



ROSE BOWL ADJUDICATION

Name of Company: Exeter Musical Society

Name of Production: THE SOUND OF MUSIC

Venue: Northcott Theatre, Exeter

Date: Tuesday 4th April 2023

Adjudicator: Nicholas Goodall

A heart-warming and slick production of an evergreen musical that delighted the House

Rodgers and Hammerstein's final collaboration, *The Sound of Music*, based on Maria von Trapp's 1949 memoir *The Story of the Trapp Family Singers*, was first produced on Broadway in 1959. It has remained a firm favourite with audiences ever since, mainly because of the run-away success of the iconic 1965 film version starring Julie Andrews and Christopher Plummer. Taking on a show with such a strong heritage and well-known songs brings with it a special responsibility and a strong audience expectation. Exeter Musical Society's production certainly rose to this challenge and for those members of the audience who might have come to the theatre with a picture of the iconic principal characters firmly lodged in their heads, your team didn't disappoint.

The Sound of Music in its original stage incarnation avoids sentimental sweetness because it is set against the historical backdrop of the Austrian Anschluss and includes the addition of two significant supporting roles - Max and Elsa - who get to sing the show's two light-hearted but politically nuanced songs. The latter were axed from the film and it is nice to see these restored in the current stage version of the show. You wisely chose to include the two numbers Richard Rodgers penned without Oscar Hammerstein for the film, *I Have Confidence* and *Something Good*, mainly because they are such good songs and add significantly to the narrative. You also took the decision to move *Favourite Things* from its place at the beginning

of the show in the Mother Abbess's study to the scene in Maria's bedroom during the thunderstorm as it appears in the film, rather than using *The Lonely Goatherd* which should be heard at this point, making your production much more faithful to the film version than some theatrical productions I have seen.

The Sound of Music is usually guaranteed to bring in an audience and judging by the nearly full House on the second night when I attended, this was certainly the case here. It was a very good choice of show for your predominantly female cast, and despite the length of the performance and the lack of chorus work, there are opportunities for some strong choral singing and of course, for two rotating casts of children to cut their teeth in a major production. Notwithstanding a few moments of musical and technical insecurity at the beginning of an eight-performance run, this was a very slick production. Congratulations should go to Natasha Fardell and Gareth Davies for delivering such solid performances as Maria and Captain von Trapp, to Director Joe McNulty and Assistant Director Elaine Kingston for some deft direction and to a strong supporting cast. Together with assured musical direction from Rob Young and his band, the beautiful scenery, Nicholette Pollard's choreography and some lovely costumes, this was a sure-fire hit and fully deserving of the enthusiastic ovation it received from the audience at the end.

Below are some comments and notes for each department involved, and for each of the principals.

Staging

Scenery and set. The Northcott Theatre provides a very ample stage area with excellent facilities enabling the use of backdrops and fly system scenery. You took full advantage of this in the design for each scene and the backdrops and scenery really helped to set the right tone for the show. It was a good decision to hire in the scenery (it looks the same as the scenery used in *The Sound of Music* production at the King's Theatre in Edinburgh last year?) - it was certainly beautifully crafted, particularly the interior of the von Trapp Villa and greatly added to the visual impact of the show.

The show opened with a black backdrop with stained glass windows at the top to suggest Nonnberg Abbey which allowed the chorus of nuns to enter from both sides of the stage and from the steps leading from the auditorium. The mountainside was suggested by a backdrop, lighting effects and birch trees and Maria entered from the audience and sang the first verse of *The Sound of Music* while walking along the aisle in the auditorium. A table with telephone, religious statue and chair was used for the Mother Abbess's study scenes and in later scenes at the Abbey we had a large cabinet containing candles and an altar for the wedding. These were easily brought on and off and generally the scene changes were well managed by the team of stage hands.

The von Trapp family Villa had two distinct sets and scenery: the grand interior/living room complete with steps stage left and a grand settee/sofa and an exterior garden with flowers, statues, trees and a summerhouse stage left for the *Sixteen Going on Seventeen* scene. There was also the scene set in Maria's bedroom with bed and large curtain drapery stage left. One of the most effective scenes for me was the Festival concert where three large flags containing Nazi hakenkreuz formed the backdrop to the concert and, together with the

soldiers guarding the exits in the auditorium, provided a note of menace before the von Trapp's eventual escape. The final scene itself was beautifully managed, with the family revealed against a large moon in silhouette behind the nun's chorus and then revealed walking over the mountain as the music reached its climax.

