

Come On and Hear

Stepping out with Irving Berlin at OFAM

Five-year-old immigrant arrives in strange country with his destitute family, drops out of school at age 14, declaring his intention to live by his music, teaches himself to play piano — but only on the black keys. First gig: accompanying a blind street singer. After a spell of couch surfing, he scores a breakthrough mega-hit, loosely based on African-American rhythms largely unfamiliar to white folks. A year later, however, when he's 24, his 21-year-old wife succumbs to typhoid fever contracted on their Cuban honeymoon.

Over the six decades after his wife's death in 1912, the star of that up-from-the-street tale, Irving Berlin, continued to churn out songs (about 800), movie scores (18) and musicals (19). The Siberian cantor's son was one of the first to put American music on the world stage. His music dominated the American soundtrack of the first half of the 20th century, but the music was soon surpassed in sophistication and ambition by Cole Porter, Harold Arlen and George Gershwin, his lyrics by Larry Hart and Ira Gershwin, and his aesthetic by the rise of rock, R&B and soul. More than other pioneering Tin Pan Alley songwriters, Berlin was shoved aside by the stylistic evolution of the great American popular music explosion that he ignited in 1911 with that first hit, the still-irresistible "Alexander's Ragtime Band."

We seldom hear any but Berlin's most prominent creations. That makes his music ripe for revival, and this year, tributes to Berlin are happening at Lincoln Center and the Library of Congress, at museums in Pennsylvania, San Francisco and New York — and at this summer's Oregon Festival of American Music Aug. 1-12 at the Shedd and the Hult Center.

Although Berlin could compose only in

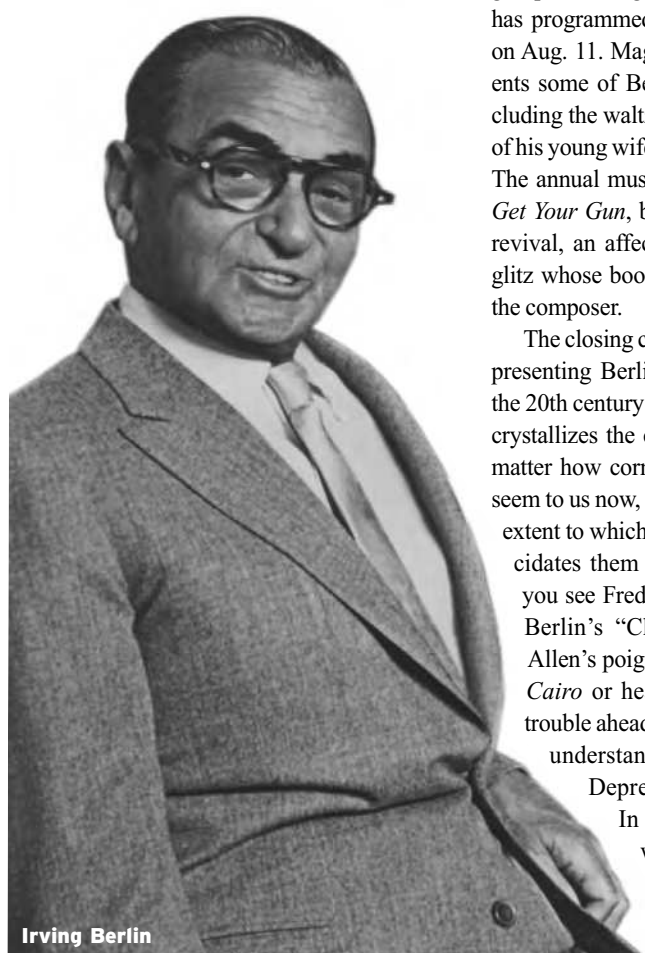
one key, he established the formula for composing catchy songs: "Easy to sing, easy to say, easy to remember and applicable to everyday events." He regarded songwriting as a craft, helped create a profitable and lucrative business model for creators and even codified nine rules for writing pop songs.

But Berlin's greatest legacy lies in the incontestably immortal tunes ("Let's Face the Music and Dance," "Blue Skies," "Change Partners" and more) that will be wafting through cabarets and clubs as long as people crave memorable melodies. Children may not listen for sleighbells in the snow anymore, but their parents still hear "White Christmas" every December.

Unfortunately, we too often hear his songs in soggy lounge lizard versions, stultifying medleys and oversimplified reharmonizations. So it's welcome to see OFAM bring its thoughtful, historically informed appraisal to Berlin's music. In performances, lectures, films and other presentations, OFAM will try to rescue Berlin from neglect and shoddy interpretations. This year's festival includes a trio of bona fide Irvingologists: author Robert Kimbell, singer/author Ian Whitcomb and acclaimed standards interpreter Maude Maggart. Music director Dick Hyman, who knows the American songbook as well as any performer alive, has again called on his coterie of New York musical veterans (like the great clarinetist Ken Peplowski), some of Eugene's finest musicians and OFAM regular Maria Jette to render Berlin's songs with the respect they deserve.

The opening night sampler at the Hult Aug. 3 is a good way to get a sense of what's in store. Jazz fans will appreciate the afternoon small-combo show Aug. 4, while everyone should enjoy that evening's musical display, with music composed by a remarkable group of immigrants. Commendably, OFAM has programmed a concert of Berlin rarities on Aug. 11. Maggart's Aug. 10 concert presents some of Berlin's finest early songs, including the waltz ballad he wrote in the wake of his young wife's death, "When I Lost You." The annual musical is Berlin's classic *Annie Get Your Gun*, based on the 1999 Broadway revival, an affectionate send up of showbiz glitz whose bootstrapping heroine resembles the composer.

The closing concert at the Hult on Aug. 12, presenting Berlin's music as a reflection of the 20th century's most compelling moments, crystallizes the case for his significance. No matter how cornball some of his songs may seem to us now, history judges an artist by the extent to which he reflects his times and elucidates them for later generations. When you see Fred Astaire dancing and singing Berlin's "Cheek to Cheek" in Woody Allen's poignant film *The Purple Rose of Cairo* or hear him sing "There may be trouble ahead" as World War II looms, you understand how Berlin's music gave Depression-era America hope. In that sense Irving Berlin will always be the music man of early 20th century America. **EW**



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