

**YOU'RE A GRAND OLD RAG:
THE MUSIC OF GEORGE M. COHAN**

World-premiere recordings of original period orchestrations

THE PARAGON RAGTIME ORCHESTRA

RICK BENJAMIN, DIRECTOR

1. *There's Only One Little Girl for Me* (one-step, 1916) 2:36
2. *The Yankee Doodle Boy* (song from *Little Johnny Jones*, 1904) 2:40
Colin Pritchard as George M. Cohan
3. *Overture to The Talk of New York* (1907) 9:32
Introducing: "Under Any Flag at All," "When a Fellow's on the Level with a Girl That's on the Square," "I Want the World to Know I Love You," "Burning Up the Boulevard," "I Want You," "Drink with Me," "March," "Put Down a Bet for Me," "Polka," "Mr. Burns of New Rochelle," "Busy Little Broadway," "Gee, Ain't I Glad I'm Home," and "Under Any Flag at All (reprise)"
4. *Geo. M. Cohan's Rag* (from *Cohan & Harris Minstrels of 1909*) 2:08
5. *The Eyes of Youth See the Truth* (song from *The Cohan Review of 1918*) 2:13
Bernadette Boerckel, soprano
6. *March Medley from George Washington, Jr., introducing "Ethel Levey's Virginia Song" and You're A Grand Old Rag* (1906) 2:56
7. *Harrigan* (song from *Fifty Miles from Boston*, 1908) 2:33
Colin Pritchard, baritone
8. *Selection from The Man Who Owns Broadway* (1909) 5:57
Introducing: "The Man Who Owns Broadway," "When a Servant Learns a Secret," "Eccentric Dance," "Love Will Make or Break a Man," "I'll Go the Route with You," "I'm in Love with One of the Stars," and "The Man Who Owns Broadway (finale)"
9. *Mary's A Grand Old Name* (song from *Forty-Five Minutes from Broadway*, 1906) 3:55
Bernadette Boerckel, soprano
10. *Give My Regards to Broadway* (song from *Little Johnny Jones*, 1904) 2:41
Colin Pritchard as George M. Cohan
11. *Popularity* (ragtime incidental music from *Popularity*, 1906) 3:03
12. *That Haunting Melody* (song, 1911) 4:33
Bernadette Boerckel, comedienne
13. *Overture to Little Nellie Kelly* (1922) 10:42
Introducing: "The Great New York Police," "The Name of Kelly," "The Hinky Dee," "Voice of My Heart," "You Remind Me of My Mother," "Nellie Kelly I Love You," "Until My Luck Comes Rolling Along," and "Reprise—Nellie Kelly I Love You"
14. *Over There* (song, 1917) 3:26
Colin Pritchard as George M. Cohan

Appendix:

15. *George M. Cohan speech* (1938) 6:05

TT: 65:52

YOU'RE A GRAND OLD RAG: THE MUSIC OF GEORGE M. COHAN

By Rick Benjamin

"Never was a plant more indigenous to a particular part of earth than was George M. Cohan to the United States of his day."—Oscar Hammerstein II

More than a century after he rocketed to fame, **George M. Cohan's** name still evokes vivid images of the archetypical Broadway "song-and-dance man." But Cohan was far too important and complex an artist to sum up so breezily. He was an incandescent figure, celebrated as an actor, dancer, choreographer, playwright, lyricist, composer, director, producer, and theater owner. Cohan's incredible range of talent was itself remarkable. But astonishingly, he often fulfilled all of these roles *at the same time*, while at work on one of his many theatrical productions. As his orchestrator M.L. Lake recalled, Cohan was ". . . purely and simply, a genius—with so many brilliant facets that even his most intimate, oldest friends never ceased to be amazed and to thrill over new flashes."

Historians have long viewed George Michael Cohan (1878-1942) as one of the most innovative figures in the evolution of the American theater: He is widely heralded as "The Father of Musical Comedy," and he is the *only* person ever to have a statue in his honor erected on the "Main Stem"—Broadway—*itself*. Without doubt, Cohan's boisterous arrival in the early 1900s liberated our musical stage from the domination of European style and convention. As historian Jack Burton put it, Cohan ". . . was something refreshingly new in the American theater. His songs packed a punch, his heroes and heroines were American guys and gals you'd meet in Joe's bar and the 5-and-10, and his librettos put New Rochelle, N.Y., Richmond, Virginia, and Boston on the musical comedy map. This 'real live nephew of my Uncle Sam' had fired the opening shot in Broadway's War of Independence. . . ."

In some ways Cohan's successes as a performer, playwright, and impresario have overshadowed his importance as the creator of some of America's most vital and enduring music. While "Over There," "You're A Grand Old Flag," and "Give My Regards to Broadway" are still familiar to many people, comparatively few of them today know that these were written by an Irish-American guy named Cohan. Fewer are aware of Cohan's other numerous nationwide song hits, his innovative contributions to theater music as a composer and lyricist, or of the powerful influence he later had on "Golden Age" Broadway composers such as Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, and George Gershwin.

George M. Cohan was a great American songwriter; no less an authority than Irving Berlin referred to him as "*the* great American songwriter." Yet surprisingly little serious study and exploration of Cohan's rich musical legacy has been undertaken, perhaps because of the complex, interconnected nature of his creativity. The heart of his work cannot be found through dissection even when one begins to peel away the many layers: Cohan the songwriter is inextricably linked to Cohan the singer/dancer/actor, who is in turn connected to Cohan the librettist, all of whom are welded to Cohan the showman's tireless quest to entertain. The first step to gaining some kind of understanding would seem to spring from simply *listening* to recordings of George M. Cohan's music performed from his original scores and orchestrations. But the difficulty with this plan is that no such recordings have heretofore been available.