One small note on the staging: I was seated on the left-hand side of the auditorium and the *Favourite Things* scene in Maria's bedroom was situated on the extreme stage-right and was partly obscured from my sight-line. I couldn't see Maria at all throughout much of the song while most of the stage was left empty apart from the enormous ruched curtains.

Costumes and Props Although many will have been hired in or borrowed I suspect, the costumes were a real treat and added a really strong visual element to the show, placing it firmly in the specific time the action takes place. Indeed, the visual impact of the show was greatly enhanced by the costumes (particularly beautiful in the ballroom scene) in a show where reference is made to what the characters are wearing - Maria's convent clothes that 'the poor didn't want' or the children's play clothes made from the curtains for example. You also have Maria's magnificent wedding dress, the military uniforms in the second Act (and the captain's for the wedding) which need to be suitably authentic and the elegant formal wear for the party, together with a large number of nun's habits and religious crosses. The children too have to wear several different outfits in the course of the show and in addition to their smart new clothes, the girls had beautifully braided hair for the wedding scene. Hats off to Sarah Butler Evans, Debbie Cole and the wardrobe department here in making this such an impressive part of the production. Props were also appropriate and there were some lovely touches. I liked the children's outfits and the bouquets in the Wedding scene which was really beautiful to watch, together with the going away clothes and lanterns during their escape in the finale.

Lighting was well designed and really well operated with a sensitivity in the cues that I appreciated. I liked the contrasts you achieved with the interior of the Abbey, the elegant Villa of the von Trapps and the outdoor moments, which had a freshness that worked well. Particularly impressive was the final scene when the family were revealed first in silhouette and then fully lit as they walked across the mountain to freedom. There was a good use of a red wash to complement the flags and spotlights during the Festival scene and the searchlights which swept around the audience after the family had made their escape. Day and night scenes were suitably differentiated and the thunderstorm, which can sometimes be a little bit too staged, was subtle and believable, both with sound and light (the lightning effects were spot on). The garden scene which followed the storm was beautifully contrasted, with bright daylight (complete with birdsong) and moved us quickly to the action six weeks later. Plaudits should certainly go to Dominic Jeffrey for such an effective lighting design.

Sound was well balanced, with all the soloists nicely forward in the mix. However, there were a number of moments where sound cues were missed; this was particularly unfortunate for Brigitta whose lines were lost more than once and for Rolf who's cue was missed in the garden scene. This was at the beginning of your run and I'm sure this was sorted out as the week progressed.

For me there were certainly a number of places where I would have liked more from the band, especially in numbers like *Climb Every Mountain* at the end of Act 1 where some of the richness of the orchestration was lost - the sound seemed a little thin and treble-heavy (it was much better in the reprise of the song in the Finale). Solo instrumentalists did cut through in the sound mix (the oboe in particular) but there were also issues with the on-stage guitar pickup the night I came which didn't allow for a seamless transition to the off-stage guitarist in the pit and led to some feedback issues. It was a nice idea to have Liesl play the guitar on stage but it didn't quite come off at this performance. Notwithstanding these small technical problems, it was easy to hear both vocals and spoken dialogue; all the principals were using radio mics and the nuns chorus were singing without. The occasional moment when things didn't go completely right didn't detract from the performance as a whole.

Choreography throughout was well designed and suited the skills of your cast and congratulations should go to Nicholette Pollard for what was achieved here. In the solo performances, such as Maria's opening scene in the hills, the design of her movements through the auditorium and across the stage was creative and effective. I particularly liked what you did in *I Have Confidence* - an especially nice touch was the group of passengers who formed a bus (together with driver) and another group of dancers in dirndls who added a choreographed sequence towards the end of the song - very effective.

The children looked totally comfortable with their movements across the stage in *Do-Re-Mi* although I was slightly surprised that the second verse of the song was so static, with the children grouped around Maria rather than interacting or dancing. I'm guessing you wanted a contrast with the interior scene at the start of the song and the exterior scene which we moved to as the song continued? The second part was nicely staged with gestures and movements for each of the note names and the song gathered pace after the pause in the middle, ending with a flourish.

