

The Sound of Music: The Music Festival Scene

Caryl Flinn



[Link to film clip in criticalcommons.org: "THE SOUND OF MUSIC: Festival Scene"](#)

The Sound of Music is not too shy about announcing the importance of its soundtrack. First, there is its title. But even as the film begins, well before Julie Andrews explodes into song, it is a series of sounds, of winds and birds, that moves us out of the abstract, cloudy opening shots. The soundtrack, notably the musical numbers, is of supreme importance throughout the film—as with any musical—but assumes a curiously specific and active relationship to the audience in one particular scene late in the film, nearly giving directives of how to listen in a conspicuous "singalong moment."

When first adapted in 1965, no one expected that someday *The Sound of Music* would lure parades of cross-dressed nuns and legions of lederhosen and dirndl clad kids into film theatres. But it has done precisely that, ever since its first *Singalong* at the London Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in 1999. And for as extensive as the sartorial play-alongs have always been, the singalong component is even more exuberant. The *Singalong Sound of Music* works like a multi-directional karaoke, a musicalized exchange that creates an ephemeral public community, one built on affection and humor and that gives a rare opportunity to connect with other audience members.

The Sound of Music exhibited signs for "singalonghood" from the start. There were, of course, *The Sound of Music* paratexts that even preceded the film: the runaway success of both the 1959 show and its original cast recording, factors that made the

"songs of music" familiar to millions of households before Robert Wise even started his film for Fox. There were the hundreds of song covers before and after the film (yes, even Coltrane's "My Favorite Things"), recordings by "real" Trapp family members, the film's theatrical re-releases, its ritualistic broadcasts on television, its multiple releases on DVD, the thousands of times it's been staged from local schools all the way to the West End and Broadway; add to those the film's mammoth online presence as so many fractured knockoffs.

That acoustic footprint is what anchors *The Sound of Music* as a singalong phenomenon and, I would argue, what anchors our chief memories and experience of the film overall. Those acoustic memories—i.e., our familiarity—are what fuel our desire to reconnect with the musical as active participants and not merely as observers.

That familiarity is not simply a result of the activity outside of the text. Indeed, *The Sound of Music* itself scatters cues soliciting our participation throughout its three hour running time. It does so primarily when Maria invites her young charges (and, who are we kidding, us) to sing with her ("Do Re Mi," "The Lonely Goatherd"), or even just to participate in the call and response of "My Favorite Things" before the children learn to sing. (Later, the children initiate a call and response with their diegetic audience in "So Long, Farewell," and the adults at the ball collectively sing goodbye as we join them from our theatre seats.) We are also directly addressed as audience members in a key non-singing musical moment. Just before Maria leaves the Trapp household, she turns around to survey the foyer, saying good bye to it, and with her gaze directly facing us, bids us adieu before the film's entr'acte.

One needs to be familiar with a song in order to sing it, and typically musicals will do whatever they can to repeat and rework their numbers within, often through underscoring that anticipates or repeats songs in overtures, entr'actes, and in so many instrumental variations. (These repeated listenings doubtlessly help future sales of songs and soundtracks after listeners leave the theatre). *The Sound of Music* follows these traditions, going them a step further by *vocally* reprising so many of its numbers: "The Sound of Music," for instance, is sung twice in the first half of the film and joins several others that are reprised in the second. It joins "My Favorite Things" when the dispirited children miss Maria (both "sad versions," *pace* Saul Chaplin); other repeated numbers include "Maria," when it officiates the former nun's wedding, and a toned down "When You're 16," when it becomes a lesson of love's disappointment rather than a celebration of its promise.

Three songs are restaged at the music Festival, where they are sung by the family to bide for time, Scheherazade style. We cut in to the scene mid-performance of "Do Re Mi", and end with a condensed version of "So Long, Farewell," both of which had previously been performed in full. A similar, if subtler, sense of musical repetition also plays out when Max announces the group receiving the Festival's second prize as the Toby Reiser Quintet, whom we'd heard perform before when Georg threw a party for the Baroness and the group played the waltzes there.

Visual cues sharply differentiate the settings and contexts of the number's performances. Here, the Trapp singers on stage move relatively little, their bodies comparatively still, and the children, arms and knuckles clasped, periodically exchange

looks of anxiety. The editing further enforces the stasis of this new setting, avoiding anything that would animate what we hear—quite unlike the spectacular, kinetic montage of their initial performance of "Do Re Mi."

Given the professional festival context and the bitter politicized circumstances that bring the Trapp family there, it's understandable that the images of *The Sound of Music* also foreground the theatrical space and audience, and not just the performers on stage. Nazi guards darken the amphitheatre's upper-level lit cubicles, their faceless figures transfigured into empty eyes of would-be theatre boxes. Wise provides numerous close ups of Herr Zeller, seated in the front row, whose visible irritation at being there is matched only by his huffy ennui. Clearly, such visual details are intended to direct, dictate and amplify our own feelings, fears, and worries in one of the tensest scenes of the film.

It's an odd tenseness, though. Indeed, as the festival condenses and combines earlier songs, it's not that difficult to experience it as if it were a special cast appearance on a tv variety show—a fact that might explain all the visual cues used to guard against this. Still, and more than anything else, we are audience members in this scene, and with so many reminders of the diegetic theatrical space and audience members within it, we are constantly urged to feel part of a larger community, all of whom (as in a singalong), are brought together to enjoy the Trapp Family Singers. Indeed, in her recent work on singalongs and their audiences, Desiree Garcia refers to the latter as an "imagined community of musical film lovers that has been convened for the event." [1] At the Festival, however, this doesn't happen all at once.

