breakthrough period and proclaimed him not only America’s foremost songwriter, but as something of an American legend.

His new Music Box Theatre, located at 239-47 West 45th Street, was an absolute wonder as well. Financing its construction had been Berlin’s million-dollar challenge. With its opening on February 22, 1921, his next task was to put a show onto its stage—*his* show. Fortunately, Berlin had already finished and set aside a song for his dream production: **“Say It With Music.”** And it was a very special one indeed. As his friend Alexander Woolcott recalled, “When the Music Box was building, Berlin set his heart on writing at least one song that would serve at once as a dedication of his house and, in the event that that house ever settled and mellowed into an institution, as a sort of anthem for it always. He called it ‘Say It With Music’ . . .”

With this key element in place, Berlin undertook the thousands of non-musical details crucial to the operation of a brand-new theater and the production of a major Broadway show. Over the spring and summer he wrote fifteen more songs, consulted on design and casting, and went into rehearsal. With tremendous anticipation, on September 22, 1921 *Irving Berlin’s Music Box Revue* finally opened. The two-act, sixteen-scene show starred veteran comedian Willie Collier (1864–1944, who also wrote the book), and Irving Berlin (as himself). But the biggest star of all was

Berlin's superlative words & music. Although its large cast included few other major names, the show was sumptuously mounted and cost an astronomical sum. (\$187,613.00.) Happily, the *Music Box Revue* was sensational; *Variety* hailed it as "America's greatest show"; the majority of the critics and audiences were similarly impressed. The *Revue* continued to run for more than a year at a considerable profit. It now seemed that everything Irving Berlin touched turned to gold.

Although the entire score of the Music Box Revue came in for praise, fittingly, the song that attracted the most attention was also Berlin's personal favorite—"Say It With Music." As the penultimate number of Act I, it was staged as a girl/boy duet with chorus. For our re-creation here we proudly present baritone Edward Pleasant singing the song's first published orchestration (1921, by Al Moquin). While not as expansively scored as the Music Box version, it does include a whimsical quote from *Lohengrin*, an elegant violin variation, and a remarkable three-bar modulation into the final *grandioso* refrain. But these fripperies are quite unnecessary; as conceived on his battered upright, "Say It With Music" was more than great; it is a timeless epitaph for the genius of Irving Berlin.

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authentic scores. All of these achievements have been widely praised and considered instrumental in rekindling interest in the rich history and tradition of the American theater orchestra.

[www.paragonragtime.com](http://www.paragonragtime.com)

Conductor **Rick Benjamin** has built a singular career on the discovery and performance of American music from the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. He is the founder and director of the Paragon Ragtime Orchestra, which uses his extraordinary 20,000-title collection of historic theater and dance orchestra scores (c. 1870–1925) as the basis of its repertoire. In addition to his work with Paragon, Mr. Benjamin maintains active careers as a pianist, arranger, and tubist. As a conductor, in addition to the PRO he has led the National Orchestra of Ireland (Dublin), the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, the Aalborg and Aarhus Symfoniorkestere in Denmark, the Olympia Symphony (Washington State), the National Orchestra of Iceland, the Erie Philharmonic, the Anchorage Symphony (Alaska), and the Virginia Symphony. Mr. Benjamin is also one of the foremost researchers of early cinema music; he has unearthed the original orchestral accompaniments to many great motion pictures of the 1910s and '20s, and he has conducted for more than six hundred silent film screenings across North America and Europe. Mr. Benjamin has written many articles on American music, and lecture tours have taken him to over a hundred colleges and universities. He is continuing work on his books *The American Theater Orchestra* and *Encyclopedia of Arrangers & Orchestrators: 1875–1925*. Rick Benjamin is a member of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences and BMI; he was educated at The Juilliard School in New York City. [www.rickbenjamin.com](http://www.rickbenjamin.com)

**Bernadette Ulrich Boerckel** has appeared with the Paragon Ragtime Orchestra for over a decade and has been a soloist on three previous recordings: *From Barrelhouse to Broadway: The Musical Odyssey of Joe Jordan*, *George M. Cohan: You're a Grand Old Rag*, and *Midnight Frolic: The Broadway Theater Music of Louis A. Hirsch*. A highly versatile performer, her credits include Marian in *The Music Man*, the Witch in *Into the Woods*, and Angelina in *Trial by Jury*. She has also sung the soprano solos in choral works by Mozart, Fauré, and Duruflé and Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire*.

