

Rodgers & Hammerstein's *The Sound of Music*

Music by Richard Rodgers

Lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II

Book by Howard Lindsay and Russell Crouse

Based on *The Trapp Family Singers* by
Maria Augusta Trapp



Photo Credit: Niki Boon

Prepared for The Glimmerglass Festival by Nick Richardson

A Note from Nick

Hello, Glimmerglass!

We're finally staging *The Sound of Music*! Woohoo!

This dramaturgy packet covers a variety of topics from the world of the show and the making of the musical. Some things I wrote myself; other things I borrowed or adapted (and cited). I also included links to external sites, including a [Google Drive](#) with scans of printed material.

There's so much to explore here. If you'd like any help pursuing a topic more thoroughly, please reach out to me! I look forward to working with you all this summer.

With gratitude,
Nick Richardson

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Original Broadway Production: Nov. 16, 1959 – June 15, 1963

After five previews, *The Sound of Music* opened at the Lunt-Fontanne Theatre, where it stayed for nearly 3 years (Nov. 16, 1959 – Nov. 3, 1962) before transferring to the Mark Hellinger Theatre for the rest of its run (Nov. 6, 1962 – June 15, 1963). It ran for 1,443 total performances. The production cost \$400,000, but advance ticket sales reached \$2.32 million – a record for its time.

Critics, however, were unimpressed, finding the show overly sentimental. Walter Kerr of the Herald Tribune said, “Before *The Sound of Music* is halfway through its promising chores, it becomes not only too sweet for words, but almost too sweet for music.” [Brooks Atkinson](#) of the *New York Times* predicted the end of an era on Broadway: “...the scenario of *The Sound of Music* has the hackneyed look of the musical theater [Rodgers and Hammerstein] replaced with *Oklahoma!* in 1943...It is disappointing to see the American musical stage succumbing to the clichés of operetta.” The show faced similar criticism during its Boston tryout, with Elliot Norton lamenting the “silliness, stiffness, and corny operetta falseness of the script.”

Nevertheless, the show earned numerous accolades. It received nine Tony nominations and won six, including Best Musical in a tie with *Fiorello!* Mary Martin took home Best Actress in a Musical, beating legend Ethel Merman in *Cypsy* and newcomer Carol Burnett in *Once Upon a Mattress*. Patricia Neway won Best Featured Actress in a Musical as Mother Abbess. Other Tony’s: scenic design, music direction, and producer. Additional awards: a Theatre World Award (for Lauri Peters’ debut as Liesl) two New York Drama Circle Awards, and an Outer Critics Circle Award.

The original cast album was certified Gold on Dec. 7, 1960 by the RIAA, selling half a million units. The album topped the Billboard charts for 16 weeks, stayed in the top ten for 109 weeks, and remained on the Billboard 200 chart for 276 weeks. The R&H Organization calls it the “highest-charting cast album of all time.” The album won Best Show Album at the 1961 Grammy’s.

“It was a dream of mine
to put *The Sound of Music*
to a beat. It’s one of my
biggest inspirations.”

~Gwen Stefani

(Visit the Extras section to see Gwen’s
Sound of Music-inspired music video.)

Production & Recording History

With its massive global popularity, *The Sound of Music* remains a favorite of the musical theatre canon. Listed here is only a sample of major productions and recordings of the musical.

Sources for this section:

Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences
American Theatre Wing
Billboard
Deadline
Internet Broadway Database
Library of Congress National Film Registry
Library of Congress National Recording Registry
Overtur
Recording Academy
Rodgers & Hammerstein Organization
[The Sound of Music Companion](#) by Laurence Maslon
[The Sound of Music Story](#) by Tom Santopietro

West End Premiere: May 18, 1961 – Jan. 14, 1967

The Sound of Music was an even bigger smash hit in London’s West End, running for 2,386 performances at the Palace Theatre. It set a record for the longest-running American musical in West End history at the time; in fact, the musical was still open when the beloved film adaptation premiered at London’s Dominion Theatre (March 29, 1965 – June 29, 1968).

This production was a replica of the original Broadway production, including the same orchestrations by Robert Russell Bennett.

The Captain (Theodore Bikel) introduces Elsa to Maria (Mary Martin) and the children in the original Broadway production. (Source: [Playbill](#))



20th Century Fox Film: Apr. 1, 1965

Having previously produced other R&H musicals for the screen (*State Fair*, *Oklahoma*, *Carousel*, and *The King and I*), 20th Century Fox had first rights to *The Sound of Music*. The studio purchased the rights to the stage musical for \$1.25 million, but contractually could not release the film until the stage version closed. The rights were then forgotten as the studio became preoccupied with its lengthy, expensive production *Cleopatra* starring Elizabeth Taylor. Looking for a money-maker that could save the company, the reinstated head of Fox Darryl F. Zanuck turned to *The Sound of Music*.

Thankfully for Fox, the film was a hit. It won five of its ten Oscar nominations, including Best Picture, Director (Robert Wise), Music (Scoring – Adaptation or Treatment), Sound, and Film Editing. Julie Andrews did not win Best Actress, nor did Peggy Wood win Best Supporting Actress as Mother Abbess. The other three nominations in technical categories all lost to *Doctor Zhivago*.

But the world fell in love with Andrews regardless, particularly for her voice. The film's soundtrack came out March 2nd (a month in advance of the film) and reached half a million in sales before the film's release. 20 million units were sold worldwide, even at the hefty price of \$6 (when most LPs maxed out at \$4). It was Billboard's #1 album for two weeks, stayed top ten until mid-January 1968, and lived on the Billboard 200 chart for over 230 weeks, overlapping with the original cast recording for 9 months. In 2015, Billboard named the soundtrack its second-best-charting Billboard 200 album of all time only behind Adele's *21*. Today, it's still the second-longest-charting soundtrack on the Billboard 200 behind Disney's *Moana*. The record did even better in the UK, where it spent 70 weeks at #1 on their charts and was the UK's best-selling LP in 1965, '66, and '68. According to scholar Caryl Flinn, the album "sold even better in Norway" for reasons unknown.

The film and its soundtrack were both named to the Library of Congress' National Film Registry and National Recording Registry in 2001 and 2017, respectively.

West End Revival: Aug. 17, 1981 – Sept. 18, 1982

The "first major stage revival" of *Sound of Music* (according to Laurence Maslon) was across the pond at the Apollo Victoria Theatre. The show played to 101% seating capacity for over a year, and it set an all-time record for highest weekly box office on the West End for the week of October 26th.

