



Victorian  
Opera



# SUNDAY

IN THE PARK

WITH GEORGE

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EDUCATION RESOURCE  
MUSIC

## SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE

### *A masterpiece comes to life*

In 1884, a twenty-five year old French Impressionist named Georges Seurat began work on *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*, an idyllic park scene that would eventually become an icon of late 19th century painting.

*Sunday in the Park with George* is a joyous musical theatre retelling of a visionary artist's creative process. Seurat's much-loved painting comes to life, revealing the lives and loves of its subjects, and exploring the 'art of making art' across generations, from 19th century Paris to 20th century Chicago.

Following its Broadway opening, legendary conductor Leonard Bernstein declared it 'brilliant'. A year later *Sunday in the Park with George* won the Pulitzer Prize for drama.

Sunday in the Park with George | Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine  
 20 – 27 July Playhouse, Arts Centre Melbourne

Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim.  
 Book by James Lapine.

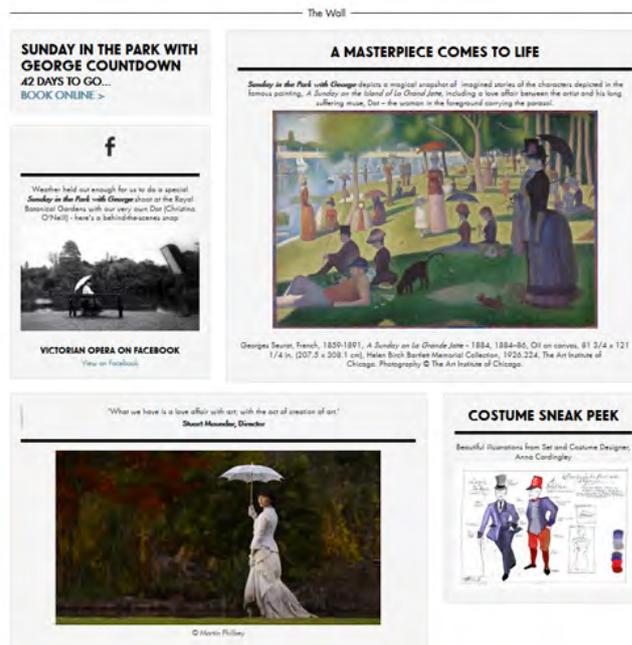
Originally Directed on Broadway by James Lapine. Originally Produced on Broadway by The Shubert Organisation and Emanuel Azenberg.

By arrangement with Playwrights Horizon, Inc. New York City which produced the original production of *Sunday In The Park with George* in 1983.

By arrangement with Hal Leonard Australia Pty Ltd Exclusive agent for Music Theatre International (NY).

## WHAT TO EXPECT BEFORE, DURING & AFTER YOUR OPERA EXPERIENCE!

To gain the most of your opera experience it is highly recommended to study the work, discover its inspiration, learn about the composers and explore the main themes. The following educational resources will provide you with information about the work, what to expect during your opera experience and post opera reflection. Most of the information is included here in the pre-visit exploration section can be re-visited during and after the opera experience. Visit our [interactive Wall online](#) for historical facts, behind-the-scenes, photographs and more!



## BACKGROUND

### *The making of a masterpiece*

#### Sunday in the Park with George

Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine

Broadway Musical

Opened Booth Theatre, 2<sup>nd</sup> May, 1984 ran for 604 performances

10 Tony Nominations

Pulitzer Prize in 1985, only the sixth musical to receive that honour

#### Stephen Sondheim (1930)

Stephen Joshua Sondheim is possibly one of the greatest composers and lyricists in American Theatre. His career spans almost 60 years and he has collaborated on 19 musicals, many which have been performed globally. Sondheim's accolades include eight [Tony Awards](#) including the Special Tony Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Theatre, an Academy Award, many [Grammy Awards](#), a [Pulitzer Prize](#) and the [Laurence Olivier Award](#).

#### James Lapine (1949)

Three times Tony Award recipient, James Lapine is a stage director and librettist. His major collaborations have been with Sondheim and William Finn (1952).

#### Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine Collaboration

This was Sondheim's first collaboration with James Lapine. When deciding on a topic, they first looked at photos to see whether they could invent relationships, but later abandoned this idea. They then came up with an inspiration for art and used George Seurat's painting, *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* (1884). The painting and the mystery surrounding it fascinated them. They were 50 people in the painting as well as trees, a dog and a yacht. Sondheim speculated why no one was looking at each other and James said what was missing from the painting was the protagonist, the painter. That formed the basis of the musical.

## PRE-VISIT EXPLORATION

### *Sondheim's Compositional Style*

When Sondheim researched the painting style of Seurat, he discovered that he arranged only 12 colours on his paint palette which comprised 11 colours and white. Inspired by this information, Sondheim initially explored the 12 tone technique as exploited by the Serial Composers of the Second Viennese School, namely Schoenberg, Berg and Webern. This technique abandoned the traditional 'tonal' technique with the major and minor scales systems and created a new scale where the 12 semitones in the octave could be arranged in a new order according to the composer's inspiration. However, after consulting with his mentor Babbitt, Sondheim came to the realisation that he was indeed a tonal composer and abandoned this approach. To imitate Seurat's Pointillist painting technique, he adopted a musical language for this musical which was highly rhythmic, disjointed and staccato.