Re-creating George M. Cohan's Theatrical Soundscape

The main purpose of this new CD is to re-create, as closely as possible, the sound of George M. Cohan's music as he and his audiences might have heard it in theaters during the early 20th century. These performances will likely surprise and possibly challenge 21st-century listeners, whose love for the "Cohan Songbook" was probably inspired by the soundtracks of the 1942 Warner Brothers film *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, or M-G-M's *Little Nellie Kelly* (starring Judy Garland), or cast recordings of the 1968 Broadway musical *George M!* These three productions were but part of the flood of Cohan tributes—books, articles, plays, recordings, films, and radio (and, later, TV) programs—that began washing across America during the last years of the Yankee Doodle Boy's life, ebbing only in recent years. But, however delightful and heartfelt many of these creations were, almost all updated, modernized, "improved" and/or otherwise distorted Cohan's music to conform to ever-changing fashions, expectations, and commercial needs. In most cases, these alterations were made for fear that the original versions of his music would be rejected by newer, younger audiences as "stodgy," "too simple," "not interesting enough," or possibly even "offensive" (as with material referring to minorities). In any event, the producers of *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, *Little Nellie Kelly*, and *George M!* et al found the need to update/modify Cohan's music, and as a result have given millions of happy listeners a misleading impression of its sound.

In the field of audio recordings, the pressure to update the "Cohan Songbook" has been especially intense. To date at least a hundred salute-to-Cohan types of recordings have been made, going back into the '30s (of these, the low point surely is 1957's *Mickey Rooney Sings George M. Cohan!*). Almost without exception, these discs and tapes were simply commercial products, rather than historical presentations of the way the music was actually sung and played in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Because of this, it has been all but impossible to make a real study of Cohan's music using recordings. But his music, as he wrote it (and in collaboration with his arrangers and orchestrators) is artistically and historically significant, and deserves to be heard in its original forms.

The first thing contemporary listeners may notice when playing this CD is that the orchestra heard performing is not large. This is because American theater orchestras of the 19th and early 20th centuries were usually quite small. In contrast to Europe, there were simply fewer musicians in the United States, relative to the population; there was little economic basis to support music here. The nation was very new, and still engaged in the epic process of forging itself. Most Americans were far too busy earning a living and building businesses and communities to have free time or spare money for professionally made "entertainments." And even if they did, outside of a handful of America's largest cities, there were few places they could go to find it. But conditions changed rapidly after the Civil War; as the Industrial Revolution fueled a thriving American economy, soon there was time and money for amusement. It was into this setting that George M. Cohan and his family (father, Jeremiah [1848–1917]; mother, Helen F. ["Nellie," 1854–1928]; and sister Josephine ["Josie," 1876–1916]) made their first entrance. Billed as the "Four Cohans," this hardy troupe blazed a trail as true pioneers of American show business. They specialized in one of the earliest species of that new industry—"variety."

For variety performances (often staged in saloons), a lone upright piano was usually the only musical accompaniment for the acts. In American variety this state of affairs lasted right up until the mid-1890s, even in the fanciest of music halls in the largest of cities. Then, during the 1890s as variety began refining itself into true *vaudeville*, other instruments began to be added to the piano in theater pits. First to appear usually was a violin, followed by a clarinet, cornet, and bass fiddle. Eventually, the “ideal” instrumentation specified for a “theater orchestra” was flute (doubling piccolo), clarinet, first and second cornets, trombone, drums, piano, first and second violins, viola, ’cello, and double bass. The period trade term for this combination was “Eleven & Piano.” These orchestras sometimes had a conductor, but in smaller venues it was common for the pianist or first violinist to also act as leader. This very efficient ensemble evolved as a result of both economic and artistic considerations: It made a clear, full sound, could play popular and classical music, was compact enough to not encroach into the customer’s seating areas, and only added twelve more names to a theater’s payroll list. From a musical standpoint, the Eleven & Piano orchestra was admirable for this setting; it supported singers on the stage without overwhelming them (the microphone was not perfected until the mid-1920s, and was not routinely used in the theater until the 1950s), yet could play loudly enough to fill the typical theaters of the day (which ranged from eight hundred to fifteen hundred seats). On this recording the P.R.O. represents an exact re-creation—even down to its 1910 drum kit—of the classic Eleven & Piano theater orchestra.

American *musical comedy*—that is, a show with a story (the “libretto” or “book”) advanced by dialogue and songs—was to a great extent an outgrowth of vaudeville. Indeed, by the 1890s the aspiration of most vaudeville singers and actors was to “graduate” into musical comedy. Naturally then, many of the techniques and production values of vaudeville formed the basis for musical comedy. This certainly held true for orchestras used to play for the early musicals; well into the 1910s the Eleven & Piano orchestra remained a basic standard, even in New York, and even on Broadway. (It should be noted here that *operetta* in America was generally a more expensively mounted genre aimed at upper-class metropolitan patrons. Typically, from the 1870s onward American operetta productions featured fifteen-to-twenty piece [or larger] orchestras that, in addition to a full string section, included oboe, bassoon, and two French horns.)

Curiously, George M. Cohan made very few recordings. The reasons for this reticence were never clearly stated. But it is known that Cohan did not like the sound of his own singing voice, and may have felt that his song renditions required his acting and dancing abilities to truly “put them over.” Indeed, during his entire career only seven songs recorded by Cohan were ever commercially released. These were all “waxed” on the same day—on May 4, 1911—for the Victor Company, and none of the titles (with one arguable exception) were mega-hits from Cohan’s extensive song catalog. A study of these 78 r.p.m. discs reveals that the early acoustic recording technique (i.e., pre-microphone) was not particularly successful in capturing his unique vocal style. Undoubtedly Cohan was not proud of these records, and given his almost super-human scheduling demands as a performer/playwright/songwriter/director/producer, he likely felt no great need to develop a career as a phonograph artist as well.