Tenor **Tom Carle** currently studies at Westminster Choir College where he is pursuing a Master of Music in performance. On the operatic stage, he has appeared as Tamino in Mozart's *The Magic Flute* (Bucknell Opera) and King Kaspar in Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors* (Susquehanna Valley Chorale), among others. In the 2014–15 season, he appeared as tenor soloist in the Unity Choir's production of Handel's *Messiah* and Sussex County Oratorio Society's presentation of Beethoven's Mass in C Major. Upcoming projects include Tom Rakewell in *The Rake's Progress* (Opera Brooklyn) and Fenton in Verdi's *Falstaff* (Westminster Opera Theater).

**Heather Hill**'s career encompasses classical music, Broadway, TV, and film. Favorite roles include Carlotta in *The Phantom of the Opera*, Lily and Serena in the Broadway revival of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, Pip in *Moby Dick*, Adina in *L'Elisir d'Amore*, and Konstanze in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. Ms. Hill made her Carnegie Hall debut in 2010 and maintains an active concert schedule performing with orchestras both here and abroad. Additional recordings include the cast album of Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* and the Lincoln Center Live recording of *Knickerbocker Holiday*. [www.heatherhill.com](http://www.heatherhill.com)

**Daniel Marcus** made his Broadway debut in Joe Papp's production of *The Pirates of Penzance* and since then has appeared on Broadway in *1776*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Pal Joey*, *The Woman in White*, and *Urinetown*, in which he created the role of Officer Barrel. In London he was in *Paradise Found* directed by Hal Prince and most recently Off-Broadway in *Adding Machine* and *Our Town*. This is his second recording for producer Judith Sherman and New World Records, following their *Victor Herbert: Collected Songs*, and he looks forward to further collaborations with Rick Benjamin and his wonderful orchestra.

**Edward Pleasant**, baritone, is a gifted actor and has received critical acclaim for his performances in opera, musical theater and on recordings. Pleasant gained national attention when he appeared with the New York City Opera as Jake in *Porgy and Bess*, which included the historic Emmy-nominated Live from Lincoln Center telecast on PBS. He has performed in such prestigious concert venues as Avery Fisher Hall, Alice Tully Hall, and Carnegie Hall, as well as at the Texas State Capitol and the White House. He has appeared on more than a dozen recordings and operatic compilations.

### **The Paragon Ragtime Orchestra**

Rick Benjamin, conductor & piano

Caroline Chin, 1st violin & concertmaster

Bryony Stroud-Watson, 2nd violin

Thomas Rosenthal, viola

Jonathan Dexter, cello

Troy Rinker, double bass

Leslie Cullen, flute & piccolo

Vasko Dukovski, clarinet

Paul Murphy, cornet

Michael Blutman, cornet

Michael Lormand, trombone

Taylor Arthur Goodson, drums & percussion

Diane Scott, piano

### **Vocalists**

Bernadette Boerckel, soprano & comedienne

Daniel Marcus, tenor & comedian

Edward Pleasant, baritone

Heather Hill, soprano

Thomas Carle, tenor

## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

### **The Paragon Ragtime Orchestra on New World Records**

*Black Manhattan: Theater and Dance Music of James Reese Europe, Will Marion Cook, and Members of the Legendary Clef Club.* New World Records 80611-2.

*Black Manhattan; Volume 2.* New World Records 80731-2.

*From Barrelhouse to Broadway: The Musical Odyssey of Joe Jordan.* New World Records 80649-2.

*Midnight Frolic: The Broadway Theater Music of Louis A. Hirsch (1881–1924).* New World Records 80707-2.

*Minding the Score: The Music of Harry L. Alford, America's Pioneer Arranger (1875–1939).* New World Records 80743-2.

*Scott Joplin: Treemonisha.* New World Records 80720-2 [2 CDs].

