

# THE SOUND OF MUSIC

Directed by Robert Wise  
Produced by Robert Wise  
Distributed by Twentieth Century-Fox  
Released in 1965

Ever since its arrival coincided with that of spring, 1965, *The Sound of Music* has met a deep-seated need in audiences the world over; it is soothing entertainment that nimbly balances piety, patriotism, and redemptive love in a package that never seems dated. This secure and welcoming world, this Austria as it was meant to be, is ably reflected in a patient narrative that rewards the viewer with nuanced characterizations and unexpected juxtapositions of locale, mood, and subtext. Many a cross critic has faulted the sentimentality which *The Sound of Music* unabashedly exhibits. However, if by sentimentality they refer to chaste romance, courteous kinfolk, religion stripped of stereotype and crass humor, humor free from sex and vulgarity, and beauty taken as an ideal to which all man's energies should be directed, then sentiment should satisfy us all. Few films can compete with its iconic imagery, and never on screen has the importance of the family been so forthrightly delineated and demonstrated.

As, perhaps, nothing is perfect, so too goes cinema. And the disappointments of *The Sound of Music* must be confronted if the reader unassured of the movie's greatness will be convinced that the opposing view is defensible, if not altogether unavoidable.

A journey into the structure of the narrative can begin with the dual love triangles (Baroness-Captain-Maria, Liesel-Rolfe-Nazi Party) that surface in the story. The baroness is a confusing character, and the ambiguity of her desires, opinions, and personality traits strongly affects the choices of our primary characters, Maria and the Captain, in ways that threaten to befuddle the narrative flow. (Her asides with Max are purely comic.) But, in the end, her unpredictable actions do not prevent our anticipating the inevitable nuptials; they just carry us through some welcome surprises.

We are immediately suspicious of Mrs. Schrader before she has even appeared. The children don't know much about her, and what they do know they don't like. Once we see her, we realize that her age approximates that of Captain von Trapp, she excels in idle conversation, and attracts inordinate attention in her rarefied evening wear.

But, on this last score the Captain never seems to notice. To him she is only a charming and distinguished dinner companion, regardless of what he says about the salvation she's provided in the wake of his wife's death. The children can guess that he doesn't love her, and know for sure that she doesn't give a hoot about them. Her comments to Max on boarding school mark her lowest point in the audience's estimation.

She is already rich. She doesn't need the Captain's money. She needs his companionship. Once we realize that, seeing her scurry off the stage to make room for Maria, we empathize with her a great deal. Her final scene, where she quiets the Captain before stumbling upon halting words begging for inner strength, is one of the best of the film.

We know that the Baroness never visited Salzburg with the Captain until the time just prior to their engagement, and that von Trapp made many trips, alone, to Vienna while courting her. The last time out he was gone a whole month. Subsequently, the children felt discarded and unappreciated, and Maria gave the Captain an earful about it the day he returned. But what if he was in Vienna to get a read on the difficult political situation, to do his part to prevent the Anschluss with his connections in the military, using the Baroness as cover? He may have still warmed to her near the end, but it would explain his exceedingly mannered demonstrations of affection.

The Baroness does her best (and worst) to keep the Captain and Maria apart, but nice Maria returns (wearing the dress of a woman who, that same day, entered the abbey), Mrs. Schrader knows she's failed; von Trapp can no longer check his 'respect' for this special employee.

The second romantic triangle is a blurred reflection of the first. Where the Captain was merely stuffy, Rolf is arrogant; when Maria was shamefaced and flustered, Liesl is eager and unchecked; as Baroness Schrader is jealous...so too is the Nazi Party.

