

The Hills Are Alive at the Wortham With HGO's *The Sound of Music*

[D. L. GROOVER](#) APRIL 27, 2024

Even before the curtain went up on its stunning production of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *The Sound of Music*, Houston Grand Opera had a smash on its hands. General Director and CEO Kori Dastoor announced from the stage that ticket sales for *Music* had historically broken all previous HGO box office records. The hills are alive with the sound of money.

I suppose that's no surprise. *The Sound of Music* is perhaps America's favorite musical. The Broadway show shared the 1960 Tony for Best Musical (with *Fiorello!*); while Robert Wise's ponderous film version won the 1966 Best Picture Oscar, was a phenomenal hit, and raked in cash like Scrooge McDuck.

The beguiling songs are universally known and loved, and who doesn't admire a work where the evil Nazis are defeated by a former postulant and an Austrian dad who hates the regime and finds familial love while doting on his adorable singing children – and the little scene stealers at HGO are most adorable, by the way. *The Sound of Music* is a cash cow, no matter where it's performed – opera house or theater – and there's no point in arguing over its preferred venue. When a Broadway musical is done as well as it is here, who cares where it belongs?

Although the last creation by musical theater's titanic duo, *Music* is hardly their best. I must give my nod to the rousing and much more sexy *South Pacific*, but this musical has homespun charm, family grit, a virginal nun, the Alps as background, and plenty of those dastardly Nazis. It's set in Austria, but wallows in the best of American values. What's not to love?

Surely, you know the plot, everybody knows the plot, and its infectious music has been ingrained in our consciousness since its 1959 Broadway premiere.

In this co-production with Glimmerglass Festival, HGO plays it safe. It's not set on the moons of Saturn or some struggling backwater town in the rust belt. This is a very traditional production with a classy look and feel. The cut-out pine trees could be better looking perhaps, but the Alpine backdrop is majestic and lighted just so to evoke evening, daylight, or dusk. And the utilitarian set is designed efficiently enough to morph into abbey, baroque manse, and simple impression of Salzburg's festival hall. Directed by famed Francesca Zambello, it's all very clever and good looking, and glides into frame as if on wheels.

The actors/singers glide by, too, anchored by a most magnificent performance from superstar mezzo, Grammy-winning Isabel Leonard. Her dark mature voice gives Maria an unforeseen depth, a subtle hint of strength, a quality not often plumbed by other interpreters. She may not be as innocent as she appears.

Watch as she interacts with the precocious children – those little pats to the arm, a quiet hug, an outstretched hand – she connects with them with genuine affection. She doesn't outclass them or play down to them. She's magnanimous. She may not ever admit to it, but she's the best part of this show. Her voice wraps around Rodgers' most tuneful tunes as if they were written specifically for her. She trippingly skips through the yodeling “The Lonely Goatherd” as if on holiday with it; generally relishes the cloying “Do-Re-Mi,” and gives a prayerful reading to “The Sound of Music.” She is in fine voice, very fine voice, and is a consummate actor.



The Captain and Maria get together before the end.

Photo by Michael Bishop

Although Captain von Trapp doesn't have much to do in this musical except be gruff at first, then melt during the Ländler with Maria, then be gruff again with the Nazis, Alexander Birch Elliott (last heard impressively at HGO in Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers*, 2019) makes a welcomed return. He is good at being gruff. His baritone is rich enough for the irony in "No Way to Stop It," and softly pliant enough for the emotional "Edelweisse."

Usually cast by an opera singer, the role of Mother Abbess is fortunate to be sung by soprano Katie Van Kooten, who has appeared numerous times at HGO. Her vocal heft is undeniable in her signature piece, "Climb Ev'ry Mountain," one of R&H's most powerful power ballads. Teen Liesl was lovingly handled by soprano Tori Tedeschi, making her HGO debut. She has a bright clean voice abetted by crystal diction, and, I think, is on her way to a solid career.

I would be remiss if I didn't name the little von Trapp tykes, who were all subtly coached to be as unannoying as possible. They were a delight: Peter Theurer (Friedrich), Annie Voorhees (Louisa), Antonio Rico (Kurt), Macie Joy Speer (Brigitta), Abigail Lee (Marta), and Lora Uvarova (Gretl). Pros all.

Who also should be in the cast but Houston theater pros, Spencer Plachy and Pamela Vogel, in the non-singing roles as butler Fritz and housekeeper Frau Schmidt. I immediately recognized Plachy from his commanding baritone and Vogel from her command of the stage. (What an exquisite Mrs. Danvers she would make in a future staging of *Rebecca*.) It's always nice to spot familiar favored stage faces at the opera house.

Maestro Richard Bado, HGO's chorus master, led the orchestra at a somewhat slow tempo, more suitable to church than Broadway brass. But the Nun's chorus was most agreeable, especially in the opening "Preludium," as they stopped in the aisles, holding votives, and harmonized in Latin; and in their final reprise of the stirring "Climb Ev'ry Mountain," as the family marches up over those cut-out, pasteboard pine trees on their way to freedom.

The Wortham was packed, and not many operas receive such ovations as did *The Sound of Music*. There were two couples dressed in dirndls and lederhosen, which was fun to see, and many children in the audience, which was even more gratifying. If this musical brings them back – to the opera, to TUTS, to Broadway at the Hobby, to any of our theaters – then R&H and HGO have truly done their job.

The Sound of Music continues through May 12 at 7:30 p.m. Fridays, Saturdays, and Tuesday, April 30; 2 p.m. Sundays; and 1 p.m. Saturday May 1 at Wortham Center, 501 Texas. Sung in English with projected English text. For more information, call 713-2286737 or visit houstongrandopera.org. \$25 to \$210.