The production starred Australian soprano June Bronhill as Mother Abbess and British pop singer Petula Clark as Maria. Though dubious about her own prospects, Clark won over critics and audiences. She extended her contract from six to 13 months and got an Olivier Award nomination for Actress of the Year in a Musical.



Famous Marias

Though originally written for Mary Martin and most closely associated with Julie Andrews, the role of Maria has been a star vehicle for many famous women in entertainment. Pictured below, from left to right:

- Florence Henderson, 1961 US Tour (Carol Brady on TV's *The Brady Bunch*)
- Shirley Jones, 1977 US Tour (Shirley Partridge on TV's *The Partridge Family*)
- [Petula Clark](#), 1981 West End (British pop star)
- Debby Boone, 1990 New York City Opera ("You Light Up My Life" singer)
- [Marie Osmond](#), 1990s Tour (singer/actress)
- [Carrie Underwood](#), 2013 NBC Live (country superstar)
- [Lady Gaga](#), 2015 Oscars Performance (singer/actress/icon)

Broadway Revival: Mar. 12, 1998 – June 20, 1999

The Sound of Music finally returned to Broadway nearly 40 years after its debut (though New Yorkers may have seen New York City Opera's production in 1990). It played at the Martin Beck Theatre for 38 previews and 533 performances. The late Rebecca Luker played Maria, under the direction of Susan H. Schulman, with choreography by Michael Lichtefeld.

The production received nominations for a Tony, a Drama Desk Award, a Drama League Award, and multiple Outer Critics Circle Awards, but did not win any. Of the musical itself, Ben Brantley wrote for the *New York Times*, "On one level, it will always nauseate." Some critics still found the musical too sweet.

2nd West End Revival: Nov. 15, 2006 – Feb. 21, 2009

After negotiations with actress Scarlett Johansson to play Maria fell through, producer Andrew Lloyd Webber (Really Useful Group) turned to a new way of finding star talent: reality-competition television. Like the global *Idol* franchise, Lloyd Webber and BBC1 organized a televised singing contest where each week Maria hopefuls would perform for audience votes. Britain voted, and the winner of *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?* was Connie Fisher from Wales.

Problem solved? Yes! Not only did the production draw in £13 million in advance sales, but critics found Fisher refreshing. “She is the first real Maria I’ve seen,” gushed Nicholas de Jongh of the *Evening Standard*. Shrugging off the skepticism of finding a quality stage performer through a television series, Mark Shenton in the *Sunday Express* said, “[Fisher] effortlessly transcends the marketing gimmick to deliver a performance that isn’t just that of a well-meaning amateur...but comes from an expertly honed and self-assured professional.” Lloyd Webber compared the audience’s adoration of Fisher to that for Elaine Paige on the opening night of *Evita*.

Critics even looked at the musical itself anew. *The Guardian*’s Michael Billington called it a “melodically abundant show that lauds charity, the act of communal music-making and resistance to political tyranny.” Writing for the *Times*, Benedict Nightingale said, “I acknowledge the pull of a show whose tale draws heavily on three elemental fairy stories: *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, and *Beauty and the Beast*.”

Despite the praise for Fisher and the growing appreciation for *The Sound of Music*, the production did not win its sole Olivier nomination for Best Musical Production. Regardless, it was a commercial and critical success, and it inspired other reality-competition TV shows searching for lead actors and actresses for the West End, Broadway, and stages around the world.

NBC’s The Sound of Music Live!: Dec. 5, 2013

NBC chose the beloved *Sound of Music* for its first attempt at returning to the musicals-produced-for-television format popularized in the 1950s (such as R&H’s *Cinderella* starring Lesley Ann Warren) Former *American Idol* winner and country music chart-topper Carrie Underwood played Maria, supported by a cast of stage veterans (Audra McDonald, Laura Benanti – a former Broadway Maria herself, and Christian Borle).

Judging the event’s success depends on who you ask. NBC was thrilled that over 18 million viewers tuned in to watch it live. (21.3 million viewers if you include DVR and on-demand views up to 3 days later.) The soundtrack peaked at #17 on the Billboard 200 chart and reached #2 on their soundtrack chart specifically. The production earned a Director’s Guild nomination and won one of its four Emmy nominations (for Outstanding Technical Direction/Camerawork/Video Control).

The reviews, however, paint a different picture. Most of the criticism went to Underwood’s acting inexperience and the live television format. As Tom Santopietro summarizes in *The Sound of Music Story*, “The difference in criticism this time around...centered less on *The Sound of Music*’s perceived sentimentality, and much more on the fact that this one-night television event could not hold a candle to either the Robert Wise film or the great Julie Andrews. ...Even critics of the television version granted the underlying property its due. Time, it seemed, had granted critics a renewed respect for the sheer professionalism of the basic material.” (Read a roundup from the [Chicago Tribune](#), or peruse [Playbill](#)’s master post of collected reviews.)

The production still made an impact on American television. NBC aimed to make live musical events an annual holiday tradition, producing *Peter Pan*, *The Wiz*, and *Annie*. (*The Music Man* and *Bye Bye Birdie* were also announced, but not brought to fruition.) Fox competed with their own live television productions of *Grease*, *A Christmas Story: The Musical*, and *RENT*. Britain’s ITV produced their own *Sound of Music Live* in 2015.

Others of Interest

Productions:

- 1988 adaptation by [Takarazuka Revue](#) – an all-female Japanese musical theatre troupe
- 1990 New York City Opera – Directed by Hammerstein’s son, starring one-hit wonder Debby Boone
- 2005 Vienna Volksoper – first production in Austria, German translation, sold-out run of 50+ performances, 53-piece orchestra (including organ)
- 2006(?) Salzburg Marionette Theatre – originally inspired “The Lonely Goatherd” puppet scene in the 1965 film
- 2006 dance piece “[Fraulein Maria](#)” by choreographer [Doug Elkins](#) at Jacob’s Pillow

Recordings:

- *Members of The Trapp Family Singers sing The Sound of Music* (RCA Victor, 1960)
- [1987 Studio Cast Recording](#) – Frederica von Stade as Maria

Additional Resources

For an overview of American musical theatre history (though perhaps a biased one), check out theatre critic Ben Brantley’s introduction to *Broadway Musicals: From the Pages of the New York Times*. ([PDE](#))

If you can’t get enough of Rodgers and Hammerstein, you’ll enjoy Todd S. Purdum’s comprehensive book, [Something Wonderful: Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Broadway Revolution](#). Ethan Mordden’s [Rodgers & Hammerstein](#) is an excellent coffee table book. (Or opt for the updated [paperback](#) version for your bookshelf.)

