

LINCOLN
CENTER

presents

American Songbook

sponsored by Omnicom Group Inc.

Wednesday Evening, February 8, 2006, at 7:30 and 9:30

Eric Comstock The Music That Makes Me Dance: A Jule Styne Songbook

featuring BARBARA FASANO

SEAN SMITH, *Bass*

VITO LESZAK, *Drums*

*This evening's program is approximately 70 minutes long and
will be performed without intermission.*

Steinway Piano

Major support for *Lincoln Center's American Songbook* is provided by
Richard L. Fisher.

***This performance is made possible in part by the Josie Robertson Fund for
Lincoln Center.***

The Allen Room, Frederick P. Rose Hall
Home of Jazz at Lincoln Center

Notes on the Program

by Barry Singer

For most of his 50 years on Broadway Jule Styne kept an office atop the Mark Hellinger Theater. It was a mysterious backstage aerie nestled deep inside Broadway lore and musical comedy legend, where the composer of *Gypsy*, *Funny Girl*, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, *High Button Shoes*, *Bells Are Ringing*, *Do Re Mi*, and *Hallelujah, Baby* (among many others) transacted his business. By office standards the space was modest—though Styne himself was anything but. His inner sanctum was a wedge-shaped cave of a room with a low, wood-beamed ceiling. A tiny window overlooked West 51st Street. There was a wide desk opposite the narrow doorway and a handsome art deco standup Steinway was jammed into one corner. Framed photographs were everywhere: Merman (“To Jule—From Your Greatest Admirer—With much love!—Ethel”), Streisand, Jerome Robbins, Sondheim. A letter from a royal lady-in-waiting hung near the desk, thanking “Mr. Styne” in January 1962 for letting Princess Margaret and the royal family know that a London preview of *Gypsy* had been postponed.

“Anytime I wanted to hear somebody I’d take them right downstairs to the Hellinger stage,” Styne liked to say. “Judy Holliday learned a lot of *Bells Are Ringing* in my office. Ethel Merman came up, Carol Channing, Barbra Streisand, Mary Martin, Bert Lahr, Dolores Gray, Phil Silvers, Nancy Walker. There was always a congregation of people around. In fact, it sometimes stopped me from getting my work done. They’d all sit and order corned beef and have a ball.”

Jule Styne could tell a story. His melodies, similarly, spun fabulous tales. He was a fabulist—not merely a veteran, but an icon of the show business, who loved to talk about himself as if he *were* the business. He had made it big in Hollywood, he’d made it big on the *Hit Parade*, often writing for Frank Sinatra, and he’d made it big on Broadway. The record more than backed up the bluster. Even his back story was larger than life. Born Julius Stein in London, December 31, 1905, he’d been a piano prodigy—a child soloist with symphony orchestras, following his family’s emigration to Chicago when he was eight.

In Chicago he’d also discovered jazz, playing around town with dance bands, including in 1926 Ben Pollack’s Californians—a group that, at the time, included Glenn Miller, Charlie Spivak, Fud Livingston, Gil Rodin, Jack Teagarden, and a teenaged Benny Goodman. Styne’s first song was written that year; to impress a girl, he claimed. With a lyric ghosted by Irving Caesar (writing under a pseudonym, according to Styne), the song, “Sunday,” went on to sell more than 500,000 copies of sheet music. Still, Styne did not yet consider himself a songwriter full-time.

He landed in New York around 1934, finding steady work as a vocal coach while also conducting Harry Richman’s Lux Radio Show orchestra. It was the vocal coaching that got him summoned to Hollywood, where he helped train singers, from Alice Faye and Tony Martin to Shirley Temple, for Twentieth Century-Fox. He arranged and composed background soundtrack music for Republic Studios, scribbled cowboy songs for Gene Autry and Roy Rogers, and finally broke through, writing “I Don’t Want to Walk Without You,” with Frank Loesser.

His teaming with the lyricist Sammy Cahn in the early 1940s sealed Styne’s future in song. Together they turned out so many hits—“I’ll Walk Alone,” “I’ve Heard That Song Before,” “I Fall in Love Too Easily,” “Time

After Time," "It's Magic"—that Sinatra virtually commandeered them. By the time Styne returned to New York more or less for good, around 1947, his fortune in Hollywood had long since been made and he was ready for phase two: the conquering of Broadway.

This he accomplished with an array of superior lyricists and scores filled with more hit tunes—commencing with Cahn (*High Button Shoes*: "Papa, Won't You Dance with Me?" in 1947), then proceeding to Leo Robin (*Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*: "Diamond's Are a Girl's Best Friend" in 1949), before finally settling in for the long-term with Betty Comden and Adolph Green for at least eight musicals, from *Two on the Aisle* in 1951, through *Hallelujah, Baby* in 1967, with 1956's *Bells Are Ringing* in between. He stepped out spectacularly for a one-time partnering with a very young Stephen Sondheim in 1959 to create what many consider to be the perfect Broadway musical: *Gypsy*. He also wrote a handful of shows with the lyricist Bob Merrill, of which *Funny Girl* for Streisand in 1964, was by far the most successful.

Tonight—while of course singing more than a few of Styne's countless hits—Eric Comstock, hopes to "honor the less famous bits, at both ends of Jule Styne's career;" the early, pre-Broadway period when Styne turned out many excellent songs for mediocre movies, and some of the beautiful Broadway scores he wrote after *Funny Girl* that were not hits, like "Darling of the Day," with its fine Yip Harburg lyrics. "To me," says Comstock, "Jule Styne deserves mention alongside Richard Rodgers as a master theater melodist. He was a perfect balance between keen dramatist and audience-pleaser. Though he is typecast as a 'brassy' songwriter, I feel he was among the most romantic of the great melodists, with his heart always right on his sleeve. I also admire him for taking a professional risk in leaving the studios and fighting for artistic control of his music."

Certainly, Jule Styne was fearless. He relished grand gestures and thrived in the vortex of the 11 o'clock number, devising "Rose's Turn"—the mother of them all—with Sondheim for *Gypsy*. He also had an unexpectedly tender touch with a ballad, a touch more torchy than pensive perhaps, which was perfectly in character. "I write big," he conceded toward the end of his life in his little office above the Hellinger. "Not a lot of people know how to do that anymore. I always did."

—Copyright © 2006 by Barry Singer

Meet the Artists

Eric Comstock



BILL WESTMORELAND

Pianist, vocalist, arranger, writer, and raconteur **Eric Comstock** has just concluded a 16-month run in *Singing Aitaire* at the legendary jazz club Birdland. He now adds the role of acclaimed recording artist to his success as an entertainer. His third and latest CD, *No One Knows*, is a refreshing mix of standards and rarities by Duke Ellington, Benny Carter, Stephen Sondheim, and other masters of pop and jazz. The title song is a Billy Strayhorn song being given its premiere recording. Mr. Comstock is backed by an all-star jazz ensemble that includes Frank Wess, Wycliffe Gordon, Eric Reed, Peter Bernstein, Peter Washington, and Matt Wilson.