At Play in America's Attic: Rick Benjamin's Quest for a Lost Age of Musical Theater

BY ROBERT SCHULSLAPER

Rick Benjamin drives a Model T and is lovingly restoring the Victorian house he and his family share with antique parlor clocks, multitudes of gramophones, wax cylinders, and 9,000 scores and arrangements for silent films and a style of musical theater that enjoyed its heyday during the years between 1890 and the early 1920s. True time traveler that he is, Rick doesn't limit himself to faithful recreations of America's earlier theatrical legacy, but is completely immersed in his chosen era, surrounding himself and the Paragon Ragtime Orchestra—the ensemble he created to bring this irresistible music to life—with every genuine accoutrement available, from historically correct costumes to original instruments. His lively, seemingly inexhaustible enthusiasm for his calling suggests that he's channeled the plucky optimism of that earlier, perhaps more innocent time, and his orchestra delivers its repertoire of energetic or sentimental numbers with all the charm and vitality that must have characterized the initial performances. Having learned the story that launched his career, it's tempting to think that fate played a hand in casting him in a staring role as a crusading musical historian.

"The upshot of it was that I had been working in New York as a teenager, actually doing things professionally as a brass-player. I was playing with the American Symphony; this was in the early 1980s. I bumped around the city for a couple of years and then got my scholarship and decided to go to Juilliard. I went there a little bit later than most people did; I was 20 when I started. In my second year, I had an operation to remove my wisdom teeth, and somehow my jaw was broken and I was left sitting there with the prospect of having six months not being able to play. I really couldn't do much of anything, I couldn't even talk, which some of my friends from that era recall as The Golden Age (laughter). I sat in the corner with my mouth wired. Nobody could get a sound out of me, and they liked it. So, I was looking for things to do and I remembered tales that my grandfather had told me. He was a professional musician, a violinist and a saxophone player, a common double in the 1920s. He played in theater orchestras with his violin and he played the saxophone in the summertime with Arthur Pryor's concert band. When I was a little kid, he would tell me these great stories of working in show business, silent movies and things, and then playing for Pryor.

"So when I had my injury I thought, 'I need something to do.' I was always interested in the early days of the recording industry. In fact, even as a little kid I was collecting wind-up phonographs and Edison records, and—you know—wandering around, trying to listen to these sounds of the early 1900s. So I thought, 'Well heck, while I'm on the mend here I'm going to invent this project and write about Arthur Pryor,' who was one of the first recording artists as conductor for the Victor Talking Machine Company. In the process of doing lots of interviews and wandering through library stacks, I encountered a couple of people who actually knew Pryor, and one of them told me about a collection of Pryor's music that still existed. When I say Pryor's music, I mean the library of orchestra stuff that he had accumulated as a conductor and performer, not necessarily his compositions. Sometimes that confuses people. He also wrote quite a bit; he had a number of great hits like *The Whistler and His Dog*. So I found all this stuff and didn't know at the time what I was looking at, but it was a combination of manuscripts, orchestrations, as well as published pieces, all of it rare. Anybody you could think of. There were about 700 different composers in this collection. And I brought it back bit by bit to Juilliard and just for fun, really, started reading these arrangements with my friends, with myself as conductor. We started out, honestly, as a kind of a fun thing to do, just honk through some tunes and maybe go out and have a beer. But we ended up being so struck by the quality of the music in every way—and the construction of these orchestrations. The care that these people took with what was supposed to be, even at that time, total ephemera. You play this piece for a couple of runs for this show, cut it out and go on to the next thing. But yet you made sure that your

counterpoint was pure and going in the right direction.

"There was such quality to that and there was so much thought that went into it that we decided to create a regular ensemble to read this material, to explore it, and to try to conserve it. With that in mind, I went to one of the deans there, asked to do a concert, and was told 'No.'"

Juilliard obviously wasn't ready for Rick Benjamin.