Sixteen Going on Seventeen was classically choreographed with Liesl and Rolf doing a very sweet and elegant routine together with plenty of variety in the extended sequence at the end of the song. The ballroom scene, where Kurt and Maria dance together with pairs of guests dancing in the background, first a waltz and then the ländler, was also beautifully done. The elegance of the dance moves and the costumes combined to give this scene a strong visual dimension. Of course, *So Long, Farewell* will always be a moment to savour in *The Sound of Music* and you followed a well-established routine which was similar to the film, but with the addition of some unique touches, for example the way the children carried Gretl at the beginning. There was less to do in Act 2 but I liked the Festival scene with its reprise of *So Long Farewell* and Max and Elsa's two songs, *How Can Love Survive* and *No Way to Stop It*, one in the first half and one in the second, were deftly choreographed.

Although *The Sound of Music* is not a big dance show, the moments when dance is centre-stage need to be appropriate to time and place and this was very evident in your elegant choreography.

Band

It was very nice to hear a reasonable sized band for a show like this which has an orchestral score. You had a good balance of players with three woodwind and three brass players,

together with string synth, guitar, bass and percussion although I was left wondering if you needed three brass players for much of the show. The variety of timbre you were able to achieve with your resources was nicely demonstrated in a number like *Sixteen going on Seventeen* where we heard a piccolo and subtle drums with brushes and the opening song, *The Sound of Music*, greatly benefitted from the string synth sound which was authentic and well positioned in the mix. Personally I would have liked to have heard more from the strings to balance the wind players who were sometimes just a little too prominent. More bass or low strings would have been nice, especially in the more climactic moments, but this is very much a personal preference. I very much liked your prominent use of a guitar in the pit band; this added some authenticity to *Do-Re-Mi* and *Edelweiss* in particular.

Overall the band had quite a bit to do, with a lot of incidental music as well as the songs, and Musical Director Rob Young kept a very tight control of tempi with clear musical direction. The ensemble was pretty good throughout and notwithstanding a few moments where the intonation slipped a little (most noticeably during the ball scene in the ländler) the band provided very solid support for the singers throughout the show.

Principals

Maria - Natasha Fardell

This was a really charming performance and you deserve many congratulations for the energy and musicality you brought to the role. You embraced your inner Julie Andrews and your spoken voice, with its cut-glass accent, was often a dead ringer for her. Whether this was intentional or not, you gave to the part of Maria the same energy and joie-de-vivre that we are familiar with from the film version. Described in Flood Magazine as “a cheery, outspoken, child-friendly, music-loving, positive-thinking, curtains-into-clothes-making nun-governess”, your Maria was all this and more, offering us an impulsive, engagingly tomboyish figure who never stops smiling and offering her life-affirming optimism to all around her. You certainly have the voice to pull off the famous songs and your acting was very believable. Maria was shown to be tough when she needed to be, yet naive and likeable at the same time.

I thought you sang *Something Good* beautifully and with real conviction, although your burgeoning relationship with Captain von Trapp leading up to that moment didn't quite convince me and felt a little staged at times. The relationship with the seven children however, was very touching and after the wedding in Act 2 I felt much more convinced about Maria's devotion to the Captain too.

Playing such an iconic part does bring with it a certain pressure and you coped with this admirably. On the one hand, you are stepping into some very famous shoes and on the other you need to put your own mark on the role and make it your own; you achieved this with grace and aplomb. You have a lovely voice that was perfectly suited to these songs and they seemed effortless. Your first entrance from the audience, singing *The Sound of Music* while walking through the theatre was a lovely touch and you were similarly peripatetic in *I Have Confidence*, which worked equally well, providing both solos with movement and visual interest. *I Have Confidence* was the only song where there was some musical uncertainty at the start - the pitching wasn't right at the beginning, probably because you couldn't hear the band cue, because once the song got going you got into your stride.

You looked well rehearsed and very confident in your moves about the stage in each scene and achieved another real skill – that of engaging with your fellow performers and the audience at the same time. But what was really memorable for me was the range of your facial expressions. You conveyed a lot of emotions which were instantly recognisable and Maria's empathetic nature was clear for all to see. That's quite an achievement and you thoroughly deserved your applause. Well done on giving such an engaging and polished performance.

