



EDELWEISS



“Edelweiss” has been referred to by some as the best song Rodgers and Hammerstein ever wrote. The marvelous singer, actor on stage and film, and folk singer, Theodore Bikel (1924-2015) created the role of Captain Georg von Trapp in the original Broadway cast of *The Sound of Music* (opened November 16, 1959), with music by Richard Rodgers and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein, II. Bikel died on July 21, 2015, in Los Angeles, and his obituary appeared in *Variety* that same day, containing the following statement: “... right before ‘The Sound of Music’ was to open on Broadway, Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote the song ‘Edelweiss’ specifically for him to sing and accompany himself on the guitar.” The following story, however, appears in *Wikipedia*, Theodore Bikel, (retrieved 8/14/2024):

In 1959, he created the role of Austria-Hungary Empire naval Captain von Trapp in the original stage musical production of *The Sound of Music*, which earned him a second “Tony” nomination. Bikel did not like his role because his ability to sing was underused; neither did he like performing the same role of the captain repeatedly. When the famous longtime musical composers, Rodgers and Hammerstein, realized Bikel was an accomplished folksinger, they wrote the song “Edelweiss” (purporting within the story to be an Austrian folk song) specifically for him to sing and accompany himself on the guitar.

The citation for this statement is the obituary from *Variety*. The inference from the article, which may be unintentional, is that because Bikel thought his talent was underused and because he did not like performing the same thing night after night, R&H wrote the song for him. This inference is not correct. Edelweiss was among the songs sung on opening night of *The Sound of Music* and was not added later. By opening night, Theodore had played the role only eight times in the New Haven tryout and about 32 times in Boston, for a total of 40 times. Bikel could well have complained about not liking to perform the same role night after night, but that was much later. According to *Wikipedia* (retrieved 8/14/2024), “In his autobiography, he writes: “I promised myself then that if I could afford it, I would never do a run as long as that again.”¹

¹ Bikel, Theodore. *Theo: The Autobiography of Theodore Bikel*, Univ of Wisconsin Press, 2002, p. Z-17.

His singing talent doesn't seem to have been terribly underused as he sang in eight of the 18 songs in the show. But none of these was the reason the song was written. R&H could well have written the song especially for him once they learned that he had been cast in the role.

Richard Rodgers, in his autobiography, *Musical Stages* (Random House, NY, 1975, p. 300), wrote:

Oscar was too sick to go to New Haven for the first tryout stop, but he did get to Boston to write the lyric for a melody that Von Trapp sang as an expression of his love for his homeland. "Edelweiss" was the last song Oscar and I ever wrote together.

From Frederick Nolan's, *The Sound of Their Music – The Story of Rodgers & Hammerstein*, Unwin Paperbacks, London, 1979, pp. 219-220:

.... Rodgers was unhappy with the final sequence. He felt that Theodore Bikel needed a solo in the scene preceding the finale, in which the children slip offstage one by one in a reprise of their party piece 'So Long, Farewell' and begin their flight to Switzerland. Unusually for him, Rodgers came up with the melody before Oscar had given any thought to a lyric for the spot. Bikel learned to play it on the guitar while they waited for words to fit it. Rodgers remembered how it happened: "Oscar was sick and couldn't come to the tryouts in Boston, and I felt that Bikel needed another song. In the plot there was a concert and I wrote a tune that Bikel could play on his guitar and sing. Then Oscar finally got up to Boston and I played the tune for him. He agreed Bikel should have it and he wrote the lyric". The name of the song was "Edelweiss." The last one that Oscar Hammerstein wrote.