

British Theatre Guide

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The Sound of Music

Music by Richard Rodgers, lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II, book by Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse

London Palladium
(2006)

Jeremy Sams' revival of *The Sound of Music* is irresistible. OK, it is at times unbearably twee with its fairy tale values but that is part of the charm, as Maria and friends win you over with a wholesome overdose of feelgood.

Everyone wanted to know whether new Welsh star, Connie Fisher (no relation I assure you) was the real thing after her victory in the *How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?* reality TV show sponsored by Lord Lloyd Webber. This assured new star proves herself several times over following her initial song (the title one) delivered as she perches on what looks like a grass-covered flying saucer.

She sings confidently and tunefully, is a fine, humorous character actress who strangely brings to mind Joyce Grenfell and Maureen Lipman with her ungainly cheerfulness; and, like Julie Andrews, exudes unlimited goodness in the role of Maria Rainer.

As a singer, she cannot compete with Lesley Garrett as The Mother Abbess, the beauty of whose soprano voice has been lauded in the great opera houses of the world. Every time she opens her mouth, one's heart lifts.

The impressive thing here is that she is given her moments, especially with "Climb Ev'ry Mountain" to close both halves, but does not otherwise drown out her colleagues, who include a top class team of choral nuns.

The rosy-cheeked Maria soon gets her marching orders from the nunnery for being too normal. She is foisted on a Von Trapp family boasting in the hunky Alexander Hanson a father who only joined the main cast around a week ago following the unceremonious replacement of the original choice.

The Austrian Naval Captain has his work cut out with a massive castle and seven delightful children to run - like a team of sheepdogs responding to his strident whistling.

He is on the lookout for a new bride and with the comic help of Ian Gelder as unscrupulous impresario Max, is introduced to Lauren Ward's Fraulein Schraeder. She is very rich, very blonde but lacks the high-minded principles of a man who will stand up to the Nazis alone, even at the risk of his family's health and happiness.

Having won over the children with a series of happy songs, young Maria instantly, like a serious case of global warming, thaws their frosty father. She is the only one that doesn't immediately realise her conquest and needs a little help from her tiny, truth-telling, Cassandra of a future step-daughter Brigitta, Caroline Riley.

After the briefest of hiccups, Maria becomes a bride in the show's most beautiful scene, courtesy of Robert Jones whose sets are lavish if not always overly robust.

The happy couple return from their honeymoon to Anschluss (or occupation). Their great escape is as unlikely as the film of that name but will leave few theatregoers without a lump in the throat and tear in the eye.

Eventually they are saved by the only good Nazi in town, conveniently the man who earlier on had been the recipient of Liesl's "I am Sixteen Going on Seventeen" love poem. This suffers a little since Sophie Bould in the part may sing well but is older than the actress playing her stepmother and might better have gone for the lesser-known song "I am Sixteen Going on Twenty-Five".

The minor criticisms should not be allowed to detract from what will be a popular family night out, particularly with devotees of the film. Not only are the stars great, the team of children on show were fantastic, especially when singing songs such as the semi-yodelled "Lonely Goatherd". They will provoke "ahhhs" by the thousand, especially the youngest pair, on this occasion Molly May Keston as Marta and Alicia Gould as Gretl (eight and seven respectively) who dance and sing like tiny pros.

Overall, that feelgood factor is overwhelming, Lesley Garrett is a joy but we knew that already and, overnight, Connie Fisher proves herself a ready-made star in a role for which the producers had originally attempted to cast Scarlett Johansson.

Add in music that Lord Lloyd Webber suggests "may be the greatest popular score ever written" and containing so many catchy songs that everyone knows and loves before they even get to the theatre and there is no doubt that *The Sound of Music* is back to stay.

Robert Tanitch [reviewed](#) this production when Summer Strallen took over as Maria

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Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)