Want more on how *The Sound of Music* came to be? Pick up [The Making of The Sound of Music](#) by Max Wilk.

For a breakdown of the differences between the stage and screen versions of *The Sound of Music* (and how our production bridges the two), see my [blog post](#) on the Festival’s website.



Left: The final five contestants of BBC1’s *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?* in rehearsal. Connie Fisher, far right, wins the role of Maria.

Right: Carrie Underwood and the children rehearse “Do Re Mi” for NBC’s television production.

“Preludium”

DIXIT DOMINUS DOMINO MEO:
SEDE A DEXTRIS MEIS

DONEC PONAN IMICOS TUOS,
SCABELLEUM PEDUM TUORUM.

DOMINUS A DEXTRIS TUIS:
CONFREGIT IN DIE IRAE SUAE
REGES.

DE TORRENTE IN VIA BIBET:
PROPTEREA IN EXALTABIT
CAPUT.

GLORIA PATRI, ET FILIO,
ET SPIRITUI SANCTO.

SICUT ERAT IN PRINCIPIO,
ET NUNC, ET SEMPER,
ET IN SAECULA SAECULORUM.
AMEN.

REX ADMIRABILIS,
ET TRIUMPHATOR NOBILIS,
DULCEDO INEFFABILIS,
TOTUS DESIDERABILIS.
ALLELUIA.

The Lord said unto my Lord:
Sit at my right hand,

Until I make your enemies
Your footstool.

The Lord at your right hand:
Destroys kings on the day of his wrath.

He shall drink of the torrent in his way:
Therefore he shall lift up his head.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son,
And to the Holy Spirit.

As it was in the beginning,
And now, and always,
And for generations of generations.
Amen.

Admirable king
And noble achiever,
Ineffable sweetness,
Wholly desirable.
Hallelujah.

“Gaudeamus Domino” & “Canticle”

GAUDEAMUS OMNES IN DOMINO
DICUM FESTUM CELEBRANTES.

CONFITEMINI DOMINO
QUONIAM BONUS:
QUONIAM IN SAECULUM
MISERICORDI A EJUS.

ALLELUIA.

Let us all rejoice in the Lord
Celebrating the feast.

Give praise to the Lord
For he is good:
Because his mercy endures forever.

Hallelujah.



The real Nonnberg Abbey, inside and out. *The Sound of Music* was not filmed inside, but they did use exterior shots. Its red dome is an iconic landmark of Salzburg’s “skyline.” (Source: [Tourismus Salzburg](https://www.tourismus-salzburg.at))

“Get Thee to a Nunnery”

Calling all nuns! Here’s a translation for each of your
Latin pieces and a little bit on life in Nonnberg Abbey.

Sources for this section:

[chantblog](#)

[The English Benedictine Congregation](#)

Jeffers, Ron. *Transcriptions and Annotations of Choral Repertoire*. Vol. 1, [Sacred Latin Texts](#). Corvallis, OR: Earthsongs, 1988.

[The Order of St. Benedict](#)

Fun fact: The only music research Richard Rodgers ever conducted for his shows was on liturgical music for the nuns’ scenes in *The Sound of Music*. He was Jewish and unfamiliar with Catholic traditions. (For more insight on the roles of Jewish composers and Jewish audiences in American musical theatre, check out [Transposing Broadway: Jews, Assimilation, and the American Musical](#) by Stuart J. Hecht.)

Did you know? The lyrics of the “Preludium” are a mashup of three different sacred texts. “Dixit Dominus” comes from [Psalm 110](#). “Gloria Patri” is known as the Lesser Doxology. “Rex admirabilis” comes from a 12th century hymn by St. Bernard of Clairvaux.

Benedictine Life

St. Benedict of Nursia (480-550 AD) was born into a Christian noble family. He went to study scripture in Rome, but found his peers and teachers immoral and unchristian. He left Rome to pursue a spiritual life, living in caves, then establishing multiple monasteries. As abbot (leader) of his 13th and final monastery at Monte Cassino, he wrote the [Rule of Monasteries](#), which became a highly influential text thanks to Pope Gregory’s Dialogues written around 593/594 AD. For his leadership and vision, he was canonized and is recognized as the Patron Saint of Europe.

Benedictines still follow his Rule today. There are three vows: Obedience, *Conversatio Morum* (fidelity to monastic living, including chastity), and Stability (living in one monastic family, in one place, in life and death).

The community prays six or seven times a day, including a daily Mass. The goal is not spiritual perfection, but continuous learning and growth, mainly through listening to God. Prayer is the main work – the “Work of God” according to St. Benedict) – but monks and nuns also serve the community and the wider Church through manual labor, crafts, and hospitality. This work is not a personal choice; the superiors assign tasks to meet the needs of the community.

The process to become a Benedictine monk or nun is quite lengthy:

1. Candidate: One year of consideration outside of the community.
2. Postulant: Live and work in the community alongside inducted members for “some months.”
3. Novitiate: One year for monks, two years for nuns of prayer, studying, and discernment. “Does the novice truly seek God in monastic life?” If yes, the novice makes a vow to stay at least three years (Simple Profession).
4. Juniorate: At least three years, but no more than nine, of closer work within the community, further discernment, and study. With community approval, the junior may make vows for life (Solemn Profession) to be a full member.

