

Stephen Schwartz: Wicked Good Composer



Stephen Schwartz has written music and/or lyrics for some of the best-loved musical productions of the last 30-plus years, including *Godspell*, *Pippin*, and animated features *Pocahontas*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, and *The Prince of Egypt*. His work has earned him three Academy Awards, four GRAMMYs*, and four Drama Desk awards to date. We spoke to him recently about his latest hit, the musical *Wicked*, which is currently touring 22 U.S. cities in addition to its ongoing run at Broadway's Gershwin Theatre and Chicago's Ford Center for the Performing Arts/Oriental Theatre.

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What's the process for putting together a musical like *Wicked*?

A Broadway musical takes about five years from conception to opening. That's a fairly conservative estimate, but that's pretty much what took place with *Wicked*. I might do some musical sketches when I first know I'm going to do a project, but I tend not to start writing until at least some of the book has been written, and that doesn't happen until we've worked out the structure. Once that's in place, song-spotting occurs. Then I try to realize those specific songs.

How do you determine where songs should be placed?

There's a kind of instinct as to what should be musicalized, and at what point it feels like the story wants to sing. It's usually a point of high emotion or a significant event. Sometimes it's a comedy moment. Sometimes you want to take a whole section of the story and tell it through song and choreography. We have a long sequence in *Wicked* called "Dancing through Life" which encompasses several scenes and little vignettes.

How is a song for a musical different from a conventional pop song?

They perform different tasks. Generally speaking, the job of a song in a musical is to move the story forward, so the character or story is in a different place at the end of the song. In contrast, a pop song tends to describe a static emotion. Pop songs also depend more on repetition—a chorus gets repeated over and over, for example. Part of the point of a pop song is to be as catchy as possible as quickly as possible. If you take a giant pop hit like, "I Will Always Love You," it's basically that line repeated over and over. Songs for musicals tend to carry more narrative responsibility.

Do you write at the piano?

I have a Yamaha Disklavier in my studio, which has been very useful to me in recent years when I'm putting together the songs. It serves two functions: I write on it—and if I'm playing something and want to remember it, it serves as a kind of tape recorder. I can play something and save it, so I don't have to write things down yet.

Then when I'm actually doing the transcription, usually I'll play the song on the Disklavier and export it into a transcription program on the computer. I much prefer to play on a real piano rather than a MIDI keyboard—I feel I play the song differently, and better. The Disklavier captures the nuances of what I play, details I might want to include in the final score. So the Disklavier is a great tool in terms of getting the show prepared, writing the music and disseminating it. And it's such a flexible instrument in the orchestra pit. It gives you so many more possibilities than either an acoustic piano by itself or a MIDI piano by itself.

What is the orchestration for *Wicked*?

There's a total of 23 musicians in the Broadway orchestra, including keyboards, guitars, bass, drums, percussion, harp, strings, brass, and woodwinds. The touring orchestra incorporates more electronics and slightly fewer musicians. Of course, the first keyboard part in *Wicked* is specifically scored for the Disklavier. We use it because it's able to act as both a regular acoustic piano and a MIDI instrument. With the Disklavier, there are things you can do in terms of sound that you can't do with any other instrument. It can have no sound of its own, or be just the piano, or a combination of those things, which is extremely effective.

Do audiences expect different things from musicals than they used to?

In a strange way, I don't think audiences come with expectations. Critics come with expectations. [Laughs.] Audiences come because they want to have an experience. They want to be told a meaningful story that moves or amuses or excites them or makes

them think. They may want to see something extremely funny, or see great dancing. The kinds of shows I do tend to be about emotion and content, and I don't think that's changed over the years. That's what people have always gone to the theater for, and always will.

Stephen Schwartz with the Broadway cast of *Wicked*: from left, Schwartz, Ben Vereen, Megan Hilty, Phillip Spaeth and Shoshana Bean.