This triangle's lynchpin, Rolf, is introduced to us when he delivers a telegram to the Captain. The butler, Fritz, meets him at the door and, after some pleasantries, looks behind him and closes the door, asking "Have there been any developments?", to which Rolf replies, "Perhaps. Is the Captain in?" Here we first see Rolf's arrogance, his contemptible insolence. In a later scene where the Captain catches him chucking pebbles at Liesl's bedroom window, Rolf, even though no watchful Nazi sympathizers are around, brazenly delivers a 'Heil!' with arm outstretched. Through the whole movie he forgets he's a mere errand boy and acts like he's making news rather than reporting it. (As an aside, Fritz isn't closing the door out of respect for the Captain, but out of fear of him—a later shot of Fritz peering down on the family just before they are cornered by Herrzella reveals him as a Nazi stooge who probably betrayed the von Trapps.)

Rolf treats Liesl o.k., keeping her playful eagerness in responsible Germanic check. He may seem to talk down to her, but initially he is just a mild braggart, eager for the pretty girl's attention. It is only later that his more unfortunate tendencies come to the fore. His final scene in the film reveals the most about him—he's smart, trapping the family when his Brown Shirt cohorts had wandered elsewhere, but he's a wuss, unable to summon a yell, or to pull the trigger on a subversive Austrian reaching for his gun.

If Rolf had joined the Trapps what would have happened? The Captain looks accusingly at Liesl when she gasps at the sight of Rolf prowling the tombstones, probably feeling that her involvement with him has jeopardized the family. Rolf's being asked to join them may be sincere, but the Captain could just be planning to push old Rolf off a mountain to Liesl's abject horror. He certainly would be an odd companion for this tight-knit group.

The music of this film is truly outstanding. Its tuneful songs, collectively, produce one of the best soundtracks in Hollywood musical history. And many a song serves the story well, often finding new meaning as a truncated reprise, whether as source or score.

Further artistic depths are broached amidst the strange environment of these songs. In musicals the distinction between the 'real' environment of normal dialogue and that of

heightened communication expressed through song is clearly delineated—a character flashes a conspicuous look, pauses to hear that fourth-dimensional chord, and tells the world what's on his mind. In *The Sound of Music* the barrier is quietly broken.

"My Favorite Things," more than any other song in the film, best demonstrates this phenomena. It is first introduced as Maria, prayerfully considering her first day in the mansion, receives an evasive Liesl and a succession of discomposed siblings seeking solace amidst the thunderous peals without. In good time it is used to accompany Maria and her charges as they amble about in new play clothes, and to carry the family into the abbey as an ironic accompaniment to their dire circumstances. In this sequence, hiding in the courtyard of death, Gretel asks if this is a good time to sing "My Favorite Things," since she's terrified and all, further reinforcing the idea that the music in the film functions in dual realms—singing as performance (the 'real') and singing as expression (the 'unreal').

Other songs take these pseudo-existential difficulties even further: "The Lonely Goatherd" was originally presented in conjunction with the marionette show, and there it straddled the performance/expression divide—the music was used in a show but it was accompanied by a full (and unseen) orchestra. At the Captain's swinging party, it's played as dance music. With "So Long, Farewell," a song of performance becomes a song of expression as the partygoers raise their arms in gracious salute, intoning a cadential "Goodbye..." and finishing this von Trapp showstopper on their own.

Consumed in the storm and stress of "My Favorite Things," Maria suppresses a panic because she's having difficulty knowing what to sing next—like she's really making it up! A single performer is one step closer to 'reality' than a chorus of contrapuntally-minded dancers in patently-false perfect step. Such a revelation takes us even closer into the world of *The Sound of Music*, especially as Maria is revealed as a folk-impresario super-musician just minutes later in the movie. The children sing "My Favorite Things" to enliven their spirits just before Maria's return from the abbey, but it is not like one character is suddenly convicted by the dialogue-heavy narrative flow and launches into song like no other recourse is possible. (This would be the way of alternate-universe musical-reality.) No, this is a von Trapp jam session, and when Maria's voice rises above their waning song the orchestral heavens are opened and out pours music and love enough for all. It's an altogether lovely scene, easy on the memory.