Trapp Family Timeline

- 1880** April 4: Birth of Georg Johannes Ritter von Trapp, son of an Austrian Imperial Navy official.
- 1891** June 14: Birth of Agathe Whitehead, daughter of a British engineer who helped invent the self-propelled torpedo.
- 1898** Georg graduates from Austro-Hungarian naval academy and begins his naval career, ascending in rank quickly.
- 1905** Birth of Maria Augusta "Gustl" Kutschera, future governess of the von Trapp children and later Georg's wife.
- 1909** The Whitehead Torpedo Factory designs and builds U-boat submarines for the Austro-Hungarian Navy. Georg and Agathe Whitehead meet at the christening of a new U-boat.
- 1911** January 14: Georg and Agathe Whitehead wed.
November: Their first son, Rupert, born.
- 1913** Daughter Agathe born.
- 1914** June 28: Austria's Archduke Franz Ferdinand murdered, catalyzing World War I. Georg serves in the navy as a submarine captain.
September: Daughter Maria born.
- 1915** April: Georg earns the Military Honor of Maria Theresa for sinking a French cruiser in the Adriatic Sea.
October: Son Werner born.
- 1917** Daughter Hedwig born.
- 1918** November 1: Austro-Hungarian Navy surrenders, losing its access to the coast. The Navy folds; Georg's military career ends.
- 1919** Daughter Johanna born.
- 1921** February: Daughter Martina born, Georg and Agathe Whitehead's last child.
December 25: Five von Trapp children fall ill with scarlet fever.
- 1922** Agathe Whitehead contracts scarlet fever and dies.
- 1924** Maria Kutschera becomes a candidate for the novitiate at Nonnberg Benedictine Convent.
- 1926** Maria chosen by the Mother Abbess to tutor young Maria.
- 1927** November 26: Georg and Maria wed. Maria becomes step-mother of the seven children.
- 1929** Rosmarie von Trapp, Maria and Georg's first child, is born.
- 1931** Daughter Eleonore born.
- 1936** Maria and Monsignor Franz Wasner, a priest in Salzburg, begin the Trapp Family Singers (originally The Trapp Family Chorus).
- 1938** Family flees Nazi-occupied Austria, gives concert tours throughout Europe, followed by a three-month tour in America.
- 1939** Family emigrates to US and settles in Merion, PA.
Maria's only son, Johannes, is born.
- 1942** The Trapp Family purchases part of an old farm in Stowe, Vermont, and name it *Cor Unum* ("One Heart"), later to become the Trapp Family Lodge.
- 1947** Baron Georg von Trapp dies.
- 1950** Maria wins an award from the Catholic Writers Guild for best book of nonfiction, *The Trapp Family Singers*.
- 1956** Final Trapp Family Singers concert in the United States.
- 1959** Rodgers & Hammerstein's *The Sound of Music* opens on Broadway.
The von Trapp family concentrates on lodge business.
- 1965** *The Sound of Music* movie premieres.
- 1967** Maria awarded the Honorary Cross First Class for Science and Art by the Austrian Government for cultural endeavors.
- 1984** Maria dedicates new lodge.
- 1987** Maria dies after a short illness.
- 1998** *The Sound of Music* re-opens on Broadway at the Martin Beck Theatre. Von Trapp family members attend the gala opening.
- 2010** December 28: Daughter Agathe dies.
- 2014** February 18: The last living von Trapp child, Maria Franziska von Trapp, dies.

Sources: [Trapp Family Lodge](#), [Georg & Agathe Foundation](#)

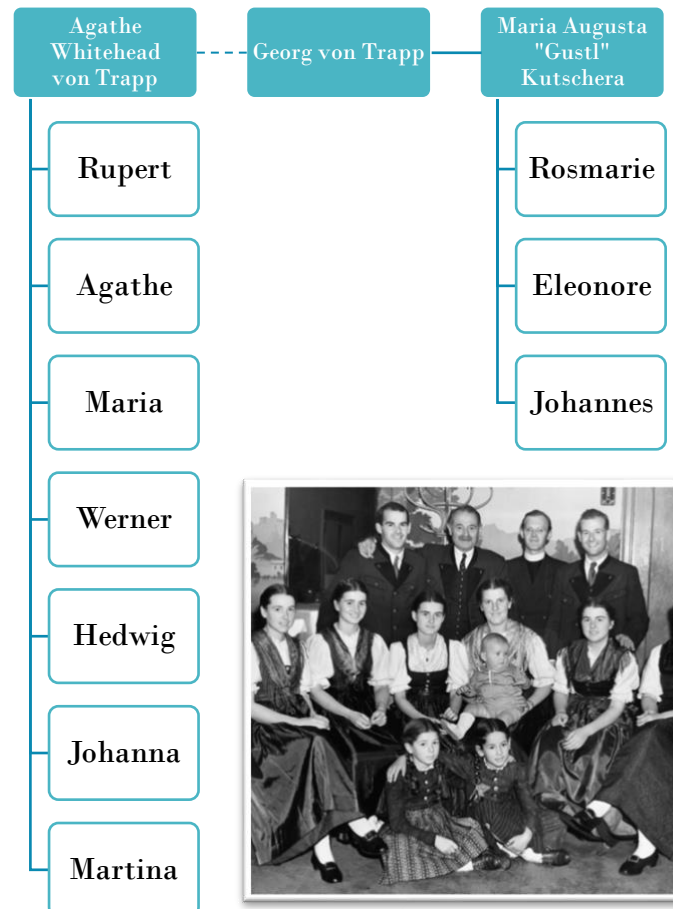
Meet the Real von Trapps

Yes! That really happened! (Well, sort of...)



Above: The original seven von Trapp children, 1921.
Back row: Rupert, Maria, Agathe, Werner.
Front row: Johanna, Martina, Hedwig.

Below: Georg, Maria, and the full von Trapp family, along with Mgr. Franz Wasner, who helped establish the Trapp Family Singers.



About Georg

- “Papá was tall with a slender, well-proportioned build. Distinguished in appearance, he had dark hair, a mustache, and brown eyes that commanded attention in a gentle manner. His hands were strong, well-shaped, and accentuated by his engagement and wedding rings. **Attentive and sensitive** to his surroundings, Papá walked erect and moved easily.”
- “Naturally **dignified**, he was not dependent upon what other people thought of him but lived his life according to his conscience. He always showed **genuine friendliness**. He did not have to say to us, ‘I love you.’ **We knew he loved us, and he knew we loved him.**”
- “In *The Sound of Music*, the Captain was portrayed as stern, distant, and unyielding. In reality the Captain, our father, was **gentle, kind, and sensitive.**”
- “Georg **came from a musical family**. Georg himself played the violin, the guitar, and the mandolin.”
- “After WWI, Italy and Yugoslavia took over Austria’s naval fleet. “Some of our naval officers who were Italians or Yugoslavs were willing to serve under the new regimes. But for Papá, that was impossible. **His loyalty was to Austria, victorious or defeated.**”
- “Every time [Papá] came back home from Hungary, we greeted him with great enthusiasm. We rushed down the big winding staircase and jumped right into his arms. He did not have enough arms for all of his seven children, **but he kissed us all one by one.**”
- “In the movie *The Sound of Music*, the Captain (our father) summons his children with a boatswain’s whistle. When we moved to Aigen, **Papá began using a whistle to summon his children**, and there was a very good reason to do so. The house was large, and our rooms were on the second floor. Papá’s study was downstairs. We lived with our doors closed, and Papá never came to our rooms. The sound of the whistle penetrated the wooden doors, whereas his voice would not have reached us. Each one of us had a certain signal, and Papá had a special signal when he called us all together. **We loved our signals.** Perhaps some of us even imagined that we were sailors on Papá’s ship. He did not, however, use the whistle to summon the staff or to place us into formation as shown in the movie.”
- “One day Papá asked me into his study. He sat down on the sofa, and I sat in a chair next to him. He asked, ‘**Do you think I should marry Gustl [Maria]?** You know, she’s quite pretty.’ I remember the exact words of my answer to Papá: ‘I think **if it is the will of God**, then you should marry her.’ At the age of fourteen this was not my usual way of thinking, but the words just flowed out.”
- “The play and later the movie, as beautiful as they were, misrepresented our life at home with our father. He was not some naval officer with a distant look and a boatswain’s whistle in his mouth ready to order us children coldly about. In reality **he was a dedicated father who saw to our well-being in every way.**”

Georg and Maria in Vermont. Date unknown.
When they wed, Georg was 47 years old and Maria was only 22.