This lack of recorded performances by the man himself is a considerable stumbling block today in the study and understanding of Cohan’s performance practices. Thus, a second purpose of this recording is to attempt to re-create what the young George M. Cohan may have sounded like singing onstage in the early 1900s. Toward this end, in the spring of 2006 I began to collect and study all known surviving audio “artifacts” of Cohan’s voice. I consulted with a number of archivists and several private collectors, and over time was able to gather and study all of Cohan’s 1911 Victor recordings, an assortment of his 1930s and ’40s radio appearances, and also his performances in the 1932 film musical *The Phantom President*. With Cohan’s ghostly voice ringing in my ears, the next step was to find a modern-day performer who could give

a creditable impression of it for New World Records's microphones. This was difficult: After advertising for months in the leading theater trade magazines for a "singer who sounds like Geo. M. Cohan," I had over three hundred applicants, most of whom had clearly never even *heard of* Cohan, never mind having *heard* Cohan on archival recordings. However, from this pile of CD and cassette submissions a handful of performers emerged as possibilities—a small fellowship who had done their own homework and obviously shared a love of early American theater music. And so, on a chilly March afternoon in 2008, I heard these "Cohan-didates" in live auditions held in New York City. I feel very confident in saying that, after this rather exhaustive search (and research) process, what you hear Colin Pritchard do on this recording really is as close to the real Cohan as anyone is likely to experience without benefit of a time machine or *séance*.

And what did Mr. Cohan sound like? From his surviving recordings, the first striking characteristic was his manner of *speaking*, rather than actually *singing* many of the words to the songs he was performing. He used this technique intermittently, reciting a few words, and then singing a few, and then lapsing back to speech. He sometimes slurred these two deliveries together. In this process Cohan often ignored the written melodies and rhythms of his own songs (and it should be noted that Cohan, with very rare exceptions, performed *only* his own songs). But the effect was one of thrilling insouciance: To audiences it seemed as though he was making it all up off the top of his head—delivering his street-wise and sometimes sardonic "observations" just as he pleased—while the orchestra underscored him with jaunty Cohan melodies. Of course this "sing-speak" technique was not a Cohan invention; it had evolved earlier in operatic music (termed *Sprechgesang*), and also enjoyed a vogue with 19th-century British music hall entertainers. What *was* unique was Cohan's combination of "sing-speak" with his New England "twang" (gained honestly as a native of Providence, Rhode Island, and reinforced during a childhood spent barnstorming through old New England), and his vaguely patrician style of enunciation. The blend of these conflicting vocal elements resulted in a strangely compelling sound. Audiences found it utterly irresistible (many theater critics thought otherwise). As his arranger and orchestrator M.L. Lake observed: "George had absolutely no singing voice, yet he could put over a topical song better than any singer I ever heard. There was something in his voice that never failed to get under one's skin, even if you heard the same lines week after week after week."

Cohan's singing was naturally an extension of his stage persona, of which theater historian David Ewen wrote perhaps the best description: "Everything about Cohan was personalized . . . he wore a straw hat or derby slightly cocked over one eye, and in his hand he held a bamboo cane. He sang out of the corner of his mouth with a peculiar nasal twang; he danced with a unique halting kangaroo step. He had his own way of gesturing—with an eloquent forefinger. The way he strutted up and down the stage—often with an American flag draped around him—was singularly Cohanesque; so was the way he could create a bond between himself and his audiences with informal, at times slangy, salutations or little speeches or homey monologues." All this was not an act: his associates affirmed that the cocky character Cohan presented on the stage was quite similar to his actual personality (although backstage he was admired for his warmth and kindness). As Lake remembered, "George, of course, did it all; he wrote the books, wrote the music, directed and starred in his own productions. But, unlike many producers, George never flaunted his position; at rehearsals, if he had criticism to offer an individual, it was private—one on one—and not a vitriolic insult before the entire company. No bombast. No temperamental explosion. Just a very humorous remark, followed by 'Now, we must get this.' Naturally, every performer, stagehand, and musician idolized such a boss; you couldn't help it."

Finding “the listen”—Cohan the Composer and Songwriter

Late in life George M. Cohan estimated that he had written five hundred songs. Of these, about three hundred were published, in addition to a small number of instrumental pieces (around two hundred Cohan scores were studied in preparation for this recording). Cohan wrote most of his music for performance in specific stage presentations (sketches, musical comedies, and revues) rather than as independent (stand-alone) works. But in their creation, Cohan was always in search of the quality his father called “the listen”—that elusive, unnamable magic that could set the entire nation singing, humming, and whistling.

As a songwriter, Cohan was exceptional in that he was one of the few who composed his own melodies for his own lyrics. Almost every other creator of popular songs penned either music only or words only, and then relied on a partner (or partners) to come up with the other half of the work. Songwriting, even well before Cohan’s time, was considered a collaborative activity, and remains one to this day. Thus it is further evidence of his immense talent that he could do both so well that he could create dozens of nationwide hits, a few of which remain famous after more than a century.

The path for this tremendous success as a songwriter was not paved with long years of formal education. Six weeks of first grade at Providence’s E Street School was the total extent of Cohan’s classroom experience (he was expelled). His musical training was similarly limited; in 1885 Jerry Cohan bought his son a violin and arranged for lessons. As George M. wryly related in his autobiography, “In two weeks I knew all there was to know about the violin. The teacher himself said so. He sent me back to my father with a note which read: ‘Impossible to teach this boy any more. HE KNOWS IT ALL.’” But Cohan’s natural abilities, environment (literally growing up in the theater), coupled with his phenomenal ambition more than compensated for his lack of theoretical studies of music or poetry.