"Well, they had and still have this particular image they're projecting. As I've told other people, it's their ball field, so they can do whatever they want (chuckling). But you know, I signed out the hall for a tuba recital, left the doors open, and ended up having a nice crowd of people who were just drifting by. And that's how we met Thomas Frost [a record producer best known for his work with Vladimir Horowitz and Glenn Gould]. Although he wasn't at the performance, it created such a hubbub in the days afterwards—people talking about it and about me getting yelled at (laughter)—that his ears perked up and he got involved very early on. He came on board and said, 'Look, I love what you're doing here and I'd like to produce some recordings of this.' So I showed him some of the arrangements. This was in 1985, a long time ago. I think we made the first one in 1986. Tom produced our CDs until he eventually went over to Sony, and then I took over as producer for a while. Finally, in 2003, after quite a series of records—I think there were probably eight or nine by that point—New World Records hooked us up with Judith Sherman (Grammy winning producer). The Cohan CD is the fifth thing she's done for us, so we do like her a lot. Anyway, that's how it happened. We started making a CD and then—I guess it's sort of a backwards way of building a career—we started getting calls for concerts at universities. I think the first one was at the University of Iowa. They came to me and said, 'Listen, we've got your CD of such and such, could you come out and give a lecture about your discovery, bring the orchestra along, and then give a concert in the evening?' So, by 1988, when we gave our New York debut, that had become a full-time job."

This interview was scheduled to coincide with the latest Paragon Ragtime Orchestra release, "You're a Grand Old Rag: The Music of George M. Cohan" (New World Records 80685). Although many people know his most famous songs, *Over There*, *The Yankee Doodle Boy*, *You're a Grand Old Flag*, *Give My Regards to Broadway*, *Harrigan*, *Mary's a Grand Old Name*—and memories of James Cagney's movie impersonation linger, Cohan is not always appreciated as the titan he was. "He was 'the Compleat Man,' as they used to say, of the American theater. He was even, anonymously, famous as what they call a play doctor. If you had a musical that was faltering, and if he were free and you could get him to come look at it, he would tell you how to fix it. He did a lot of directing of other people's shows, too, and a lot of producing. When Cohan and Harris (Sam Harris, Cohan's business partner) were at their height, they had just dozens and dozens of shows."

The scale of his activities is mind-boggling, and not only as an author, director, or producer.

"That's the thing. You look at that schedule and wonder how he did anything, or as much as he did. They say he had zero family life. He had three or four kids and a wife, but they never saw him. I've learned a lot about his multiple roles through reading reports of his contemporaries and coworkers. He was a playwright extraordinaire; he wrote all of the lyrics and music for his shows; he choreographed them; he was the star dancer—everybody in the world of show business wanted to dance like George Cohan; he was the top guy. He was a brilliant director and directed even serious plays; he was a brilliant comic and dramatic actor; he was working with Eugene O'Neill on these very serious melodramas from the 1930s; he was a producer of extraordinary perception; he was also a theater owner with seven large theaters to his name.

"Here's a man who could sit down—I mean, Irving Berlin said, when they were working on *The Cohan Review of 1918*, that they needed a fortuneteller's song for act I, and Cohan's sitting there smoking a cigarette backstage, he looks at Irving and says, 'Hey kid, who wants to do it?' And Irving Berlin says, 'Well, Mr. Cohan, it's your review, maybe you should do it.' So, Cohan grabs a sheaf of manuscript papers and slumps off to this upright piano there, bangs on it for about 20 minutes, comes back with 'Eyes of Youth.' I mean, who can do that, go out and star in the show and hold an audience of 2,000 people? This is a guy from a sort of a vanished world of show business that is compelling. Before we made this recording, no one had actually done a serious study of Cohan's musical output. He's known as an icon of entertainment, show biz with a capital B, but no one had gone back and taken a look at his original material, done an analysis, and tried to present everything in a historical manner. For about a year I collected every Cohan tribute recording that came out, there were at least 100 of them, and they were horrendous: they were all commercial projects designed to cash in on the fame of this old guy."

Not only were people in awe of his creativity, he was revered for his kindness.

