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Andrew Lloyd Webber's Impact on Music and Entertainment

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Andrew Lloyd Webber is regarded as perhaps the most famous musical theatre composer alive. He has won numerous awards for his work, including several Grammy and Tony Awards. Many people have seen his shows, many more have heard his songs, and even more do not know that it is him who helped to create the musical theatre masterpieces they know and love. With hits like *Phantom of the Opera*, *Cats*, and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, to name a few, Webber has made history with his works. Many of his compositions carry and evoke controversial or extreme emotions, which has only aided in propelling him to the spotlight. Fans and critics alike cannot deny the immense impact he has had on the world of music and entertainment.

Andrew Lloyd Webber was born March 22, 1948 and was surrounded by the world of music from his birth, with his father directing music professionally and his mother teaching piano (“Andrew Lloyd Webber Biography”). Although he studied history at Oxford University, he still found passion in music, and he began work on what would be an incredibly successful career. However, his intrigue in history can be seen in works like *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* and *Evita*. His first composition for musical theatre was for *The Toy Theatre*, which, although never released, was published in a British music magazine, essentially jumpstarting his profession (“Andrew Lloyd Webber Biography”).

But how did Webber get his start? One big name that Webber is commonly tied to is that of famous lyricist Tim Rice. The first big name production that Webber and Rice produced together was *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* in 1968. What began as a 15-minute children’s musical became a full-length, global musical sensation (“Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.”). A major selling point for *Joseph* was the fact that, as a retelling of a Bible story, the musical was suitable for all ages. This meant families could take their children to the theater, which helped spread the success of the musical. Although written in

1968, with a debut at the Edinburgh International Festival in 1972, *Joseph* did not premiere on Broadway until 1983 (Barnes & Noble.). However, it was greeted with immediate success, which prompted a cast-album recording to be released to the public. At the time, this was Webber's second album. While *Joseph* had been performed before an album was released, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, written by Webber in 1972, had an album created ahead of its debut performance. People who were not familiar with the music of *Joseph* at that time were familiar with the music of *Jesus Christ Superstar* instead, and its success helped promote Webber's name in relation to *Joseph*. As a result, his name began to spread across the musical theatre world ("Andrew Lloyd Webber and 'Jesus Christ Superstar.'").

This also sparked the introduction of endless debates of Webber's controversy. *Jesus Christ Superstar* quickly became a hit with the general public, and within the span of 4 years, a cast album, Broadway and West End performances, and a film adaptation of the production had taken over the musical theatre world. This not only marked the beginning of his unbelievable success, but also of critics who claim he is "everything that went wrong," in the musical theatre world (Gopnik). Fans of Webber will counter the harsh critics with the argument that a man with as much success as he has garnered *has* to be doing something right for the entertainment industry. *Jesus Christ Superstar* caused controversy because it was a rock style album, which at the time was a new style for musical theatre (*Hair*, produced in 1967, is considered the first rock musical, but Webber helped to throw the concept more dramatically into the public eye). The introduction of rock and its usage in theatre grew steadily, and Webber himself has produced prominent albums with the style, including the musical adaptation of *School of Rock* in 2015. Other notable musicals featuring rock music include *Rent*, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, and *Spring Awakening*, which have all been incredibly successful during their runs as professional

productions (Simonson). Webber started a new era of musicals, bringing new types of music to the stage despite the harsh criticism. One might say he was ahead of his time, as he brought ingenious and daring concepts to the entertainment world.

“Sung-through” describes musicals that consist almost entirely of sung dialogue, with very few spoken parts. Some of the most famous sung-through musicals in recent times include *Hamilton* by Lin Manuel-Miranda and *Hadestown* by Anaïs Mitchell. However, it is Andrew Lloyd Webber who can be credited with bringing this type of musical into the spotlight. Both *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Joseph* are sung-through musicals, as well as *Cats*, *Evita*, and *Starlight Express*. Although some of these shows include small sections of dialogue, they can generally be considered sung-through musicals. This type of musical also created controversy. Some critics claim that the musicals feel more like staged concerts than professional theatre productions, regardless of the acting (Reynolds and Mandel). Yet despite jarring reviews, sung-through musicals remain successful in the modern musical theatre world and are still being produced. *Cats* received a film adaptation created in 2019, and that same year, *Joseph* experienced a revival on London’s West End, showing that even older sung-through musicals written by Webber are still in demand.

Although not a sung-through play, one of the most famous of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musicals is *Phantom of the Opera*. The musical made its Broadway debut in 1988, and has been performing ever since, making it the longest running show in Broadway history (Snelson 1). It broke this record on January 9, 2006, beating out another of Webber’s musicals, *Cats*. As of January 2019, *Phantom* has been seen by over 140 million people in over 41 countries and in 17 languages (“THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA Continues to Make Broadway History”). A film adaptation was created in 2004, with select songs from the musical. A sequel, *Love Never Dies*,

also consisted of music composed by Webber, although this musical has seen much less success and popularity than the original *Phantom*. Today, almost everybody has at least heard of *Phantom of the Opera*, and many will have seen the movie or professional production. In the words of Webber himself, *Phantom* is “about love. It’s as simple as that” (Webber). It is one of the most iconic musicals of all time, and it has the music of Andrew Lloyd Webber to thank for that success. In fact, revenues for the production far surpass those of any film in history (“THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA Continues to Make Broadway History”).

In addition to creating original compositions for several musicals, Webber has also broken into the film industry. Many of his musicals have been readapted into their own film versions, including *Cats*, *Joseph*, *Evita*, and *Jesus Christ Superstar*, to name a few. Beyond his own musicals, Webber was enlisted to create scores for the movies *Gumshoe* and *The Odessa Files*, in the early 1970s (Snelson 71). Webber reused a few parts of the music that he created for *Gumshoe* while working on creating a musical version of *Sunset Boulevard* in 1993 (“Gumshoe”). While Webber is most well-known for his contribution to the world of musical theatre, it would be ignorant to dismiss his work in the film industry as well.

As stated previously, Webber has been the subject of controversy from the beginning of his musical career. Critics have much to say about his productions, in addition to debates about the introduction of rock to theaters and musicals comprised entirely of songs. Some say that his time in the theatre world has run its course, and it is time to make way for new creators, such as Lin Manuel-Miranda or Tim Minchin. Webber’s content appears to be “old news” to some who are looking for a new age in musical theatre (Mau).

Although the debate over Webber’s content is ongoing, that has not prevented him from reaching great levels of success. Webber is one of 16 people to have achieved EGOT status,

meaning he has won at least one Emmy, Grammy, Oscar, and Tony Award, which displays the wide range of entertainment he has contributed to (McCall). In addition to having received many prestigious awards, Webber was knighted in 1992, with his official title being Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber; his star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame bears his knighted title (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica).

Whether one personally enjoys the works and compositions of Andrew Lloyd Webber or not, the fact that he completely transformed the world of musical theatre and entertainment cannot be disputed. With the sheer numbers of musicals he has produced during his decades in the business, as well as the concept of sung-through musicals, Webber gave the public a new form of entertainment and began a new era of theatre. His name is certainly a household name, and is sure to be one for many, many years to come. Many fan-favorite theatre performances throughout the world would not have had the success that they do without this esteemed composer creating incredible compositions. As such, it is important and necessary to acknowledge and respect the musical genius that is Andrew Lloyd Webber.

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