At the very core of George M. Cohan’s being was an insatiable need to entertain. And somewhere very early on he realized that he was most entertaining when performing his own material. Thus, he began writing tunes and song lyrics by the age of ten. As a teenager in the early 1890s, Cohan’s musical interests began to eclipse even his performing (as a trick fiddler, dancer, and actor) and sketch writing activities (he wrote the Four Cohans’ sketches, playlets, and routines). As he recalled years later, “My heart was set on being a popular song writer. I practiced verse writing night and day. ‘The words must jingle, the words must jingle,’ I’d keep repeating over and over again. I could play four chords on the piano in F sharp. I’d vamp these four chords and hum tunes to myself for hours and hours at a time. I’ve never got any further than those four F-sharp chords, by the way. I’ve used them ever since.”

In one week late in 1892 the young “tunesmith” completed words and music for six songs. With a flourish he quickly mailed copies of these to several New York sheet music publishers, and eagerly awaited the avalanche of contracts he was sure would follow. But to his amazement, all six were flatly rejected (One publisher sent him this note: “Dear Sir: Your songs are not publishable. Please do not send any more.”). Characteristically, rather than discourage him, this total failure strengthened Cohan’s pugnacious belief in his abilities. He sharpened his pencil and “. . . worked like a trojan [sic] to improve my style of melody and learn how to jingle words in rhyme . . .” A few months later, after he had written a stack of new songs, he began to personally make the rounds of the New York music publishers. Again and again he was rebuffed. In a last-ditch effort he braced himself and ventured into the offices of one of America’s foremost music publishers, M. Witmark & Sons. This firm’s catalog represented the *crème de la crème* of the nation’s top composers (they would not sign Victor Herbert for another five years). To the youth’s amazement, the firm purchased one of his comic songs, “Why Did Nellie Leave Her Home?” (It was later revealed that the sale was the result of the senior Mr. Witmark’s fondness for George’s father, rather than out of any real interest in the kid’s song.) Cohan’s elation at having his first number published was shattered when he received his copies and discovered that the Witmarks had replaced his original words with new ones ghostwritten by their staff lyricist. Nevertheless, the publication opened doors up and down Tin Pan Alley, and Cohan leapt at his chance. Getting his one man “factory” into full production, he turned out songs by the dozens, and publishers were now knocking at *his* door: “I played no favorites with the publishers. I’d sell a song wherever I could get the price. The price was from ten to twenty-five dollars, according to the subject and merit of the thing. The paying of so much a copy as royalties was an exceptional arrangement in those days. The average song writer (comparatively few at the time) was usually pressed for ready cash, and couldn’t afford to gamble.”

In his earliest efforts as a neophyte songsmith Cohan wrote primarily in “waltz time,” and occasionally in 4/4 meter with bouncing, schottische-style dotted rhythms. These songs were pleasant and very ordinary. That would soon change: While touring with the Four Cohans in vaudeville in the mid-1890s, Cohan became more and more aware of and fascinated by the emerging style of “rag-time”—the underground urban folk music of Midwestern African-Americans. But by the mid-1890s ragtime was making inroads into the consciousness of white middle-class America. It is not known exactly where Cohan first encountered this new music, but there can be no doubt that he heard it in vaudeville theaters of the Midwest (rendered by fellow white performers, since vaudeville was strictly segregated), as offered by the white minstrel troupes for whom he wrote sketches, and possibly, at Tony Pastor’s Music Hall in New York, where singer/pianist Ben Harney (1872-1938) was then introducing ragtime (as a strange and exotic novelty) to Gotham. However he discovered it, this new rhythmic sound was intensely exciting to Cohan: brash, optimistic, and eccentric, it was—almost literally—his own personality expressed as music. It is no wonder that he grabbed onto it with such enthusiasm, and why it remained an important element in his songwriting for so long.

The earliest Cohan ragtime-inflected songs appeared in 1896. “Hot Tamale Alley,” popularized by the “coon shouter” May Irwin (1862-1938) was the first, followed by other tunes including “Warmest Baby in the Bunch” (1897). These first efforts shared two traits: their overtly racist themes, and their very sparing use of true ragtime syncopation. Rhythmically speaking, it is likely that Cohan was not yet able to notate the tricky syncopations exactly as he wished them to be performed (at the same time in Sedalia, Missouri, an older black musician named Scott Joplin was wrestling with the same problem). But by the turn of the century, Cohan seems to have mastered the rhythmic “palate” of ragtime. He did not use many of the rhythmic figurations gracing the classic piano rags, but did use those that could be reproduced vocally with reasonable ease. Indeed, what could really be termed the “Cohan motif”—eighth-quarter-eighth (as in the first measure of “Give My Regards to Broadway”)—was a basic building block of ragtime. It provided the “jingle” for dozens of Cohan songs well into the late 1920s. (It should be mentioned that, to the general public of the early 1900s, the term “ragtime” meant syncopated *pop songs* as well as instrumental pieces; the narrowing of the definition of “ragtime” to include only piano pieces was a modern trend advanced by the ragtime revivalists beginning in the 1940s. Ragtime songs typically were structured like most pop vocal music of that time—intro/verse/chorus/verse/chorus. Instrumental rags were generally built on the “march form”—intro/AA/BB/A/CC.)

On this recording there are many examples of Cohan’s use of the ragtime style. Beyond the obvious ones (“Cohan’s Rag” and “Popularity”) there is the gentle, sophisticated raggyness of “That Haunting Melody,” the faster, cified “The Hinky Dee” and “Until My Luck Comes Rolling Along” from the Overture to *Little Nellie Kelly*, “Ethel Levey’s Virginia Song” heading up the “March from *Geo. Washington, Jr.*,” “The Man Who Owns Broadway,” “I’ll Go the Route With You” and the flirtatious “I’m in Love With One of the Stars,” heard in the Selection from *The Man Who Owns Broadway*, and “Burning Up the Boulevard” and “Put Down a Bet for Me” from the Overture to *The Talk of New York*. Even the slightly foreboding “Eyes of Youth” contains several measures of good old-fashioned ragtime syncopation, *à la* Cohan!