Captain Von Trapp - Gareth Davies

I very much liked your performance overall and it was lovely to hear the Captain's songs delivered with such gusto and musicality. In the first few scenes I wasn't entirely convinced of the Captain's developing feelings for Maria but his emotional detachment from his children was clear to see. You were suitably authoritarian in the opening scene with the children and they responded to your whistle commands with realistic nervousness. However, as Act 1 went on you grew into your role and I really enjoyed your performance and the thaw in the Captain's relationship with his new governess was clear after you had rejected Maria's arguments about the children and requested that she leave. There was something missing for me in the chemistry between Maria and the Captain when they danced at the ball but in the darker second half, when political tensions burst the romantic bubble, your fervour and patriotism for an independent Austria was well played and you got across the crucial point that Captain von Trapp's determination not to yield to Nazi pressure is not up for negotiation. You also had a very believable relationship with Max and the scenes with Max and Elsa, particularly *How Can Love Survive*, were played with the lightness of touch which is needed at that point in the show. By the denouement, when the family are making their escape from the Festival, I was rooting for you completely.

You certainly have a very fine singing voice and judging by your CV, a lot of experience in operetta and serious drama. Your delivery of the few songs the Captain has to sing filled the auditorium and you brought a kind of gravitas to the vocals at the end of *Something Good* that you don't always hear - it felt more like *Some Enchanted Evening* - and was all the better for that. The part of Captain von Trapp doesn't have a lot of singing to do and doesn't need to have a great voice (Christopher Plummer certainly didn't) but your vocal delivery gave more gravitas to the songs than you often see from actors playing the Captain and really enhanced the production. This was a performance with a lot to commend it.

Liesl - Ava Fitzhugh

Your portrayal of Liesl was spot on, achieving the kind of bubbly innocence and nativity needed for this character. You achieved this through an exuberant physicality and vocal lightness which was slightly moderated as the show progressed and life becomes more challenging for the children. Liesl needs to be the older sister who the children look up to and who leads the children in their songs and this you did very successfully.

Your encounter with Rolf was (perhaps suitably) stiff at first but you got into your stride when the song began and your vocal delivery of *Sixteen Going on Seventeen* was charming and set the tone for your character. You really made the most of your moment to shine here; your singing was a real joy - crystal clear and nicely controlled. Your dance together with Rolf in

the choreographed sequence following the song was deftly done and I liked the way you developed your relationship with Maria, which culminated in the *Sixteen Going on Seventeen* reprise in Act 2. It was clear that you had put lots of thought into what it must have felt like to be Liesl and I could see how much you were enjoying the role – it was infectious. It was also lovely to see you playing the guitar on stage, particularly for *Edelweiss* although there were a few technical issues with the pick up at the Festival scene on the night I came - something which I am sure you sorted out as the run continued. Your musicality was clear from the way you approached the songs and together with your strong stage presence I am sure that you have a long future ahead on stage.

Rolf - Jamie Hunter

You've got a really lovely voice and I hope you get lots more opportunities to use it. You sang the verse of *Sixteen Going on Seventeen* with real commitment and your dancing in the extended dance sequence with Liesl was very slick. Physically I thought you were a little stiff at the very start - perhaps you were trying to convey Rolf's awkwardness in expressing his feelings for Liesl - but once the song began and you were singing you really hit your mark. Later on in the second half, when you were revealed to be in support for the coming Anschluss, Rolf's stiffness was just right and of course you save the day towards the end, when you allow the family the time to escape. Rolf is a nice cameo part with quite a complex and ambivalent character. You certainly made the most of your moment to shine.

Elsa Schröder - Emma McAllister

This was a perfect role for you - well done to whoever cast you in it. You really made the most of the part. Your glamorous stance and elegant stride, was just what's needed for Elsa. In the stage version of *The Sound of Music* Elsa is less of a threat to Maria and she is not competing with the captain's affections to the same extent. Your portrayal was nicely nuanced and we understood that one of the character's main points of conflict in her relationship with the Captain is that she's willing to put up with the Nazi take-over while her fiancé is not. This version of Elsa sees getting married to Georg as much as a marriage of convenience than anything and your relationship with Max, particularly the duets you had together, were delightfully played. I was very impressed with your diction in these numbers; we heard every word and the singing was clear, bright and well-articulated. The top end of your voice was especially strong in *No Way to Stop It*.