In Their Own Words

The Sound of Music is based on Maria Augusta von Trapp’s autobiography, *The Trapp Family Singers*. But the eldest von Trapp daughter, Agathe, also wrote an autobiography. This section includes her opinions on her father and stepmother.

Source for this section:

von Trapp, Agathe. *Memories Before and After The Sound of Music*. New York: Harper, 2010.

Additional resources:

Ransom, Caroline F. *Maria von Trapp: Beyond The Sound of Music*. Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books, 2002.

*Verbong, Ben, dir. *The von Trapp Family: A Life of Music*. 2015; Santa Monica, CA: Lionsgate, 2016. DVD. (Stream on [Amazon](#)) (Based on Agathe’s autobiography)

Fun fact: Maria Augusta’s autobiography not only inspired the musical, but also two successful German films in the 1950s: *Die Trapp-Familie* and *Die Trapp-Familie in Amerika*.

About Maria

- “We stood in front of a **person whose clothes looked as if they had come from a comic book**. Gustl – Maria Augusta Kutschera was her full name – wore a dark blue summer dress with an unusual neckline, and a leather hat. In one hand she held a briefcase, and in the other hand, a guitar.”
- “The doctor had recommended that this particular teacher should leave the convent for a year and get a job because of constant headaches. He felt that **her headaches were caused by the sudden confining life she had to lead in the convent.**”
- “Little by little she started to talk to all of us [children], and **when she found out that we liked to sing, she joined in our songs**. She also taught us folk songs that she knew. What a difference between Gustl and the housekeepers, who were much older than we were and never joined in!”
- “Because she loved music and could not afford to go to concerts, she attended Mass in the Catholic churches in Vienna on Sundays. **Her purpose was not to worship, but to hear the music that did not cost anything.**”
- “On top of a mountain, seeing the surrounding beauty, she made a sudden decision to **give up all this earthly beauty and enter a convent**. Looking for the strictest one, she entered the Benedictine order in Salzburg. She described her misbehavior there and the patience of the nuns as they caught her **sliding down banisters, singing and whistling** in the corridors, and **coming late for prayers**. The song titled ‘How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?’ from *The Sound of Music* was very appropriate.”
- “Mother was **young and full of energy**. She perceived our well-regulated daily routine as boring and lifeless and wanted to bring fun and more pleasant activities into our lives.
- “During the years that followed the wedding, **our new mother made many changes in our family**. She changed the way we dressed, what we ate, and how we lived. A new wind blew through our house.”
- “Mother had an **overwhelming personality** that drew people to her like a magnet. In turn, she adored being the center of attention.”

The Unrest Outside

Fans of the *Sound of Music* film might be surprised to see the rise of Nazism more prominently featured in the stage version. This timeline covers the interwar period in Austria and Germany.

- 1918** Austria surrenders in World War I. The Habsburg monarchy that ruled for nearly 400 years relinquishes control.
- 1919** The Treaty of Versailles formally ends World War I. Germany suffers the brunt of the peace deal: it must accept full responsibility for causing the war, pay £6.6 million in reparations, lose land, and reduce its military forces. The Treaty also bars Germany from uniting with Austria. These terms not only generate resentment amongst Germans, but also inspire Hitler's future policies. The Allied Powers force Germany to establish a democracy, which Germany names the Weimar Republic. The Treaty of St. Germain redraws Austria's boundaries. The former empire is divided into smaller nations of different ethnic minorities. Austria shrinks to 1/5 its original size and becomes landlocked.
- 1920** Hitler becomes leader of the National Socialist German Workers' Party (Nazi), a fringe group against the new Republic.
- 1921** Hitler organizes the Nazi Party's private army, the SA (also known as storm troopers or Brownshirts).
- 1923** For failing to make a timely reparations payment, France occupies a region of Western Germany and claims its resources. Germans are out of work, so Germany prints more money to pay them, which leads to hyperinflation. Hitler attempts a *Putsch*, or popular revolt, to overturn the Republic with the SA, which fails. The Nazi Party is banned. Hitler is jailed, where he writes *Mein Kampf* ("My Struggle").
- 1925** Hitler establishes the SS as his personal bodyguard.
- 1926** Germany joins the League of Nations, a global peacekeeping body set up by the Treaty of Versailles.
- 1929** The US stock market crashes, which causes a global Great Depression. Germany's postwar revival is ruined, and Germans turn to extremist groups.
- 1932** The Nazis hold 1/3 of the seats in the Reichstag. SA membership grows to 400,000.
- 1933** After a great deal of turnover in German leadership, Hitler is appointed Chancellor. The Great Depression hits the von Trapp family: The bank with Agathe Whitehead's inheritance fails, so they lose all their money. The family dismisses most of their servants, rent rooms out of their home, and have the children do the housekeeping. Georg gives paid lectures on military topics and sells off an additional property.
- 1934** Hitler consolidates power, bans all political parties except the Nazis, and declares himself Führer. He eliminates opposition within his party by terminating the SA. Hitler attempts a coup in Austria. The Chancellor of Austria is assassinated, but the Austrian military protects the government. Italy moves troops to the Austrian border to deter Hitler from invading.
- 1935** Hitler begins rearmament – rebuilding Germany's military power. The Nuremberg Laws formalize anti-Semitism, stripping Jews of their citizenship and their rights, and outlawing Jewish/German marriage and sex.
- 1936** Hitler initiates his quest for *Lebensraum* (living space for German people to survive) and uniting all German-speaking peoples by invading the Rhineland (between Germany and France). The German-Austrian Agreement of 1936 recognizes Austria's independence, but Austria's foreign policy must be consistent with Germany's. Hitler undermines this agreement by establishing an alliance with Italy.
- 1938** Hitler orders Austrian Nazis to cause trouble in order to justify an invasion to restore peace. Austria's Chancellor resigns, and the Nazis march into Austria unopposed. Hitler achieves *Anschluss* (annexation of Austria), gaining him more followers and more resources.

