

## [Dietze on Scott, 'German Operetta on Broadway and in the West End, 1900-1940'](#)

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**Derek B. Scott.** *German Operetta on Broadway and in the West End, 1900-1940*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019. 392 pp. \$96.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-108-48458-9.

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Transnational music history has grown into a lively and inspiring field of research. Many of these studies, especially those focusing on the era before music recordings became ubiquitous, also contribute to urban history by offering insights into urban public spheres and cultural exchanges across city networks. While the transnational circulation of opera and concert music has attracted much of the attention, the study of “lighter” forms of musical entertainment is increasingly coming into focus.

Derek B. Scott’s recent book on the cultural transfer of German operetta to the entertainment districts of London and New York City is situated at this intersection of urban and music history from a transnational perspective, combined with the social history of cultural producers and the analysis of emerging cosmopolitan musical genres. It is the result of the European Research Council-funded project GOLNY (“German Operetta in London and New York, 1907-1939: Cultural Transfer and Transformation”) that was based at the University of Leeds from 2014 to 2019. The book sets out to overcome notions of twentieth-century operetta as an old-fashioned and marginal genre, especially in the Anglophone world. It is an essential contribution to a growing number of studies showing that operetta was, in fact, more successful, transnationally mobile, and connected with modern, cosmopolitan city life than previously acknowledged.

The monograph offers rich insights into the “silver age” era of operetta (as opposed to the nineteenth-century “golden age”). This era started in 1907 with the astonishing international success of Franz Lehár’s *The Merry Widow*. The study covers thirty years of cultural transfers of German operettas to some of the major Anglophone stages. Scott clarifies that when he writes about “German” operetta, he means this in a wider sense, referring to works that were usually first presented in a German-language version in Vienna or Berlin. Their creators were born in Germany, Hungary, Bohemia or Moravia, and many of them were Jewish. Their works were then translated into English and brought to the stages of Broadway and the West End, often in heavily adapted forms.

Scott’s book makes an interesting contribution to existing research that has for a long time focused more on the way that cultural metropolises like London, Paris, or New York City have served as places of innovation and as exporters of modern urban culture. Such studies have also shown that transatlantic cultural flows gradually changed direction and American cultural trends started to make their impact in Europe, especially since the 1920s. Against this background, however, Scott focuses

on London and New York as places of reception, emphasizing the ongoing importance of bilateral transatlantic exchanges while further exploring the culturally hybrid character of modern urban entertainment and the relevant role of ethnic and linguistic minorities in these cities.

The book is divided into two large sections, the first dealing with the production, the second with the reception of operetta. The first chapter jumps right into an analysis of the musical style of operetta, discussing many examples of musical scores. While it does not exactly offer a smooth entry into the book for all readers who are not music specialists, this starting point rightfully emphasizes that the music itself forms the basis of operetta's transnational success and therefore cannot be neglected in a study of inter-urban cultural transfers. In his musical analysis Scott lays the groundwork for the book's main argument, namely that silver-age operetta was an inherently cosmopolitan genre, especially suitable for transcultural circulation and reception. The music incorporated a mixture of styles and cultural influences, such as dances from different parts of the world (from waltzes to the cakewalk and tango), as well as influences of jazz and gypsy music, and so on. From there, Scott takes the readers through the adaptations that were made to bring these operettas to new audiences. Scott frames this as a cultural transfer but does not engage with the field of cultural transfer studies. Instead, he introduces the term "transcreation" (p. 55) to underline that these were not just translations of the libretti into English, but the changes affected plotlines, characters and dramatic structure, costume, and stage design, and even included the interpolation of new musical numbers, adding to the remarkable flexibility of the genre.

The next two chapters outline the operetta business as a "transcultural entertainment industry involving cross-border financial and production networks, international rights management, and migrating musicians and performers" (p. 89). This industry boomed in the years before the First World War, as increasingly interwoven production networks between New York City, London, and the metropolises on the European continent emerged. They relied upon professional intermediaries like agencies and translators, mobile actors like traveling stars and visiting entrepreneurs, but also permanent structures like the German theaters in New York City that catered to the large immigrant community, or Broadway entrepreneurs like Augustin Daly or the Shubert brothers who were operating their own theaters in London. This first part is enormously rich in material and anecdotes, which are often laid out thematically without broader interpretation or contextualization, and thus require a well-informed reader.

It is in the second part (starting on p. 161) that Scott provides most of the historical background and conceptual framework of his study, so some readers might find it more convenient to start reading the book from here. This section begins with describing the massive international success of *The Merry Widow* that launched the international popularity of operettas from the German stages, and analyzes audiences, the wider market for musical entertainment, and reactions by critics and public authorities. Scott shows that German operetta exports were not substantially cut short by the First World War. To the contrary, there was a resurgence of interest in German operetta that lasted well into the 1930s, and Berlin became the new center of German operetta production. While the war and the Great Depression each led to serious crises in the rapidly expanding, transnational business, a sharp and lasting decline of operetta could be observed only in the mid- to late 1930s. National Socialists in Germany persecuted Jewish artists and producers and thus largely destroyed the basis for operetta production and its transnational connections. Meanwhile, competing musical entertainments such as screen musicals, radio, and dance halls were on the rise, while a new form of

jazz-oriented Broadway musical (à la Gershwin) ushered in a new cultural dominance in New York City and London.

Scott then deals with intermedial transfers, underlining that the operetta industry came to play a central role in the entertainment industries of the first half of the twentieth century. While based on theater performances and music publishing, this genre extended into many other fields of cultural production, such as fashion, recording and dance, merchandising, and star culture. In the remaining chapters, he further elaborates on the strong relation that twentieth-century operetta had with modern city life, integrating and representing new technologies, elements of consumer culture, shifting gender relations, and so on. He also spells out the elements that contributed to the cosmopolitan character of operetta and made it so suitable for consumption by culturally and socially diverse metropolitan audiences. He specifically refers to operetta's origin in multinational and pluricultural Austria-Hungary, and its strong reliance on diasporic connections, cultural mediators, and transcultural production networks.

While the author does mention the differences in the reception contexts—the large number of German immigrants in New York City, and the stronger reservations toward German culture after the First World War in London—his narrative often blurs the two urban contexts. What is missing in the end is a concise comparison of the reception processes in London and New York. While it is clear that the strong similarities of city life in the European and North American metropolises made the emergence and transfer of genres like the operetta possible, we are still lacking a more systematic understanding of why only certain cultural elements were suitable for wide transnational circulation, and how cosmopolitanism and modern lifestyles developed differently across cities, making the mediation and adaptation practices that were so convincingly outlined in the first part of Scott's book an essential component of the cultural transfer process.

Scott's book is based on archival work in Vienna, Berlin, London, and New York. He generously provides a wealth of material for researchers who want to expand on his research. Six appendices, spanning sixty-five pages, give detailed information about the German- and English-language operetta productions, with additional lists of screen adaptations and recordings. The book contains about fifty images, tables, and examples of musical scores. The website of the project (<https://golny.leeds.ac.uk/>) is still available and offers even more material, such as libretti and program booklets. The book will be of value for anyone interested in the history of the entertainment industries and of inter-urban cultural transfers in the first half of the twentieth century, and provides a fresh take on the cultural history of transatlantic exchanges.

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