*The Pioneers of Movie Music: Sounds of the American Silent Cinema.* New World Records 80761-2.

*You're A Grand Old Rag: The Music of George M. Cohan.* New World Records 80685-2.

## VIDEOGRAPHY

*The Charlie Chaplin Moving Picture Show (DVD).* Accompanied with original scores by the Paragon Ragtime Orchestra. Rialto Media, 1999.

*“The Mark of Zorro” starring Douglas Fairbanks (DVD).* Accompanied with original scores by the Paragon Ragtime Orchestra. Rialto Media, 2007.

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Album concept by Rick Benjamin

Produced and engineered by Judith Sherman

Engineering and editing assistant: Jeanne Velonis

Digital mastering: Paul Zinman, Soundbyte Productions, Inc., NYC

Recorded June 20–21, 2015 at the American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York City

Package design: Bob Defrin Design, Inc.

All orchestrations and images from the Rick Benjamin Collection, except “Oh! How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning!,” courtesy Vince Giordano.

Piano by Steinway & Sons

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Francis Goelet (1926–1998), *In Memoriam*

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IRVING BERLIN

"THIS IS THE LIFE!" *THE BREAKTHROUGH YEARS: 1909–1921*

World-premiere recordings of original period orchestrations

The Paragon Ragtime Orchestra; Rick Benjamin, director

1. ***Everybody's Doin' It Now*** (turkey trot, 1911) 2:43
2. ***I Love a Piano*** (song from *Stop! Look! Listen!*, 1915) 3:05  
Daniel Marcus, tenor; Diane Scott, piano
3. ***Oh! How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning!*** (song from *Yip, Yip, Yaphank!*, 1918) 2:09  
Edward Pleasant, baritone
4. ***Tell Me, Little Gypsy*** (from Ziegfeld's *Follies of 1920*) 3:00
5. ***Play A Simple Melody*** (duet from *Watch Your Step*, 1914) 2:20  
Bernadette Boerckel, soprano; Daniel Marcus, tenor
6. ***Nobody Knows (and Nobody Seems to Care)*** (fox trot, 1919) 2:24
7. ***Overture to Watch Your Step*** (1914) 7:55  
Introducing: "The Syncopated Walk," "What Is Love?," "When I Discovered You," "I Love to Have the Boys Around," "The Minstrel Parade," "Settle Down in a One Horse Town," and "Play A Simple Melody"
8. ***Say It With Music*** (theme of the *Music Box Revue*, 1921) 3:10  
Edward Pleasant, baritone
9. ***Smile and Show Your Dimple*** (one-step, 1918) 1:27
10. ***My Melody Dream*** (A Song Poem, 1911) 2:36  
Bernadette Boerckel, soprano; Rick Benjamin, piano
11. ***When I Lost You*** (waltz, 1912) 3:22  
Michael Lormand, trombone
12. ***This Is the Life!*** (song, 1914) 2:32  
Daniel Marcus, comedian
13. ***A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody*** (theme of Ziegfeld's *Follies of 1919*) 2:16  
Paul Murphy, cornet; Diane Scott, piano
14. ***Alexander's Ragtime Band*** (song, 1911) 2:24  
Bernadette Boerckel, soprano
15. ***Home Again Blues*** (1920) 1:44
16. ***You'd Be Surprised*** (song from Ziegfeld's *Follies of 1919*) 3:44  
Daniel Marcus, comedian
17. ***That Mesmerizing Mendelssohn Tune*** (song, 1909) 2:46  
Bernadette Boerckel, comedienne
18. ***The Girls of My Dreams*** (from Ziegfeld's *Follies of 1920*) 2:56
19. ***The International Rag*** (duet, 1913) 3:15  
Bernadette Boerckel, soprano; Daniel Marcus, tenor
20. ***When I Leave the World Behind*** (ballad, 1915) 4:39  
Bernadette Boerckel, soprano
21. ***Finale to Act II ("Opera Medley") from Watch Your Step*** (1914) 7:10  
Bernadette Boerckel, soprano; Heather Hill, soprano; Daniel Marcus, tenor; Thomas Carle, tenor (the Ghost of Verdi); Edward Pleasant, baritone

TT: 68:19