

Prairie U-U Society, April 28, 2002
"Cole Porter - His Life and Music"

Musical Prelude — Michael Briggs

Welcome — Erin Bosch

Chalice Lighting — To Linda Porter, Cole's Wife — Warren

1. "Anything Goes" — Choir, led by Barbara Park

Children Leave for Religious Education

Joys and Sorrows — Erin

A. Today we will hear some of the songs of Cole Porter and about his life. Doleta asked me what is religious about these often naughty songs, and his naughty behavior, that justifies this presentation. I can start off with two points.

First, listen to the lyrics, which often are, in their way, about morality. One of the most common mistakes in ethical thinking is that to be more means following rules, like those Moses brought down from Mount Sinai. That doesn't describe human ethical behavior. Trying to reduce ethics to rules does harm; much evil has been done by the good and the just, those rule followers. So — "Anything Goes" is a positive moral statement. Of course, it isn't true that **everything** goes. Moral ambiguity is a normal state of affairs, and many of the lyrics are about this. Cole was probably thinking about ~~this~~ relationship with Linda when he wrote "I'm Always True to You Darling — in My Fashion."

The second point invokes the U-U principle about the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Cole Porter was very wealthy, often part of the idle rich. Not only us left-wingers but most Americans tend to condemn the idle rich for much the same reason ^{that they} as their condemnation of the welfare poor; they don't work for a living. You might agree, but you should still respect their worth and dignity as persons.

B. Cole Porter was born in 1891 in Peru Indiana. His grandfather was the richest man in the county. His mother was generally permissive but made him practice the piano, which he complained about. He wrote his first composition by age 10. When he was 14 he was sent to a boarding school in Massachusetts, and he went on from there to Yale, where he wrote fight songs and a musical comedy. He developed some lifelong friendships there, and his friends included sons to the wealthiest men in the country. After doing about nothing in Harvard Law School, he went on to Broadway, with his first musical there in 1916. It isn't clear what he did in WWI, whether an ambulance driver or in the French Foreign Legion; he probably spent most of the war on the boulevards of Paris.

After the war he went back to Broadway.

In 1919 Cole married Linda Lee Thomas, a beauty who was several years older. She had inherited much wealth and had married in 1901. Her husband was quite abusive and she divorced

him, walking away with a settlement of more than \$1 million. She probably wouldn't have married a heterosexual again, but with Cole she didn't have to worry.

From 1919 to 1928 Cole and Linda lived mostly in Europe, moving from palaces in Venice to Florence to Paris. Essentially no musical comedies were produced. They had parties with royalty and the wealthy, but it wasn't exactly the life of the idle rich. In 1920 he studied music in Paris with people like Darius Milhaud, and Linda tried to get such acquaintances of hers as George Bernard Shaw to write opera librettos for him.

Our next number comes from a successful 1930 musical, "The New Yorkers." For many years censors kept it off the radio. I don't think they listened to the lyrics, or especially the music.

2. "Love for Sale" — Paula Pachciarz and Carl Wacker. (1930)

In the 1930s Cole wrote many of his most wonderful Broadway musical comedies, ~~that~~ most of us are familiar with from the movies. The next number comes from the start of the period.

3. "Let's Misbehave" — Dan Proud and Doleta (1927)

The next number might be about some of his friends and acquaintances.

From the Philadelphia story — High Society, Frank Sinatra & Celeste Holm

4. "Who Wants to Be a Millionaire" — Rosemarie, Dean, and Doleta

Another moral from the life of Porter is that you don't have to be Jewish to write successful Broadway musicals. But in 1926 he told Richard Rogers, "I'll write Jewish tunes," and Rogers said that this Midwestern Episcopalian millionaire wrote the most enduring Jewish music. (Rogers was no musicologist, and maybe what he heard was the French influence.) Many of Porter's most enduring songs were written in the minor key, like this next one.

5. "In the Still of the Night" — Kate Skog and Doleta (1937)

Cole had ~~a number of~~ ^{several} close homosexual relationships. Usually he would try to have the guys become friends with Linda, and usually he would maintain a correspondence with them long after they broke up. He could write some rather corny love letters to them. His real passions show up in his lyrics. Relationships do end.

6. "Just One of Those Things" — Rosemarie Lester and Doleta (1929)

From 1935 to 1939, actually to the end of his life, Cole spent much of his time in Hollywood. Linda hated it, and she usually stayed in a mansion they had bought in the Berkshires. Cole could be rather promiscuous, especially with dancers and with soldiers during WWII.

In 1937, ^{Cole} went horseback riding on Long Island. The skittish horse he selected shied and

fell on him, breaking both of his legs with compound fractures. The bones became infected (osteomyelitis). In those days before antibiotics it persisted. He was in pain to the end of his life, enduring repeated operations.

He continued to write and had some successful musical comedies. But for several years before 1948 he hadn't done much and was considered pretty much washed up. In 1947 he was persuaded to start work on a musical based on "The Taming of the Shrew." After many efforts to get financial backing, it was produced in 1948. After the tryouts, all of the quotations from Shakespeare were dropped, but his spirit is still in the show. *almost*

The following number is sung by a couple of gangsters.

7. "Brush Up Your Shakespeare" — Dan Proud, Rick Owens, Warren, Mike Briggs

The next number could have been sung by Linda to Cole, although they're his lyrics.

8. "Why Can't You Behave" ---- Doleta, Peter Micke, and Mike Briggs

Linda died in 1954 after a long illness. (Both she and Cole were heavy smokers, and she had emphysema.) In 1958 ^{Cole is} the Osteomyelitis required an amputation of his right leg. He seems to have lost his desire to live. Although he invited his friends to dinner, he didn't talk. He held on to 1964, when he died.

"Kiss Me Kate" was his best show, but it was followed by others, and "Can-Can" in 1953 was pretty good. Our final number is from that show. It again refers to moral ambiguity. It isn't so easy to distinguish right from wrong.

9. "It's All Right with Me" — Anne Urbanski and Mike Briggs

Introduction of Guests and Visitors
Prairie Announcements

Reprise: "Anything Goes" — the Choir and the Congregation (lyrics on reverse)