"He was a beloved figure. There are some wonderful stories. He was a famous philanthropist, walking up and down Broadway dispensing $50 bills in 1900, when that was big, big money. There's a true story, recounted several times, of Cohan at the Lambs Club. Out-of-work actors used to sell magazine subscriptions when they were down on their luck, and this elderly actor came into the club and tried to sell one to Cohan. And Georgie said, 'Well, how much kid, how much?' And the old guy says, 'Oh, it's two dollars and fifty cents.' And Cohan says, 'I'll take one,' and he writes him a check and folds it and puts it in his pocket. The old guy gets on the sidewalk, pulls it out, and it's for $10,000. And this is 1908 or 1909, something like that. The guy was just beloved for his philanthropy. Mike Lake [one of Cohan's orchestrator/arrangers], in his book *Great Guys: Laughs and Gripes of Fifty Years of Show-Music Business*, relates he was conducting—Mike was conducting,—*The Mary Malones*, which was a 1927 Cohan musical, and one of the guests in the orchestra room was this local parish priest who was starting a band in his church. Cohan liked to hang around in the orchestra room with everybody and smoke cigarettes before the show, and Mike Lake introduced Cohan to this priest and said, 'You know, Father so and so's trying to put together a band for the kids over there at Saint whatever, and the next day this truck pulled up in front of the church with a load of band instruments. And they were equipped, and that was it. He was a great guy."

Fascinating and endearing as Cohan's achievements and personality are, Rick's evangelical zeal also extends to other composers and genres.

"The Paragon Ragtime Orchestra and I have got several different plates in the air. First are the live performances, which are concerts of all description: ragtime, early jazz, and blues. So much incredible stuff was happening back then, so our concerts are a mixture of things. We'll play three or four Scott Joplin pieces, and then move around to other composers who were really famous at that time but that you don't know about today. Whoever heard of F. Henri Klickmann? He was a million-selling composer, with hits like *Knockout Drops* and other great instrumental rags. The point is that this is a whole unremembered world of American music that needs somebody out there playing it—and people respond to it. It's an era that is so seminally important to the development of American music and one that for reasons that I can't fathom is not looked at enough.

"Then there's our silent film practice. We accompany many silent-film screenings around the country, and we've just released a DVD of *The Mark of Zorro* starring Douglas Fairbanks, for which we performed the score. In the CD recording realm, our last release was the music of Joe Jordan, who, to describe him in one sentence, was the man Scott Joplin wanted to be. He was a successful, rich, black composer/songwriter/pianist in the early 1900s. He's a man who made millions doing that and who bought real estate and built a giant office building in Chicago. He's the man that Scott Joplin followed around trying to figure out how he'd done it. Because Joplin, really, in his own lifetime wasn't all that well known, and was living in close to the edge of poverty. Our previous production from New World, "Barrelhouse to Broadway" (New World Records 80669), is devoted to Jordan's music. That's what the Academy [the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences] gave Judith the Grammy for. It's a great disc and it's got another 40-page booklet from yours truly [the length of Rick's essay for the Cohan CD before it was trimmed to 30 pages].

"The next big thing for Paragon is recording my reconstruction of *Treemonisha*. The original orchestration, choreography, staging, all that stuff, was accidentally thrown away after Scott Joplin's death, but when Joplin made his posthumous breakthrough in the late 1960s, everybody was scrambling around to produce *Treemonisha*. And to do it, of course, you have to orchestrate, you have to come up with staging and the whole thing. And this was done several times, the best known one with the Houston Grand Opera. But the thing was, rather than approach this—let's call it a fragmentary Scott Joplin work from the historical perspective—the Houston Grand Opera and these other organizations just said, 'We're going to mold this to fit our modern production values: we need a chorus of 50 and an orchestra of 45 and sets 75 feet high.' What I'm saying is, in order to produce it, they grotesquely altered the work. *Treemonisha* was intended for production in small neighborhood music halls with an 11-piece orchestra and a chorus of maybe 15 or 16 people. It was like a musical sketch, really. And done that way, which is correct according to Joplin's notes and other things, it's a charming, lovely little intimate work. It's about an hour and 10 minutes long; it was never intended to be done as Verdi, the music was too light and springy to make it work. So I've come up with a reconstruction; I spent five years on it. I've got a number of arrangements that he had submitted himself. These became my template. None of these things, these arrangements and other things that I used to come up with my version, were known to these other folks in 1970. These were new discoveries, hence the new version. It would have worked in about 1911 or 1912, had Scott Joplin found a producer for it.