To hold the score together, Sondheim created motifs which he introduced in the opening sequences, and in songs throughout the musical. Tonic and dominant harmonies are used frequently which are designed to reflect the complimentary colours in Seurat's painting. Romantically inspired sweeping melodies and legato phrases are not used until finale "Move On" which acts as a synthesis of melodic and harmonic styles found throughout the musical.

## Themes

The themes Sondheim uses here are a departure from his previous musicals which have focused on marriage and class inequalities. *Sunday in the Park with George* focuses on the inner life and creative process of an artist to the extent that this work has been described as the most autobiographical work of Sondheim. The work of the artist becomes an obsession to the extent that the artist and his life become secondary to his output. The perception and value of the artist is also a reoccurring theme in the musical. This is contrasted between the two acts.



Figure 1: Georges Seurat, French, 1859-1891, *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* - 1884, 1884-86, Oil on canvas, 81 3/4 x 121 1/4 in. (207.5 x 308.1 cm), Helen Birch Bartlett Memorial Collection, 1926.224, The Art Institute of Chicago. Photography © The Art Institute of Chicago

## TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

- Study the painting [A Sunday on La Grande Jatte](#). Note how all 50 characters are static and are not looking at each other. What clues are there that the painting was completed in the nineteenth century? Try to predict story lines of each character and how they interrelate or not interrelate with others. Look at the use of colour, light and the fashions of the time.
- Listen to excerpts from *Sunday in the Park with George*. The songs can found on [YouTube](#). Songs to listen to include; "Sunday in the Park with George", "Color and Light", "Finishing the Hat" and "Sunday". In Act Two "Putting it Together", "Children and Art" and "Move On". Note the use of staccato phrases when George is painting and repeated motives such a "Finishing the Hat" and "Putting it Together".
- Sondheim has used different compositional approaches with each of his musicals. Listen to his musicals written prior to and after *Sunday in the Park with George*. Recommended songs include "The Ballad of Sweeney Todd" from *Sweeney Todd* (1979), "Not a Day Goes By" from *Merrily We Roll Along* (1981) and his other collaboration with Lapine "Opening Sequence Act One" from *Into the Woods* (1987). Compare the range of topics selected for the musicals from the dark tale of *Sweeney Todd*, a story of friendships in *Merrily We Roll Along* and a fairy tale inspired musical in *Into the Woods*.
- *Sunday in the Park with George* has been described as inspired by the styles of Benjamin Britten (operas), Leos Janacek (use of interlocking motifs) and Sergei Rachmaninov (the finale "Move On"). Listen to music from these composers and discuss whether there are striking similarities to the musical.
- Carl Jung described in *The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature* how one "can be understood as an artist only in terms of his creative achievement". To what extent does the life of the artist impact their creative output?

## ***Motifs***

The musical uses a series of motifs which act as a unifying thread. The principal motif is introduced in the opening sequence. It is an ornamental turn followed by an interval of a minor third or a fourth. Similar motifs are found in “Color and Light” and in Marie’s song “Children and Art” where the motif is inverted. The motifs used in “Finishing the Hat” and “Putting it Together” are almost identical.

### **Act One – “Finishing the Hat”**

This is one of the most popular songs from the musical. The song describes Seurat’s inner struggle between Dot who has just announced that she is leaving him, and his obsessive need for painting. When Sondheim collaborates with librettists, he requests them to write the inner dialogues of the characters so that Sondheim can further and refine his melodic and compositional style. The dialogue is a series of incomplete phrases and thoughts.

*Studying the hat,  
 Entering the world of the hat,  
 Reaching through the world of the hat  
 Like a window,  
 Back to this one from that.*

*Studying a face,  
 Stepping back to look at a face  
 Leaves a little space in the way like a window,  
 But to see-  
 It’s the only way to see.*

The song has been described as autobiographical. There was an instance when Sondheim went to a coffee bar with the music director Paul Gemignani and sang “Finishing the Hat” which is the story of Sondheim’s life. “So by the time he was finished he was drenched in sweat, completely dripping. It wasn’t at all hot in there. He was terrified, just terrified.” (Secrest, 199, p.333)

Prior to its opening on Broadway, the musical was work-shopped for three weeks with Playwrights Horizons. When it was first presented, Mandy Patinkin who played George was still reading the score. According to Patinkin, the reaction by the audience was overwhelming “And the audience quickly realized it was *the* song, and in my view it’s the best one in the show, and one of his keynote songs ever...” (Secrest, 1998 p.332)

## **QUESTIONS**

- Listen to the song. How does Sondheim vary the motif in each phrase?
- How does Sondheim treat words such as ‘hat’, ‘see’ and ‘window’ in terms of pitch, melodic phrasing and duration? Why do you think he does this?
- Listen to the opening sequence. How does the motif change with each new word or phrase?
- Compare the motifs in “Finishing the Hat” and “Putting it Together”. What is the small difference between these two motifs?
- In “Color and Light” and “Children and Art” does Sondheim use word painting? Which words are high or low in pitch? Which words are repeated?