This film is rich in detail. The twice-used gazebo set and the shot of the race through the trellis-tunnel are beautifully shot with diffused light. Or consider the nuns joyfully preparing for Maria to walk down the aisle, celebrating with her even as they know they will never be wed, themselves. "Do-Re-Mi," the most original song of the lot, is built on the fundamental seven pitches of the scale, matching the seven children. And everywhere in the film is a sense of space—space to breathe, explore, and grow undaunted, safe in a sanctuary of suspended peace while the ugly world outside stirs from discontented slumbers.

Yet one cannot help but be disappointed by the film's missed opportunities. Because of her more advanced age, and her similarly confused romantic circumstances, Liesl's character has great potential to complement Maria, and reveal her capacity for friendship, which we've lost in the midst of timid-lover-Maria, wild-nun-Maria, and reactionary-governess-Maria. With

Maria gone, Liesl takes over the fledgling von Trapp singers, leading with guitar just like Maria would.

When it wants to be, this is a busy movie, so to characterize their (potentially) multi-layered, multi-faceted relationship one scene would suffice. It arrives once the Captain returns from his aborted honeymoon. Liesl and Maria have a chat about the vicissitudes of love, and where an earlier chance to give advice slipped away, just before "My Favorite Things," Maria has another chance and here, again, is privy to Liesl's secrets. But Maria gives little of herself, speaks in generalities, and, at Liesl's prompting, re-establishes her role as mother, denying the audience further character development. The advice Maria offers urging patience in the midst of such burgeoning sexual-romanticism is good, but the reprise of "Sixteen Going on Seventeen," while not without its commendable irony, is hokey and strangely unsettling, a sadly-missed opportunity to push characterizations further instead of killing time on the cusp of the third act.

And what of Max's Anschluss ambivalence? The Captain narrowly avoids throttling his money-minded talent broker. And though Max offers passing assistance to secret them out of the festival, he laments the profits trickling through his fingers as the von Trapps slip past the Germans. If his character is to represent the danger in maintaining an indifferent neutrality in the midst of cancerous amorality, then we should see a difference in the results engendered by both Max and the Captain. Though one man does nothing and one does a lot, neither man seems to affect the steamrolling Nazis. Maybe it's all best left unresolved...and maybe it's not.

Once the Captain and Maria get married, the story rightly heads toward a climax of nunnery sabotage for, once the sexual tension is broken, little else has been established to keep us interested. The push toward reuniting the father with his children (the second of the two narrative goals) was resolved a half-hour previous. The Captain's fight against encroaching Nazism doesn't provide any goals, if only because we know he'll never be able to prevent the unification of Germany and Austria. No, the political backdrop first introduced when Rolf is met by Fritz looms over the joys of romance and family, threatening destruction. This is its purpose. Thus, the escape from the abbey, the climax of the film, is not a resolution of a potential third narrative strand (the Captain undermining the Nazis), but the final deliverance of the family (significantly including Maria) to safety.

If the Captain was destined to toil away in the German navy, the great strides in romance and family unification would have been in vain. He is the key to both and without him both are lost. So, everything in the movie from Maria's arrival at the house to the wedding is the Captain reforming himself and making things right, and everything up to the climax involves him keeping it that way. In the last half-hour he makes every major decision from leaving surreptitiously at night to singing in the festival as cover to deciding to escape through the mountains to Switzerland. Maria's lengthy introduction attests to her importance as the catalyst for change, but it is the Captain who fulfills it.

The denouement, with the family embracing the sanctuary of the Alps, perfectly echoes the opening of the film. There Julie Andrews pierced a succession of impersonally beautiful vistas with her glowing warmth and radiance. She couldn't feel the presence of God in the abbey the way she did on the mountaintop. No, the hills were her spiritual refuge, her

deliverance. In the end these mountains serve as the von Trapps' political refuge. But while spiritual matters are often sadly undermined by political machinations, let us recall the parting words of the Reverend Mother to Maria, from the Psalms—*I will lift up mine eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help*. The conclusion makes it clear that, in this film, God's spiritual ends are still served, even in a time of political trauma, a hopeful message as timely as it is true.