At *Singalong Sound of Music* screenings, the Festival scene seldom rarely triggers much initial singing, confirming the diminished situation of the performances there. The earlier, first version of "Do Re Mi" mentioned above, *always* gets loud, excited participation from singalong crowds, who wave small props or costume parts that accompany all the notes of the song. (Another reason singalong audiences may hold back at the Festival is because the songs themselves are more intricate here, played in fragments, with more complex harmonies and counterpoint than when the children had performed them before.) But if "Do Re Mi" and later, "Farewell" incite less participation at the Festival, other moments generate plenty of acoustic involvement. When the agitated guard rushes back into the amphitheatre at the end of the scene, for instance, crowds typically join him and call out, "They're gone!" The guard is immediately accompanied by a musical stinger—taken from "So Long, Farewell"—so recognizable now that singalong audiences often hum or sing along to it. In fact, the 2013 Academy Awards Ceremony used that very stinger to introduce presenter Christopher Plummer, who tried to joke off the weariness of it all.

As the film keeps nudging *us* to notice and experience the fear at the outset of the Festival setting, its internal audience appears remarkably unaffected. Also, and further unlike us, they are experiencing the Trapp family songs for the first time—with the exception of "Edelweiss," which apparently everyone in Austria knows. So at the beginning of the Festival, our feelings seem to line up with the family's and not the audience's. Even if this is our first time watching *The Sound of Music*, we know that the family's fate hangs in the balance; and again, we share the Trapps' familiarity with their numbers. The film audience to whom they sing knows neither of those things. Thus, despite our similarity to that audience for watching the family perform, we are

also an audience watching another audience, part of but different to it. That formulation starts to shift as the scene progresses. As it does, the imperative to "singalong" emerges.

If the scene's visual dynamics serve to remind film audiences repeatedly of the menace faced by the family, its acoustics, importantly, move to reassure us. Consider the thunderous applause of Festival-goers after the family concludes its numbers or their surprised, horrified murmurs of "No" when Max announces that the Captain will soon be joining the Navy of the Third Reich. These sounds establish that the Festival audience, like our own, is rooting for the Trapp family, and begin the work of drawing us closer together.

Our role as audience members meshes even more fully with theirs at one pivotal moment in which dialogue and music together usher in a sense of shared community. It occurs when the Captain takes the guitar to begin his solo of "Edelweiss." It's his fate, of course, that charges the scene with its anxiety. Before starting the song, he faces his audience to say: "My fellow Austrians, I shall not be seeing you again, perhaps for a very long time. I would like to sing now for you a love song. I know you share this love. I pray that you will never let it die."

"Edelweiss" had packed plenty of emotional power the first time Georg performed it, since it underscored the moment when this strict military father had finally softened and returned both to music and family. Associated with his late wife, who had sung the song at home, it emerged from so long ago that only his eldest child, Liesl, could join in. Thus in its first iteration, "Edelweiss" was a nostalgic tribute to a domestic home and family. The Festival, however, extends "Edelweiss" 's sense of "homeland" to an even larger family, a group of "fellow Austrians" positioned on the good side of nationalist fervor. This group—like Liesl, her siblings, their stepmother, and us—are now familiar with this fictional folksong. And whether *Singalong* audiences participate vocally or not here (and they usually do, much to my irritation), it's supremely easy for us to participate *emotionally*.

"Edelweiss" was the last number composer Richard Rodgers and lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II wrote for the Broadway musical, composing it for singer Theodor Bikel's von Trapp while the show was still in tryouts. The pair successfully imbued it with the appearance of unpretentious simplicity. Its steady, 4/4 rhythm, requires a relatively limited vocal range, and the number is performed slowly, introduced (in the film) both times by a lone acoustic guitar. During the Festival, the Captain's reprisal is initiated with respectful silence: there is minimal ambient sound, it is just him and the guitar. Visual signs tighten that focus, with Christopher Plummer, now in medium close up, spot-lit against an ill-defined black background, making nothing worth watching except his performance. Curiously, the plaintive voice of Plummer (actually, dubber Bill Lee) gleams its emotional strength through its very weakness. When the character himself is overcome and unable to sing, vocal superstar Julie Andrews /Maria saves the day by picking up where his voice trails off, beckoning the children to accompany them, as if this had been the plan all along. The Captain, brought back to his senses, then waves to the audience to join him, to support him, in a moment that anticipates *The Sound of Music's* unexpected after-life as a singalong phenomena.

Cynics might say that the process saves fictional figures like the Captain and actual audience members alike from going over an emotional edge by redirecting the scene's sense of emotional peril and sentimental excess into one of vague relief. "Edelweiss" the sentimental solo becomes "Edelweiss" the group effort, a statement of hopeful, collective expression, a sing along for a cause as well as for pleasure. That success is evident in subsequent cuts to Zeller, whose irritation now render him impotent and foolish.

As "Edelweiss" moves from solo to singalong, the soundtrack is quick to thicken its texture, adding extra recorded voices, including several children's voices. Similarly, its orchestration becomes fuller, moving subtly at first by adding strings to the Captain's guitar and finally to more elaborate instrumentation including a xylophone fanfare that unabashedly highlights the triumph of the musical moment. More pragmatically, the fuller orchestration also provides background in which a single voice (say, of an audience member bereft of much singing talent) might hide or mingle.

Thus, and in spite of not being the *Singalong Sound of Music's* most effervescent musical highlight, the Festival scene is most unambiguous in actually asking us to "singalong." Carefully worked out through the acoustic means described above, the scene demonstrates that *The Sound of Music* was already becoming the *Singalong Sound of Music*, twenty-five years *avant la letter*.

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Notes

Portions of this material taken from my forthcoming *The Sound of Music*, British Film Institute "Film Classics" Series (London: Palgrave Press, 2015).

[1] Desiree J. Garcia. *The Migration of Musical Film: From Ethnic Margins to American Mainstream* (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 199.