You brought the required touch of glamour and sophistication to the part together with Elsa's more cynical outlook on both her potential relationship with the Captain and the amoral political compromise she and Max are willing to make. This was a lovely supporting role which you fully embraced.

Max Detweiler - Daniel Goad

I thought this was one of the stand-out performances of the evening, portraying Max with just the right amount of relaxed insouciance and charm but allowing his moral ambiguity to shine through, particularly in *No Way to Stop it*. On the one hand Max is interested only in his own welfare, whether it be in finding a singing group to front the Festival Concert or his willingness to collaborate, albeit reluctantly, with the forthcoming Austrian take-over. On the

other, he seems to have a genuine love for the family and clearly colludes in their escape plan, putting himself at some potential risk. You made Max very likeable and your singing was fully committed and nicely phrased.

In the stage version of the show the part of Max is fleshed out through the two songs he sings together with Elsa and I thought you delivered these to perfection. You had a very good connection with Elsa (and the Captain) and your diction was always clear and precise. Your vocal lines were strong and the singing always in character. In particular I loved the energy you displayed whenever you were on stage, moving briskly around and generating the kind of bustling vitality his quick-witted character needs. You could see why the children would love him as a visitor. Despite his equivocation over the Nazi Anschluss, you played Max with enough appeal for me to be convinced that he did have the family's interests at heart, despite his over-riding loyalty to finding an act for the Festival Concert and to taking the line of least resistance.

One of the strengths of *The Sound of Music* for me is the way the character of Max (and to some extent Elsa) balance the black and white moral universe of Maria and the Captain and their two songs, sadly missing from the film, provide not only a couple of moments of light-hearted relief, but a counter-balance to the rather monochrome world of the main characters. This was a very strong performance which you made your own - many congratulations.

Mother Abbess - Penny Daw

The role of the mother Abbess is quite a demanding one. It requires a really strong actor and someone with a big voice and wide vocal range. I was impressed with the tenderness with which you engaged with Maria in the opening scene in the Mother Abbess's study and again later on when Maria returns to the Abbey. Of course, you also have to deliver one of the show's big numbers – *Climb Every Mountain* – and taking on this role comes with the responsibility of ending both the first and second Acts with this iconic showstopper. You delivered it with real heart and matriarchal concern, in keeping with the character, and there was no doubt the audience was thrilled by your performance. You certainly have the voice for this part and gave the Mother Abbess the kind of dignity and empathy for Maria that is needed in this role.

Sisters Margareta, Berthe and Sophia - Chloë Faine, Helen Vines & Anna Townhill

The three of you worked well to extract individual characterisation from these parts as well as gelling as a group. *How Do You Love a Problem Like Maria* was a highlight of the first Act. Your ensemble singing was strong and affectionate, with excellent diction and nice physicality and the cameo appearances later in the show were equally good.

Frau Schmidt and Franz, the Butler - Mary Lewis, Lee Andreae

These are cameo roles but nevertheless important. I appreciated your submissive gestures and careful moves across the stage, as well as that slightly lowered sight line that was appropriate for household staff in that era. Your voice projection was first class. You don't have many moments to shine but your action on stage is critical in supporting the storyline

and Franz the butler showed just enough diffidence in his relationship with the Captain for us to believe he would not remain loyal to the family in the event of the Nazi take-over.

The Children

Friedrich, Louisa, Kurt, Brigitta, Marta and Gretl (Roses)

Lorenzo Twelvetrees-Fernandez, Chloë Isabella Hughes, Ethan Lewis, Hattie Burton, Agnes Lewis, Henrietta Baker

The night I came to see the show the children were being played by the Roses team. You worked really well together as an ensemble and I was truly impressed with the connections you had as a family group. There were some subtle asides and gestures that helped to bond you as a family and you had put a lot of thought into playing your individual characters. Your first entrance in the scene at the von Trapp Villa was nicely played with you all looking suitably immaculate and answering smartly to your whistles. Indeed, you made us believe you had been drilled by the Captain and the gradual thaw in your relationship with Maria was all the more convincing as a result. Although the first two verses of *Do-Re-Mi* only required you to sit or stand around the settee, you all interacted enthusiastically with Maria and I was persuaded of your desire to learn from her. Once the song got going and the scene moved outside, the number became more energetic and was nicely choreographed. Your movements in the So-Do-La-Fa-Mi-Do-Re section were delightful and you all kept pace with the music beautifully, using your chosen gestures for each of the note names in turn. This is a tricky number to get right and you never once seemed to stumble over the words or a vocal entry.