George M. Cohan was the first major white theater composer to inject the rhythms of ragtime into musical comedy scores. The “punch” and “zing” of many a Cohan number came from this use of rag syncopation. (Here it should be mentioned that authentic African-American musicals featuring ragtime scores by black composers like Bob Cole [1861-1911], Will Marion Cook [1869-1944], and others began opening on Broadway in 1898. But these productions were far less numerous—by a hundred to one, perhaps—than the white ones.) Typical show scores of the early 1900s were stylistically no different from those of the 1880s and ’90s; the songs and dance numbers derived from the straightforward rhythms of the waltz, schottische, march, and two-step. With his introduction of ragtime, Cohan led the break away from these older musical conventions. In a very powerful way, his popular New York productions and numerous national touring companies exposed vast numbers of white theatergoers to ragtime, helping it to gain acceptance as the up-to-date musical “language” of the modern theater. However, while Cohan’s audiences took delight in this new, “gingery” sound, many professional critics—comfortable in their Victorianism—objected. They often derided his music (and ragtime in general, as it crossed their paths) as “cheap,” “vulgar,” and “inappropriate for any setting other than a common minstrel show.” (James Metcalfe, writing in *Life* magazine, sniffed that Cohan represented one of the most “. . . emphatic proofs of the continuous downward tendency of the American stage and the American audience.”) Interestingly, after Cohan’s move from vaudeville to New York musical comedy, his ragtime songwriting began to move away from caricaturing African-American life toward depictions (usually humorous) of middle-class white situations. Ragtime was moving from demeaning exoticism to its eventual status simply as up-to-date pop music—the new “soundtrack” of mainstream America.

As far as can be determined, other than a brief passage in his autobiography, Cohan did not leave a detailed description of his method for writing his songs. He did occasionally kid interviewers who questioned him about his “system,” and offered a few rather-difficult-to-believe descriptions (writing while asleep, etc.) of it. What *can* be said is that Cohan had intense powers of concentration and wrote his songs very quickly. It seems likely that he usually devised his lyrics first and then wrote melodies to fit them. When analyzing Cohan songs, it becomes apparent that the *text* was paramount to him, and in order to serve it, Cohan often ignored the conventions regarding the normal, “commercial” length of a song. A typical 1900s pop tune was constructed with a *verse* of sixteen measures, followed by a *chorus* of another sixteen or thirty-two measures, both of which were repeated at least once. But Cohan often exceeded this “standard” format to accommodate his more expansive texts (the chorus of “**There’s Only One Little Girl**,”—heard here as an instrumental—has forty-nine bars.). Similarly, when brevity was key to the success of his text, he would issue a song with fewer than the number of “expected” measures (as in “**Eyes of Youth**,” which tells his mystical story in one “pass” without need of a second verse and chorus).

Cohan the composer achieved success mainly by instinct rather than training. As related earlier, his formal musical study was extremely limited. He once quipped “As a composer I could never find use for over four or five notes in any musical number. . . .” From several comments he made, it is likely that Cohan’s tunes did not come to him in finished form (inspiration), but rather were melodic “nuggets” that he quickly worked out on the piano by repeated tinkering and experimentation. M.L. Lake became his orchestrator in the 1920s, and had this to say: “Everybody knows that George had a natural gift for creating rhythmic, tuneful melodies. No one ever wrote ‘patter’ songs equal to his. Although he had learned to play a few tunes on the violin, his basic knowledge of music was negligible. Like many other ‘ear’ composers, Cohan played his melodies on the black keys of the piano—in the warmly-colored keys of G-flat or F-sharp. These are very difficult keys for schooled pianists, but easy to find for those who employ only three or four chords for everything.”

Like most composers of popular music, George Cohan’s limited musical training caused him to rely on the services of arrangers to put his musical ideas into proper written form. (An “arranger” is a musical expert who is paid to take an incomplete musical idea [often a mere snippet of melody] or an improperly notated one, and turn it into a serviceable “score” crystallizing the composer’s ideas for future performance and/or publication. Arrangers are also responsible for “translating” piano pieces and songs into successful arrangements for the larger forces of orchestras and bands; such scores are often called “orchestrations.”) Cohan did not need help writing down initial sketches of his tunes; he had acquired that important skill in childhood. He did however require arrangers to make orchestrations from these piano “drafts” for use in his many shows. For decades the arranger most closely associated with Cohan was Charles J. Gebest (1873–1937). The Gebests were a family of German bandsmen who had settled in the Midwestern United States in the 1840s (Gebest’s uncle, Charles L. Gebest [1848–?] was a well-known circus bandmaster). Music remained the Gebest family business, and Madison, Indiana, served as their home base. Here young Charlie grew up and studied. While still a teenager, he left home; in 1890 he was carving out a living as a musician in Zanesville, Ohio. Sometime, somewhere in the 1890s Charlie Gebest met Jerry Cohan, and the vaudevillian hired the young man to serve as music director for the Four Cohans. He soon became their all-around musical factotum, playing piano for the act, conducting the pit-orchestras in those venues so-equipped, and writing arrangements and orchestrations of George’s latest songs and dance numbers.