Sources: [BBC Bitesize: A History of Europe in the Modern World 12th ed.](#), by Palmer, Colton, and Kramer (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2020); [BBC News: Georg & Agathe Foundation: Memories Before and After The Sound of Music](#) by Agathe von Trapp (New York: Harper, 2010)



Hitler's goal to unite all German-speaking people under one flag led to the annexation of Austria in March 1938, known as *Anschluss*.

(Source: [BBC Bitesize](#))

BONUS: Here's a world history timeline from 1925-1950! ([PDF](#))

Interlude (Extras)

A hodgepodge of fun videos, blogs, and other content that needed a home somewhere...

Getting sketchy: They say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. At the very least, these SNL and MADtv sketches prove that *The Sound of Music* film is a lasting touchstone in American pop culture.

- SNL: "[Sound of Music: Rolf and Lies!](#)"
- SNL: "[New Governness](#)"
- SNL: "[Sound of Music](#)" (Nuns)
- SNL: "[Sound of Music Cold Open](#)" (NBC Live parody)
- MADtv: "[The Sound of Music Alternate Endings](#)"

The sound of pop music: Recording artists have sampled melodies from *The Sound of Music*, most notably [Ariana Grande](#) and [Gwen Stefani](#).

Need a little Christmas? Find out how "My Favorite Things" became a Christmas classic in my [Glimmerglass blog post](#).

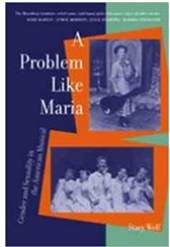
"Maria" meets Maria: Julie Andrews [learns to yodel](#) from the real Maria von Trapp on *The Julie Andrews Hour*. You can watch the full interview [here](#).

Give a little whistle: Learn [how to use](#) a boatswain's pipe (like Captain von Trapp's) and its various [sounds](#) in this two-part series from the Sea Scouts.

Critical Perspectives

Though frequently derided as sentimental kitsch, *The Sound of Music* continues to inspire analysis in the burgeoning field of musical theatre studies. Here are a few scholarly resources (including my own!) that delve into various facets of the musical.

Feminist & Queer Studies



Wolf, Stacy. "The Sound of Music." In *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002.

Wolf argues that "The Sound of Music invokes lesbian desire, compels lesbian identifications, induces lesbian readings, and works as a contemporary cultural signifier of lesbian identity"

(204). Her chapter consists of four parts: placing the show within Mary Martin's and Julie Andrews' careers, specifically their representations of femininity; contemporary cultural uses of Julie Andrews as Maria (signifying an overt sweetness and/or lesbianism); an ethnographic study of lesbians and their associations with the film version of *The Sound of Music*; and a lesbian feminist reading of the show, marking the differences between the stage musical and its film adaptation. Maria reads as a lesbian figure because she bucks traditional gender norms of the 1950s with her independent and wild spirit, connection to nature, and tomboy looks. She must be outed as a heterosexual in order for the story's love narrative to commence and carry forward.

BONUS: Consider Wolf's *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (Oxford UP, 2011), specifically how female duets in 1950s musicals undermine heterosexual narratives and norms.

Film Studies

Jubin, Olaf. "The Hills are Alive with... *My Songs, My Dreams? The Sound of Music* in Germany and Austria." *Studies in Musical Theatre* 7, no. 2 (2013): 135-156.
https://doi.org/10.1386/smt.7.2.135_1

Jubin investigates several potential reasons why the American film (translated as *My Songs, My Dreams* in German) never "clicked" with Germans and Austrians, such as the popularity of two earlier German films about the Trapp family singers, the 1956 movie *Die Trapp-Familie* and its 1958 sequel *Die Trapp-Familie in Amerika*. It also considers the US film's portrayal of fascism and its inauthentic depiction of Austria and Austrian culture. Other factors that might have been crucial in the reception of *My Songs, My Dreams* include local reviews, the advertising for the film, the German dubbing, and Austrian and German audiences' general disinterest in Hollywood musicals. [\(PDF\)](#)

Nationalism



Knapp, Raymond. *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005.

Knapp explores how *The Sound of Music* (both the stage musical and the film) contributed to the construction of America's national identity in the wake of World War II. After recognizing the horrors of the War (the Holocaust), Americans found it necessary to renegotiate their association with their European ancestry, cherry-picking elements from their European past while establishing an essential American difference – that of freedom "for all." *The Sound of Music* largely eschews actual War history and events to depict Austria as a victim of Nazi Germany. Maria represents quintessential American ideals, and it is she who saves the family – especially the children – from Nazi rule. *The Sound of Music* becomes a way for Americans to both associate and distance themselves from their European heritage. Like the fictionalized victimized Austria of the musical, the US comes from a white background with a special connection to nature; however, unlike the musical's Austria, the US is strong and confident, able to confront its enemies. The blemishes found in the US's Old-World past are necessary in order for the US to be the "good" nation of post-war society. [\(PDE\)](#)

Location, Location, Location

Ellis, Sarah T. "Establishing (and Re-establishing) A Sense of Place: Musical Orientation in *The Sound of Music*." *Studies in Musical Theatre* 3, no. 3 (2009): 277-283.

<https://doi.org/10.1386/smt.3.3.277/1>

Author's abstract:

In the 1965 film *The Sound of Music*, concepts of space and place are embedded not only in the visuals, but also in Rodgers and Hammerstein's musical score. Music itself comes to constitute a home, or alternative sense of place, for the von Trapp family. Yi-Fu Tuan's notions of the familiarity of place form the basis for a reading of this musical film: our world begins as undifferentiated space, which gradually becomes "place" through processes of repetition. In the genre of musical theatre, multiple levels of musical form provide a sense of orientation – or place – to the abstract space opened up by music: sites of internal musical repetition as well as sung and orchestral reprises. In *The Sound of Music*, concepts of "place" are performative, as the von Trapp family continually establishes and re-establishes a sense of place (a nuclear family and value system) through processes of musical reiteration.

[\(PDE\)](#)

“Bless My Homeland Forever”

From Nick: For *Glimmerglass’s* donor magazine, I wrote about *The Sound of Music’s* role in shaping American mythology – how we view ourselves as Americans and our nation’s history – and how other countries may use the musical to similar ends.

This digital version includes embedded links for you to peruse.

