

FINE AND DANDY

BY KAY SWIFT & PAUL JAMES
WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING

STARRING

ANDREA BURNS

MARIO CANTONE

CAROLEE CARMELLO

GAVIN CREEL

MARK LINN-BAKER

JENNIFER LAURA THOMPSON

DEBORAH TRANELLI

AND

ANNE KAUFMAN

SPECIAL PERFORMANCES BY

ANN HAMPTON CALLAWAY

JACK DONAHUE

NATALIE DOUGLAS

JESSICA MOLASKEY

& JOHN PIZZARELLI

CONDUCTED BY

AARON GANDY

"ALL THE WHEELS GOING 'ROUND"

Divorce *Fine and Dandy* from its tragi-glamorous, Gershwin-to-Swift-to-Warburg romantic triangle antecedents and what have you got?

A decidedly displaced, lightheaded 1920's musical comedy that found itself kicking off the 1930's on Broadway playing to audiences just absorbing the Stock Market Crash and girding for what would prove to be the Great Depression.

A knockabout star vehicle for a now-forgotten but at-the-time hugely popular baggy pants comedian named Joe Cook.

A gender-busting breakthrough by Kay Swift into Broadway's all-male fraternity of musical theater composers: a feminist milestone that seems to have gone entirely unremarked upon by the theatrical pundits of *Fine and Dandy's* day.

The show opened at Erlanger's Theatre (today, the St. James) on West 44th Street, the evening of September 23, 1930. Brooks Atkinson, the *New York Times'* usually level-headed chief drama critic, actually wrote of *Fine and Dandy's* star: "Next to Leonardo da Vinci, Joe Cook is the most versatile man known to recorded time." Largely due to Cook's hyperbolic presence, *Fine and Dandy* wound up one of the biggest hits of the 1930-31 Broadway musical season, right behind *Girl Crazy*, which was written, of course, by Kay Swift's paramour, George, and his brother Ira.



SWIFT & WARBURG

Beyond these tantalizing morsels of fact (along with a bonus bit—Hollywood tap legend Eleanor Powell appeared in the show's original cast, as Miss Hunter), *Fine and Dandy* has remained mostly a musical myth, more spoken of than heard.

Until now.

Listening to the score in its entirety for the first time, we hear music by Swift that fulfills all the conventions of its era with lyricism ("Can This Be Love?"), insouciance ("Let's Go Eat Worms in the Garden"), and melodic memorability ("Fine and Dandy"). We hear lyrics by Swift's husband, James Warburg (a.k.a. Paul James), that are often delightfully clever ("*Sing high, sing low/We live among the machinery/We see no natural scenery*"), witty (every bonus chorus of "Fine and Dandy"), and always extremely well-crafted ("*Starting at the bottom/It's tougher to suffer/With no-one to show one/The surest way to make good*").

Musically, the Gershwin influence is surprisingly restrained, with "Machine Shop Opening" striking the most overt blue notes and syncopations. Swift's voice as a tunesmith, while not yet distinctive (she was, after all, a relative beginner), is impressively polished and defiantly unpredictable, from the requisite period dance number, "The Jig Hop," to the requisite period collegiate chorale, "Fordyce," right through the delirious torchiness of "Nobody Breaks My Heart." The most nifty piece of writing may well be Swift's sweetly contrapuntal "Wedding Bells," acidly ornamented by Warburg's sentiment-free lyrics. ("We are dressed in organdy," sing the bridesmaids, "the symbol of our chastity/These dresses we'd never choose them/For you can't use them/Anymore.")

Fine and Dandy was a Broadway musical that chanced to fall on the cusp of transition. It may have opened in the 1930's but its rhythmic sense is Charleston-drenched and its story, though set in and around a factory, cannot escape suggesting some standard-issue Roaring Twenties "high society" musical locale. While the show's book (by the left-leaning satirical novelist and future blacklisted screenwriter Donald Ogden Stewart) tip-toes toward social satire in its pointed mistrust of corporate management, its bottom line message (verbalized in an early number, "Rich or Poor") anticipates the onrushing Depression with words of economic uplift: "You may not have money/Still the future's sunny."

If the team of Swift and Warburg are remembered at all today, in terms of musical theater, it's for their collaboration on *Fine and Dandy*. Their accomplishment, however, has long been obscured by the cuckoldling presence of Gershwin. With this disc, *Fine and Dandy* is at last returned to Mr. and Mrs. Warburg, along with the diverse handful of lovely songs they wrote together prior to that show (including, without question, their finest, the bittersweet, eerily self-defining "Can't We Be Friends?")

In the end, with so many behind-the-scenes personal questions left unanswered, *Fine and Dandy* stands illuminated. Is it a great musical? You decide. Is it an eminently worthy one that deserves our attention?

Yes. Even now.

—BARRY SINGER, MARCH 2004

Barry Singer has written regularly about music and theater for *The New York Times*. His latest book is "Ever After: The Last Years of Musical Theater and Beyond" (*Applause Books*).