A similar familial bond was evident in *Favourite Things* where you seemed to be enjoying the playfulness of the music and Maria's encouragement not to be scared during the thunderstorm scene. *So Long, Farewell* in Act 1 was equally delightful and subtly more world-weary in the Festival scene in Act 2. I liked the strong physical movements of Kurt and Gretl was as adorable as we all wanted her to be in the final verse - what a beautiful clear voice you have. I was very impressed with your confidence and charm as Gretl - you have a long career in musical theatre ahead of you I'm sure!

Of all the children's parts, it is Brigitta who has the most to say. You have a lovely strong and clear voice, and despite a couple of sound cues being missed on your entries (not your fault), we heard every word. Your characterisation was also spot on: initially a little cool towards Maria but later bold and unabashed when you revealed to her that your father was in love with her. All of these little personality nuances are not always present in this show and I really appreciated how much work all of you had put into this. It was also lovely to have you singing in harmony for the *Sound of Music* reprise, especially the off-stage start to this song. For your first performance this was very polished so very well done.

The Nuns chorus and minor parts

One of the stand outs of this production for me was the choral singing from the nun's chorus. The opening *Preludium* was very nicely staged, with the nuns coming on in different groups

from both sides of the auditorium and singing directly out to the audience, culminating in the wonderfully powerful *Alleluia*. The a cappella choral singing was nicely balanced and the intonation very impressive. The other moments in the show when the nun's chorus shine - the *Morning Hymn* before the Act 1 finale and wedding scene in Act 2 were equally impressive and provided some nice moment of reflection and repose at these points in the story. The nun's chorus in the final scene sounded glorious and provided a fitting triumphal vocal punctuation to the show's finale.

Although small parts, Herr Zeller, Admiral von Schreiber and the Elberfelds all offer non-singing roles with significant importance to the plot and these were ably delivered by Pete Francis, Amelia Hall, Andrew Mimmack, Andy Padmore and Natalie Westwood. The Nazi roles in particular were suitably sinister and uncompromising and set the scene for the von Trapp's potential peril. I should also mention the second and third placed prize-winners at the Festival who really made the most of their lovely comedic moments when they came on stage to receive their bouquets.

Thank you for bringing this show back to the stage with such a bright and well-directed production. I thoroughly enjoyed Exeter Musical Society's production of *The Sound of Music*. The show's built-in charm and charisma were clear to see in your family-friendly, comforting production but you had tweaked it a bit to reflect a version which was more authentic to the film than some I have seen. Your production also reminded me that the show's best songs aren't always the ones everyone hums. I've never much enjoyed Maria's eulogy to her Favourite Things but *No Way to Stop It*, dropped from the film, successfully deflates the false hopes of appeasement, offering a moment of light-hearted cynicism when its most needed and the beautiful love duet *Something Good*, which you chose to include, is one of Richard Rodgers' best songs.

It was clear that everyone on stage was fully invested in the story and the hard work put in during rehearsals had clearly paid off. There were some strong individual performances and the children were delightful. The visual impact of the show was very impressive: both the hired-in set and the costumes added greatly to convince us of the setting and context of the story and the music was seamlessly integrated into the action so congratulations to Joe McNulty, Rob Young and the whole team for pulling off such a lovely piece of entertainment. You produced an impressive new production of a familiar show that will have evoked nostalgic feelings for many who came to see it.

The Sound of Music may be old-fashioned and it may even be a bit too saccharine for some, but you have proved that there is still much to admire in this show and watching your entertaining production will have left many leaving the theatre with these wonderful, evergreen tunes ringing in their ears.

Thank you for your kind hospitality and warm welcome. I look forward to seeing more of your work in the future.