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***The Music for “Victory at Sea”: Richard Rodgers, Robert Russell Bennett, and the Making of a TV Masterpiece*, by George J. Ferencz. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2023 [review].**

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Book Review

The Music for "Victory at Sea": Richard Rodgers, Robert Russell Bennett, and the Making of a TV Masterpiece, by George J. Ferencz. Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2023.

x, 385 pp. ISBN 9781648250620 (cloth). \$125.97. ISBN 81800109575 (Ebook). \$29.95. Index, bibliography, appendices.

As scholarship, and particularly scholarship on musical theater, has expanded and deepened into previously unknown territory, a series of niche publications have appeared over the last few years. The present volume under discussion—*The Music for "Victory at Sea,"* by George Ferencz, is one such example. Ferencz has written previously (published by the University of Rochester Press) on the Broadway orchestrator and arranger Robert Russell Bennett;¹ this book is something of a follow-up to that work, concerning Bennett's involvement in scoring and conducting music for an NBC series in the 1950s on World War II.

Very well referenced and researched, this study takes the reader from the beginnings of a television series called *Victory at Sea* to the music that was composed, rather surprisingly, by Broadway legend Richard Rodgers. Lovingly documented, this book not only tells you everything you would want to know about this particular series (which lived on for a long while in syndication), but also about the fascinating and important work of Broadway orchestrators and film composers. Richard Rodgers, best known for his musical theater masterworks, seems an odd choice for this television program, yet his imprimatur imbued the series with a luster that it might not have without careful choice of soundtrack. Indeed, the producers did not want any traditional sound effects (guns going off, etc.) but wanted all to be told by the NBC Orchestra, then one of the top orchestras in the country, and conducted by the arranger, Bennett. For those who are not familiar with the workings of Broadway, composers did not during the Golden Age (and after) orchestrate their own works. They composed at the piano, and professional orchestrators took over the orchestration of the music. This included sometimes composing music associated with various songs for dance breaks, etc. The lack of an overall *Gesamtkunstwerk* approach to

1. "*The Broadway Sound*": *The Autobiography and Selected Essays of Robert Russell Bennett*, ed. George J. Ferencz (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2001).

Broadway composing has been one of the things that has left it less respected by some traditional repertoire musicologists, as it seems the composer has only done “half” of the job of composing the piece.² However, even experienced orchestral composers like Leonard Bernstein handed off the duties of orchestration for *West Side Story*, indicating detailed orchestration preferences. This was simply the only way that works could be composed, rehearsed, and performed in the short time periods of this era.

Rodgers’s contribution to the series was a well-publicized 13-hour score that was compared at the time to the length of the *Ring* cycle, and even made it into the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the longest symphony ever created. Ferencz presents the many citations of this feat, but reminds us in his analysis that Rodgers really wrote about twelve “tunes” that were woven by Bennett into various scenes in the series. Ferencz provides the piano-score examples of these themes, so readers of the book would have to have some score-reading ability to make sense of them, since the author does not comment particularly on the examples as music in the earlier chapters.

The book is divided into two parts: the first provides the history and context for the series in the early days of television, Bennett’s and Rodgers’s contributions and also those of writers, producers, and the NBC itself. This makes for very interesting reading, as the rise of television was threatening the movie industry while, at the same time, television was trying to provide high-art and quality programming experiences for what were the equally high-income earners who could afford television sets. The second part of the book is an episode-by-episode guide to the music and film of each of the twenty-six segments, an analysis of sorts that is organized by time stamp on the recordings rather than by measure numbers, which would not be useful to any reader who didn’t have a score in front of them. In each episode synopsis Ferencz also provides other films that have related content to the episode and important dramatic and musical features.

The chapters show a great attention to detail. In episode 18, for instance, there is no music by Rodgers, but by Bennett alone. The chapter begins with a summary of what historical details were covered in the episode, the general narrative of how the episode unfolded, and exactly what source material (non-musical) was used. Here (in case you thought this was a low-brow or middle-brow television series), Goethe’s *Faust* is quoted as well as communiqués from the relevant parties about the battle. And, in case you thought this was just a review of Rodgers’s contributions, Ferencz discusses the postlude by Bennett in thorough detail. Identifying it as a sonata-form movement, the author traces with tempo designations the three parts of the form, what instruments and themes are being employed in each part, and how these relate to the time stamp on the recordings. This is not just an interesting historical record of a television series: this is real musicology when you are not expecting real musicology. At the end of the chapter (which is eight pages long) there are

2. *West Side Story* was orchestrated by Sid Raman and Irwin Kostal.

notes on the recording, and then two pages of piano-score musical examples. This is certainly—if even the only—definitive text on this music.

In short, this is a very sophisticated and exhaustive study of the music, background, and context for this remarkable series and its aftermath in film versions, the recording experience with the NBC Orchestra, and its commercial release on LP. Certainly no stone has been left unturned here. The only drawback to this study is who would use this book and for what. The television series is available on DVD, and presumably interested readers could follow along the episodes with the book in hand. However, a wider audience is a little harder to ascertain outside of historians. Still, this is an important part of the historical record, of the work of Bennett and Rodgers (two giants of Broadway) and for that reason alone it should have an important place in the scholarly canon.

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