Gebest's relationship to the Cohans was very close, and he remained in their service for more than thirty years. He conducted almost all of George M.'s Broadway shows (until 1928's *Billie*), and up to 1922 orchestrated most of them as well. Charles Gebest's services must have somehow been invaluable to George Cohan, because their working relationship was often stormy. Cohan was a formidable man who had no difficulty firing employees when necessary, yet M.L. Lake remembered, "How two guys could be as fond of one another and continue to fight every day for more than thirty years is unexplainable. Charlie Gebest wasn't a bad guy. He had some fine points but he was afraid someone would find out about them. So he hid behind a sour puss, which never tends to make a man popular. If George remonstrated with him for lousing up someone's dance tempo, it was always a yelling match. I remember one time when George turned to me and said, 'Do I have to take this in my own theater?' As far as Charlie was concerned, he did." As an orchestrator, Charles Gebest was quite conservative, even by the standards of the early 1900s. He presented Cohan's melodies simply, with a minimum of ornamentation, coloration, or changes of instrumentation. This presentation may have reflected Cohan's wishes. In any case, Charles J. Gebest's hundreds of scores quite successfully introduced Cohan's music to the world.

In 1922 George Cohan hired M.L. Lake (1879-1955) to take over as chief orchestrator for the Cohan productions (Charlie Gebest retained his posts as musical director and conductor). Unlike Gebest, Mayhew "Mike" Lake was a highly trained classical musician. By the age of sixteen he was playing his violin with the Boston Symphony Orchestra; subsequently he graduated from the New England Conservatory after advanced courses in piano, harmony, and counterpoint. But Lake, like most classical musicians in late 1800s America, found the best way to make a living was to play, compose, and direct theater music for popular shows. He became a conductor specializing in vaudeville, and by 1910 had risen to the top of his field. At the same time Lake built a strong reputation as an arranger/orchestrator, scoring for such luminaries as Victor Herbert and Sousa. In 1913 he accepted the prestigious post as Editor-in-Chief of Carl Fischer, Inc., then the world's largest sheet music publisher. Despite this very full professional life, when George M. Cohan offered Lake the job as orchestrator, he took it. In his wonderful autobiography *Great Guys*, Lake described the work: "The Cohan melodies were good but, lacking a foundation of harmony, George wrote rather crude accompaniments limited to 'ear' chords. So, it was my principal job to incorporate the proper harmonies and then arrange the scores for orchestra. Good sequences of chords will enhance the effect of any song without detracting from the original melodic line. . . . There are, however, many instances wherein over-harmonization will destroy the effect of a song. In a typical tune, where the lyrics are all-important, any musical background should be secondary and kept light and unobtrusive. The words must dominate or the song is lost. Soupy, soppy-sentimental chords belong only in 'heart' songs, and when George would encounter any strange harmonization, his face would pull down into a grimace, one eye would close and we knew without his saying a word that the chords were out. At least for the time being. Sometimes, through conniving, I would be able to interpolate chords and harmonic sequences about which he would later rave. And he could, with minimum effort, be the most stubborn guy that ever lived. But, as I said earlier, he never resorted to using his position as a means of winning an argument. Well, almost never." All in all, the creative work of Gebest, Lake, and their various assistants succeeded very well in illustrating Robert Russell Bennett's wry theater maxim: "The pits and the budgets are much too small for musician's dreams, but it is up to the orchestrator to keep that fact a secret from the audience."

The Music

The music presented on this recording was selected with the hope of demonstrating the widest range of George M. Cohan's talents as a composer and lyric writer. Included are several old favorites from the "Cohan Songbook," along with some lesser-known gems. As you listen you will become aware of several Cohanesque techniques that thread their way through all of his music: First, his use of extremely repetitive, short melodic sequences which toggle back and forth between just a few notes. This jingly-ness makes his tunes extraordinary "catchy." Also much in evidence is his frequent quotation of famous earlier tunes like "Yankee Doodle," "Dixie," and "The Star Spangled Banner." This was a clever device used to "coattail" a new song on the affection listeners had for these venerable melodies. Another Cohan trait is his adoption of some of the martial characteristics of concert band music, particularly the active, melodic bass lines written in bumptious counterpoint to his melodies. Cohan obviously loved the marches of John Philip Sousa (1854-1932), which featured very similar low-register figurations. Indeed, much of Cohan's music foreshadowed the strong impact the concert band was to have on the American musical theater; he brought with him the first brassy blasts of what would become world-famous as "the Broadway Sound."

Our program begins with a stirring orchestral arrangement of one Cohan's few non-show songs, "**There's Only One Little Girl for Me.**" The publisher of this delight advertised it as "Cohan's Greatest Song," and that—up to the time of its appearance in 1916—was not too far from the truth. While not a big seller and all but forgotten today, it was a tuneful showcase for Cohan's expanding harmonic palate. The instrumental version heard here was created by William "Billy" Schulz (1882-?), a leading New York orchestrator between the years 1910 and 1920. The Brooklyn-born Schulz specialized in the conversion of pop songs into snappy dance numbers. He scored for virtually all of Tin Pan Alley's ace songwriters, and was a particular favorite of Irving Berlin. "There's Only One Little Girl for Me," performed at regulation one-step tempo, makes a perfect "curtain raiser" for the Cohanesque program that follows.

Two of the "immortal" Cohan songs, "**The Yankee Doodle Boy**" and "**Give My Regards to Broadway**," were premiered by their author on the evening of October 10, 1904. The occasion was the Hartford, Connecticut, opening of Cohan's new show *Little Johnny Jones*. This was his third musical comedy, and first full-length one. He was its librettist, lyricist, composer, choreographer, stage director, and star. The story was loosely based on the career of Tod Sloan (1874-1933), a jockey then prominent in the sporting pages of America's newspapers. While *Little Johnny Jones* was received well during its Hartford tryout, its initial run on Broadway (at the Liberty Theatre, beginning November 4, 1904) was not a success. The New York critics panned it as simple-minded, jangling, and crude; even Cohan's hometown (Providence, Rhode Island) paper piled on: "Mr. Cohan has written a lot of dialogue that has some bright spots, but for the most part is commonplace, to put it kindly; and he has provided a dozen and a half 'musical numbers' whose distinguishing feature is ginger. In fact there is more ginger than music. It is all very Cohanesque." After fifty-two performances Cohan and his new producing partner Sam H. Harris (1872-1941) pulled their floundering show from New York and put it on the road as a touring attraction. While *en route* it did well, but more importantly, Cohan, determined to have it succeed in New York, spent much time re-writing and tightening it. His efforts paid off, and *Little Johnny Jones* returned triumphantly to Broadway for two profitable runs in 1905 (from May 8 to August 26, and November 13 to December 2).