### Act Two - "Putting it Together"

This is the longest song in the musical, taking up almost a fifth of the score. It describes the frustrations and pressures of an artist working in the contemporary art scene. Art is now treated as a business and the artist has become a servant to the financiers rather than their own creativity and expression.

"Putting it Together" is also one of the most popular and enduring songs Sondheim has written. It was used in an advertisement for the Xerox Corporation for over six years. It is probably best known outside the musical by Barbra Streisand's *The Broadway Album*. Streisand recorded seven of Sondheim's songs and used "Putting it Together" as her opening number. She was a highly successful singer at that stage, but was attracted to that song as it reflected her own relationship with her record company. When she approached the record company, they said, "Barbra, you can't do a record like this. It's not commercial. This is like your old records. Nobody's going to buy it." Every word they said only encouraged me. I wanted to put all their comments into this song. And I thought, "What a great way to open this album." (Zadam, 1989 p. 289) Streisand contacted Sondheim to request changing one word "lasers" in which Sondheim suggested "vinyl". Over the course of a month, they ended up rewriting half the song to make it more personalised. Streisand commented, "Here I am, a very successful recording star and yet I have to fight for everything I believe in. I'm still auditioning after twenty-three years." I asked him if he could encompass that thought and he wrote, "Even though you get the recognition/Everything you do is still audition." (Zadam, 1989, p. 289)

### QUESTIONS

- Listen to "Putting it Together". Listen to the phrasing. Why does Sondheim have some words sung slowly such as "bit by bit" and other quickly such as "putting it together?"
- The melody "Art isn't easy" is legato in contrast to the rest of the song. What impact does this have on the words and its message?
- Do you believe the words are an accurate reflection of the contemporary art and music industry?
- How does George's attitude towards art differ here to his grandfather in act one?
- Listen to Barbra Streisand's interpretation. How different is it to the original?

### **DURING YOUR OPERA EXPERIENCE**

Before the performance, make sure you are familiar with the plot. Reacquaint yourself with the characters and the songs. During the performance, note the size of the painting and how it looks in 'real life'. Has this production followed the conventional costumes, lighting and scenery? Listen to the music and how it blends with the singers. Take note of the audiences' reaction around you, what emotion they are sharing with the performers, and how the performers respond to the audience. Most importantly, enjoy the performance and all it has to offer.



Figure 2: Christina O'Neill (Dot) © Martin Philbey

## POST- VISIT REFLECTION

After the performance, reflect on what you have experienced. Also discuss this with your peers. What did you like best about the performance? Who was the most memorable performer? What surprised you? If you were a critic for a newspaper, what would you write? Below are the critics' responses. Remember that this was premiered over a quarter of a century ago. Do you think their responses would be different if it was premiered in 2013? Read the critics' responses and review the questions below.

### Critic's Response

There was a mixed response by critics. The musical was innovative and creative yet at the same time extremely reflective and personal. "Jack Kroll in *Newsweek* stated how "Sondheim's score is original even for him...To say that this show breaks new ground is not enough; it also breaks new sky, new water, new flesh and new spirit." (Zadan, 1989, p.313) *Time* magazine commented, "*Sunday in the Park* stands before its audience... a cool, unblinking object. Only a closer look reveals it as a shapely object of art." (Screst, 1998, p.341)

And Frank Rich in the *New York Times* wrote:

*Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine demand that an audience radically change its whole way of looking at a Broadway musical...[they] have created an audacious, haunting and in its own personal way, touching work...The protagonist is possibly a double for Mr. Sondheim at his most self-doubting. ...In keeping with his setting , Mr. Sondheim has written a lovely, wildly inventive score that sometimes remakes the modern French composers whose revolution in music paralleled the post-Impressionists' in art... Look closely at the canvas – or at Sunday in the Park itself – and you'll get lost in a sea of floating dots. Stand back and you'll see that this evening's two theater artists, Mr. Sondheim and Mr. Lapine, have woven all those imaginative possibilities into a finished picture with a startling new glow. (Zadan, 1989, p.313)*

Later, Rich, in a *New York Times Magazine* piece followed on to say:

*Sunday is at once a culmination of past musical theater innovations and a rejection of them... Sunday is a watershed event. (Zadan, 1989, p.313)*

### QUESTIONS

- Has the critics' responses altered your perception of the work?
- What is the role of a music or art critic? How influential are they?
- Has the work broken new ground in musical theatre?
- Would you expect an opera company to approach the work differently to a theatrical group?

*With thanks to Dr Sharon Lierse for the research and preparation of this resource pack.*

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