This story does not start at the very beginning, though that is typically a very good place to start. Nor does it start in Austria, or Germany, or even the United States. The year is 2015. In honor of the 70th anniversary of Korea’s liberation from Japanese imperialist rule, the nation of North Korea has invited Slovenian avant-garde band Laibach to perform, an exceptional move by the secretive, isolated country. On Laibach’s setlist – overseen by the government – are covers of popular rock songs (like “The Final Countdown” by Europe), Korean folk songs, and multiple numbers from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s classic musical *The Sound of Music*. The concert is broadcast on state television, and the band brings its own cameras to document the experience. Laibach’s [concert](#) later becomes the subject of the 2016 [documentary Liberation Day](#) and spawns an [album](#) of *Sound of Music* covers, released in 2018.

As music blog [Dangerous Minds](#) notes, the 1965 film adaptation of *The Sound of Music* starring Julie Andrews is one of the few pieces of American pop culture allowed and actively promoted within the country’s borders, utilized to teach schoolchildren English. In an interview with [New Internationalist](#), Laibach member Ivan Novak explains that Kim Jong-il saw himself as a Captain von Trapp figure to his country. But these justifications do little to quell the contradictions at hand. If a musical about fighting the rise of nationalist, totalitarian regimes is embraced in a nationalist, totalitarian country like North Korea, then who is *The Sound of Music* for? What is *The Sound of Music*? Is it the sound of protest and rebellion against the state, a tool for liberation; or is it the sound of unification under one identity?

MUSICAL DRAMA ON THE HOME FRONT

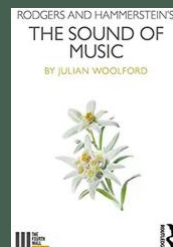
From the moment the lights come up on the von Trapp family home, we see that the home is run as a militaristic regime. Naval Captain Georg von Trapp stands in full military regalia, hailing his waitstaff and even his own children with different signals on his boatswain whistle. He calls the children’s clothes their “uniforms.” The idea of “running a tight ship” is made literal; yet we also see its inefficacies. The governess has resigned in protest, for the children are rebellious under their father’s strict rules. There is no room for fun or silliness in Captain von Trapp’s regime, especially something so seemingly inane and pointless as music.

Enter Maria Rainer, a postulant at the local abbey who will serve as the children’s new governess. She is a bit unruly herself, as we see in the abbey scenes (“How do you solve a problem like Maria?” the nuns ask), but she means well. She enjoys personal freedom, connecting with nature, and singing. Maria is the antithesis of Captain von Trapp.

When the children admit they don’t sing and don’t even know any songs, Maria pulls out her guitar and teaches them how to sing. Once they know “Do-Re-Mi,” they “can sing most anything,” Maria proclaims. She is not only engaging in a rebellious act with the children, but also instructing them *how* to rebel, giving them the building blocks to craft their own resistance to their father’s authoritarian rule. The revolution does not result in a bloody *coup d’état*, but rather a performance of the title song. The Captain rapidly warms to the children singing, and he takes to singing himself. Peace is restored in the home thanks to the sound of music.

(Continued on the next page...)

History and Autoethnography



Woolford, Julian. *Rodgers and Hammerstein’s The Sound of Music*. London: Routledge, 2020.

British theatre director, writer, and acting professor Julian Woolford divides his book into seven short chapters (named after solfège syllables), each with a different perspective on *The Sound of Music* in its many iterations. Some topics are familiar or at least well-covered elsewhere, such as the story of the real von Trapp family or information about the making of the stage musical and film. Other chapters provide new insight into an old favorite: a history of child roles in musical theatre, Austria’s reception of the musical, and the director’s own experiences staging *The Sound of Music* throughout the Middle East, for example. Each chapter is concise (the longest chapter is 11 pages), yet packed with details, facts, and figures. Though small in size, it’s a fairly comprehensive book on *The Sound of Music* – perfect for downtime during rehearsals, travelling, or an afternoon spent on the lake.

PLAYING ON THE WORLD STAGE

This domestic conflict at the center of the musical's plot parallels the political turmoil that eventually reaches the von Trapps' doorstep. Hitler and his Nazis force *Anschluss*, the annexation of Austria by Germany, which is the first of many territorial acquisitions toward building an idealized ethnic nation-state. Captain von Trapp originally objects to his children performing in public at the Kaltzberg Festival, even when his friend, the Festival organizer Max, asks him to permit it "for Austria;" however, when the Captain is forcibly enlisted into Hitler's army on immediate orders, the Festival becomes a welcome diversion to delay the Captain's departure and to hatch an escape plan.

The Kaltzberg Festival presents a paradox for the role of music in the face of rising nationalism. Organized by the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Festival is propaganda celebrating folk music, and The von Trapp Family Singers represent rural Austria. Up to this point, the musical demonstrates how music can subvert totalitarianism, but the Kaltzberg Festival demonstrates that music can also support and represent these same nationalist ideologies. Music can be used to nationalist ends (to unify and define a nation, like the new Austro-German state), but music can also undo it. When the Captain sings the lyric "Bless my homeland forever" from "Edelweiss" to a house full of Nazis, it is both a poignant moment and a defiant move. The sound of music may not win the von Trapps or Austria any remorse, but it does provide the family with a ruse for their escape. After sneaking out of the Festival one by one during their performance, the von Trapps run to the hills to cross into safer territory.

MADE IN AMERICA

The Sound of Music depicts the threat of nationalism, but the musical itself is a product of American nationalism. Turning away from the variety entertainments imported from Britain that dominated New York stages in the early 20th century, Rodgers and Hammerstein helped pioneer the American musical form, integrating singing, acting, and dancing to tell one cohesive story. Jerome Kern and Hammerstein's *Show Boat* in 1927 may mark the first successful attempt at such a feat, but Rodgers and Hammerstein's first collaboration, *Oklahoma!* (1943), typically gets the credit for the first American book musical, in no small part thanks to Agnes de Mille's dream ballet sequence. *The Sound of Music* (1959) was the pair's final effort before Hammerstein's death, and together they had truly mastered the form. Each song in *The Sound of Music* not only furthers the plot, but also stands on its own as a memorable, hummable melody. Dancing is the vehicle for illustrating physical chemistry between lovers, as seen between Rolf and Liesl in "Sixteen Going on Seventeen" and in Maria and the Captain's Ländler folk dance. With its circulation nationwide and globally, the American musical is perhaps our country's most recognizable and commercially viable contribution to music and theater today.