Cohan's second major Broadway musical was a commission from the entertainment mogul A.L. Erlanger (1859-1930), the leader of the powerful Theatrical Syndicate. Erlanger had recently signed the comedienne Fay Templeton (1865-1939), star of the popular Weber & Fields burlesques, to appear in his productions. Casting about for a new vehicle for her and impressed with Cohan's work with the resuscitated *Little Johnny Jones*, Erlanger sought out the young "comer" and asked: "Do you think you can you write a show without a flag?" The Yankee Doodle Boy fired back, "I could write a play without anything except a pencil." And thus work began on *Forty-Five Minutes from Broadway*, the show that launched one of Cohan's most famous songs, "**Mary's A Grand Old Name.**" Featuring what was very likely Cohan's career-best musical comedy libretto, *Forty-Five Minutes from Broadway* enjoyed a promising Midwestern tour. But when the production moved to New York for its January 1, 1906 opening, Abe Erlanger had doubts about the prospects for success. Cohan had written the show for only eight chorus girls, and it had fewer songs and more dialogue than other musicals; this seemed dangerously at odds with the successful "formula." But Cohan (who directed but did not appear in the show) was confident. He was proven quite correct—the show, Miss Templeton, and her young co-star Victor Moore (making his Broadway debut) all made an instantaneous smash hit. Here, Bernadette Boerckel winsomely re-creates the role of the housemaid "Mary Jane Jenkins" (Templeton) singing "Mary's A Grand Old Name" in Act I. The orchestration used to accompany her is from the original 1905 production.

George Cohan is often remembered for his unabashed patriotism: He was never shy about wrapping himself—or his shows—in the American flag. This habit endeared him greatly to Americans of that expansive, intensely nationalistic age (manifested politically by President Theodore Roosevelt and his "Big Stick" foreign policy). But this flag-waving also proved to be a lightning rod for more than a few critics, who viewed the behavior as a crass and cynical gimmick. The saga of "The Grand Old Rag" is a case in point: After a ceremony marking the fortieth anniversary of the end of the Civil War (a conflict his father Jeremiah had served in), George Cohan struck up a conversation with a nearby Union Army veteran who was bearing a large, tattered American flag. When Cohan asked about it, the old soldier began to tell of the terrible battles through which that flag had rallied his regiment. As he ended his stirring war story, the veteran began reverently furling the Colors and said, "Yes sir, she *is* a grand old rag." The phrase struck Cohan like an electric shock—here was a great song lyric. Or song title. Or both! Within an hour, while riding in an automobile, Cohan wrote a song around this idea. Dubbed "You're A Grand Old Rag," it extolled the greatness of America and her all-conquering banner. Cohan liked his new number so much that he was inspired to write an entire new musical comedy around it (possibly the only time a single song inspired a whole Cohan show). The resulting musical, *George Washington, Jr.*, starred Cohan and his then-wife Ethel Levey (real name: Ethelia Fowler, 1881-1955), as well as his parents, Jerry and Nellie Cohan. *George Washington, Jr.* opened at the Herald Square Theatre on February 12, 1906 (Lincoln's Birthday) to spectacular acclaim. Audiences adored the show, and especially Cohan's stirring rendition of his "**You're A Grand Old Rag.**" However, two days later, controversy erupted in the newspapers regarding the song: Cohan was accused of deliberately insulting "Old Glory." The clamor grew so strident that he quickly re-titled his number "You're A Grand Old Flag" (as it is still known) and revised its lyrics similarly. The "**March Medley from *George Washington, Jr.***" includes the two hits from Cohan's score, **Ethel Levey's "Virginia Song"** and "You're A Grand Old Rag." The arrangement performed here was the original entr'acte during the show's 1906 run.

Today, most of those who know the name of George M. Cohan are unaware of his considerable work as a serious playwright. But beginning in the 1890s he did write many non-musical plays, and several of them were very successful. He brought the first of these to Broadway on October 1, 1906. Entitled *Popularity*, it was a conventional melodrama about the lives of New York theater performers. *Popularity* was not very well written, but did sport some novel features: One of the “sets” was simply the backstage of the theater itself, and the audience was given the opportunity to interact with the performers as part of the show. Despite these innovations, *Popularity* was a total failure. The critics savaged it, the public stayed away, and after twenty-four performances a chastened Cohan closed it. Interestingly, in those days even non-musicals featured “incidental music” which was played before the first act, during scene changes, and after the final curtain. This music was designed to put the audience in the proper mood for the theme of the play, and in large cities, regulation-sized orchestras were used to render it. For *Popularity*, Cohan had written several such incidental “cues.” Despite the embarrassing demise of his play, he liked the first of these—a sort of miniature overture—so much that he published it as an independent “rag-time march.” He named it “**Popularity**” too. Happily, it did actually become popular; from sheet music sales of the number, Cohan was able to completely cover his losses from the stage production. “Popularity” is indeed an attractive piece, brim-full of Cohanesque swagger. And the trio section, with its heavy, over-the-bar syncopations, uncannily prefigures the “one-step” type of dance rhythm that would not be heard in other composers’ music until the early 1910s. The orchestration heard here was recorded by the Victor Talking Machine Company Orchestra on October 22, 1906. However, with *Popularity*’s disastrous closing two days later, the resulting “takes” were never released. Our performance marks the arrangement’s debut on record—more than a century delayed!