"We also have a recording, "Black Manhattan" (New World Records 80611), that's devoted to

The Clef Club, a black group from the early 1900s run by a fellow named James Reese Europe [a famous composer/pianist/orchestra leader of the time]. The Clef Club was where Sissle and Blake came together in about 1914 or 1915 [Rick hopes to record their landmark show, *Shuffle Along*, someday]. The Clef Club kind of came apart when James Reese Europe was murdered in 1919 at a concert of his band. He was having an argument backstage with his drummer and the drummer stabbed him. He didn't die right away; he was driven to Boston General Hospital, but because he was black he wasn't seen to and he bled to death. That's how things were in those days."

Such callous indifference is tragic, but the attitude behind the racial stereotypes flaunted in the songs of the time was more complex than we acknowledge from our "enlightened, politically correct" perspective. I asked Rick what he thought of the frequent use of potentially inflammatory terms in the songs of the day.

"It was intended to be derogatory, but it was a time of much less sensitivity of any kind of ethnicity. I could show you what we would consider equally offensive song references to Italians, to Irish, Jewish, or Russian people, American Indians, you name it. Interestingly, the African-American music of the 19th and early 20th century paraded all the now taboo words before the public without the slightest inhibition, quite the opposite, actually. They were creating popular art and weren't worried about ethnic slurs. It definitely wasn't the way we'd perceive things today."

On a lighter note: in the introduction, I mentioned Rick's collection of gramophones and other vestiges of early audio technology. These are not purely for show or collected out of nostalgia, but are working reminders of the ceaseless experimentation of the medium's pioneers. Rick helps to keep the old traditions alive by recording cylinders with his orchestra and broadcasting the results for the public's enlightenment and entertainment.

"There's a fellow on Long Island named Peter Dilg who has great expertise, and he's the man who runs the recording division of the Edison National Laboratory at the National Park Service. The orchestra and I have actually gone over there sometimes and made wax records on Mr. Edison's machinery. If you have a moment, I have a two-minute machine and one of our cylinders. When you get tired of me gabbing, I'll play the record." This was an offer I couldn't refuse, and it was great fun to hear a contemporary group reproduced in this old-fashioned format. The Paragon Ragtime Orchestra rips through *Alabama Jubilee* with foot-stomping panache; it was recordings like this that thrilled music-loving Americans at the turn of the 20th century. The only audible defect was an introductory static hiss that I thought was inevitable, but that's a misconception, as Rick explained. "That hiss is only endemic to the duplicates of the master. The original master doesn't have any noise at all; it's perfectly pure. This is an actual stamping that's made in a mold of some kind and so it has acquired that hissing as a generation dub. It was recorded in 2005 on a phonograph from 1899 as a demonstration for Public Radio. They dragged all this equipment into a modern radio station, set up the Edison recording apparatus, brought in the orchestra, and did a show featuring our wax cylinder. Incredibly enough, we've gotten many, many cards and letters sent by people from around the world who heard the program. The broadcast gave them a chance to hear a sample from a whole hidden world of musical achievement."

Rick has often been compared to André Rieu, an equally dedicated champion of music's lighter or sentimental side, and he enjoys the comparison. As in Rieu's festive concerts, audiences are often treated to a sing-along before the night is through, and the rest of the music is delightfully infectious. The Paragon Ragtime Orchestra and its dynamic director have found a winning formula for educating the public in the most enjoyable way about a frequently overlooked byway of American popular culture.

The last track on the new CD is a humorous and ultimately moving speech given by George M. Cohan to his fellow actors. There was some debate about whether to include it, but in the end, Rick thought, "You know, we should let this man speak for himself, as the coda to the entire 'symphony.'" In that spirit I think it proper that Rick Benjamin should have the last word to sum up *his* musical mission: "There just needs to be joy in living—because it *needs* to be."