The Sound of Music also plays a role in shaping an understanding of our own country's mythology. In his influential book [The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity](#), UCLA professor of musicology [Raymond Knapp](#) names *The Sound of Music* a musical in which America negotiates its "Old World" European heritage with its post-war role as a world superpower. His reading of the musical in the context of its 1959 premiere positions Maria as the idealized, freedom-loving American coming to save Europe and the children – the future – from the rising tide of Soviet power. In another allegory, Austria is essentially a stand-in for America; it is American history and nationhood at risk.

But what does this musical mean today? That may depend on where in the world you live. Perhaps North Koreans relate to the fear of outside foreign powers encroaching on their way of life. Russia's current war with Ukraine, fought under the guise of uniting people of the same ethnic origin, certainly resembles Hitler's *Anschluss* from over 80 years ago. We cannot neglect the surging nationalist sentiments within our own borders pitting Americans against each other. No matter who the players are, making music remains a powerful tool in asserting oneself against injustice and establishing peace among peoples – even with a tune as simple as "Do-Re-Mi."

Musicology

Why *read* musical theatre scholarship when you can *listen* to it? The Rodgers & Hammerstein Organization's YouTube channel released a series on the musicology of this remarkable creative team, and four of the seven videos feature *The Sound of Music*. Led by Broadway music director Andy Einhorn at the piano, the brief videos discuss music theory, history, and culture song by song. One special episode departs from this format to cover female characters across Rodgers & Hammerstein's body of work.

- ["My Favorite Things"](#)
- ["Climb Ev'ry Mountain"](#)
- ["Sixteen Going on Seventeen"](#)
- [Rodgers & Hammerstein's Leading Ladies](#)

You can view the entire series [here](#).



Glossary

Anschluss: German for “union.” The official name for Hitler’s annexation of Austria on March 12, 1938. It was Hitler’s first of many hostile territorial acquisitions leading up to World War II.

Ave: A Latin expression meaning “hail.” Used as a greeting or a farewell. In the Catholic faith, “Ave Maria” translates to “Hail Mary.”

Bachelor dandy: An unmarried man devoted to style, neatness, and fashion in dress and appearance. Dandies were sometimes coded as homosexual in the Victorian era.

Boatswain / bo’s’un: The most senior officer on a ship, in charge of equipment and crew.

Cad: A man who behaves dishonorably, especially toward a woman. (For a similar usage, consider “The Lusty Month of May” from Lerner and Loewe’s *Camelot*: “It’s May, it’s May, that gorgeous holiday / When every maiden prays that her lad will be a cad.”)

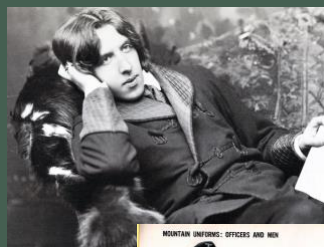
Camille: A reference to the protagonist of the novel *La Dame aux camélias* by Alexandre Dumas *filis*, based on the author’s love affair with the courtesan Marie Duplessis. Camille leaves her life as a courtesan to wed a young bourgeois man. His father is worried about the potential scandal of their union, so he convinces Camille to leave him. Camille lies to her lover, telling him that she left him for a Count. While Camille dies of consumption in bed, her lover forgives her and swears to love her forever. The play adaptation inspired Verdi’s *La traviata*.

Edelweiss: A mountain plant found in the Alps, best known for its woolly white bracts that surround its small flowers in a star shape. According to [Petal Republic](#), edelweiss’s meaning has a long history. It was a symbol of ruggedness and individualism, for to pick one proved that you climbed high altitudes. It’s used on military insignia and as a mountaineering symbol for this reason. To give edelweiss to a lover illustrated your devotion to them. Emperor Franz Joseph I picked an edelweiss bloom for his wife on a walk with her, adding to the plant’s romantic symbolism. In German, *edel* means “noble” and *weiss* means “white,” so the plant also represents innocence and purity. Travel guru Rick Steves shares that edelweiss are only white at high elevations from UV rays [in this article](#).

Gauleiter: A regional leader of Nazi Germany. The third-highest rank in the chain of command (under *Reichsleiter* and the *Führer* himself).

High command: The supreme headquarters of a military force, or the highest-ranked leaders of said force.

Top row: Oscar Wilde and Beau Brummell both epitomized the dandy lifestyle in the Victorian and Regency eras, respectively. *Below:* Edelweiss were part of the insignia on German mountain forces’ uniforms in WWII.



Glossary (cont.)

Ländler: A partner dance in triple time, once popular in Bavaria, Austria, and Switzerland. From *ländlich*, meaning “rural,” the ländler was seen as a more wholesome, folksy, country dance compared to the sophisticated, sexual, urban Viennese waltz. For these same reasons, the ländler was a site of national pride, a “purer” dance than the urban waltz. (Source: [BBC Music](#))

Maria Theresa medal: The highest military honor for Austrian soldiers through World War I.

Novice: In Catholicism, a person formally admitted into the church community to prepare for eventual religious profession. For women, this is typically a 2-year process of study, formation, and prayer. The novice may use a religious name and/or begin wearing a veil (white). This stage is not a formal commitment or acceptance yet; a novice may still choose to leave or be dismissed. (Source: [Aleteia](#).)

Ostmark: The official name of Austria from 1938 to 1942 while under Nazi rule. Replaced the formerly independent Federal State of Austria after the Anschluss with Nazi Germany.

Postulant: In Catholicism, a candidate seeking admission into the religious order. They have formally moved into the community and started living within it, though they have not yet been officially accepted. This phase takes between 6 months and a year. (Source: [Aleteia](#).)

Roué: A man devoted to a life of sensual pleasure.

Saengerbund: A German choral society.

Storm Troopers: Members of the SA (“Assault Division”), a radical, violent Nazi militia. Also known as Brownshirts for their uniforms.

Third Reich: Hitler’s name for the Nazi regime in Germany from January 1933 to May 1945. The First Reich would be the Holy Roman Empire; the Second was unification of German states under Otto von Bismarck from 1871-1918, ending with Germany’s loss of World War I.

Wimple: A cloth headdress covering the head, neck, and the sides of the face, formerly worn by women and still worn by some nuns.

Whirling dervish: A member of a Sufi religious order who has taken vows of poverty and austerity. Spinning is part of a centuries-old ceremony called *sema*, and the practice helps one come closer to God and enlightenment. Check out this video of [modern-day dervishes](#).

*Clockwise from top: Whirling dervishes twirl in an abbey in Cyprus. A storm trooper’s uniform on display at the Munich Stadtmuseum. Wimples have long been part of religious wear, seen under veils in many depictions of pious women. Inscribed on the Maria Theresa medal is *FORTITUDINI*, meaning “for courage.”*