After the great success of *Forty-Five Minutes from Broadway*, Cohan sought to create a sequel to it. Fay Templeton was unavailable, so he decided to construct his new show around the burgeoning talents of her young co-star, Victor Moore. In *Forty-Five Minutes from Broadway*, Moore (1876-1962) had made his smashing Broadway debut as “Kid Burns,” a loveable tough guy. Moore was so successful in this role that Cohan reprised “Kid Burns” as the lead in the sequel, which he dubbed *The Talk of New York*. Moore was again a sensation, securing his place as one of Broadway’s greatest comic actors. The new production “tried out” in Chicago, and then opened on Broadway at the Knickerbocker Theatre on December 3, 1907. Another smash, *The Talk of New York* ran there for one-hundred-seventy-three performances. Although the show is little remembered today, the **Overture to *The Talk of New York*** reveals some first-rate Cohan melodies (including the beautiful waltz “I Want the World to Know I Love You,” introduced here with great warmth by cornetist Kevin Cobb). In this early period of American musical comedy, the overture was often treated as walk-in music—a cheery sonic background to introduce a new show’s tunes to patrons as they found their seats and visited with friends. It was known that repetition and familiarity were vital ingredients in fostering the public’s liking for new music; in theaters, an “overture” (sometimes referred to as “the selection”) represented the first chance to acquaint the audience with new songs, hopefully paving the way for affection when they reappeared later in the context of the show. Further, an important part of the business was the sale of sheet music of songs from a production, and repetition also boosted song-sheet sales. For these reasons, overtures from the 1900s and earlier were usually straightforward medleys presented with few connective passages, modulations, or even much concern for key relationships between the tunes. It was not until the mid-1910s that it became customary in musical comedy for the overture to mark the formal start of the program (as had been the case in “higher-toned” opera and operetta). And with that advance, the musical comedy overture rose from mere ballyhoo to its modern place as the artistic showcase for the talents of a show’s orchestrator.

One of George M. Cohan's best and best-loved songs is "**Harrigan.**" So it is delightful to know that the song celebrates a real person who, in life, was as just as lovable as the tune made him out to be. Edward "Ned" Harrigan (1844-1911) was a true pioneer of the American theater. Famed as an actor, lyricist, playwright, and impresario, from the 1870s through the 1890s his Irish-tinged musical farces were the toast of New York. Young George Cohan idolized Harrigan, and in many ways patterned himself after the veteran showman. Late in 1907 Cohan began work on a new musical starring Edna Wallace Hopper (1874-1959), with a storyline set in the Cohan family's real-life summer home of North Brookfield, Massachusetts. Entitled *Fifty Miles from Boston*, it opened in the Garrick (formerly Harrigan's) Theatre on February 3, 1908. The cast included a character named "Harrigan" who was based on the comic roles that the real Harrigan had played in his own shows decades before. New Yorkers attending *Fifty Miles from Boston* quickly caught on to this affectionate reference and were touched by it. And, when Ned Harrigan himself was eventually coaxed to his old theater to see the show, bittersweet tears streamed down his face as he heard "Harrigan" sung for the first time. Cohan, after his hero's passing some time afterward, made this testament: "Edward Harrigan was a fine artist, a great writer of human comedies and one of the grandest men it has ever been my pleasure to meet . . . I live in hopes that some day my name may mean half as much to the coming generation of American playwrights as Harrigan's name has meant to me." \

"**Geo. M. Cohan's Rag**" is an instrumental dance arrangement made from two 1908 Cohan ragtime songs, "Belle of the Barber's Ball" and the chorus of "Oh! You Coon." This rare number was a highlight of the short-lived *Cohan & Harris Minstrels of 1909*, a production that in many respects marked the demise of the oldest of American theatrical genres—the minstrel show. The sequel to the modestly successful *Cohan & Harris Minstrels of 1908*, the 1909 edition opened at the New York Theatre on August 16 of that year. But this time Messrs. Cohan and his co-producer/partner/brother-in-law Sam Harris were unhappily surprised by dismal ticket sales. After only sixteen performances and the loss of a large sum of money, the two showmen were forced to concede that the minstrel format had finally become obsolete (at least in the Metropolis). Nevertheless, *Minstrels of 1909* had plenty of excellent music, including "Geo. M. Cohan's Rag." While far removed from the Joplin rag style familiar to modern listeners, it is a fine period example of theater orchestra ragtime. Its intense syncopation, eccentric instrumental effects, and brassy out-chorus made it a thrilling model of sophisticated stage music ninety-nine years ago.

By 1909 George M. Cohan had become generally recognized as one of the most important figures in the American theater. He was acclaimed as a performer, songwriter, playwright, and stage director, and also—with partner Sam Harris—as a leading producer and theater owner. Just thirty-one years old, Cohan had reached the pinnacle of his profession, and was rich to boot. He was never a man of false modesty, so quite naturally titled his tenth musical comedy *The Man Who Owns Broadway*. The basic plot for this show was taken from Cohan's failed 1906 dramatic play *Popularity*. With just a dash of humility, he put another genuine musical comedy star, the great Raymond Hitchcock (1865-1929), into the title role. *The Man Who Owns Broadway* was produced at the New York Theatre beginning in October 1909, and ran merrily into the following year. The **Selection from *The Man Who Owns Broadway*** heard on this recording gives us a rare glimpse of the charm of this almost completely forgotten Cohan score. This medley was created by J. Bodewalt Lampe—the conductor who Cohan credited with "helping" him to invent the famous "Cohan style" of stage dancing. As music director of Buffalo's Court Street Theatre, Lampe (1869-1929) conducted for the Four Cohans' March 1896 appearances. The bill included teenaged George in a solo dance spot and, tired of performing to the ancient "Coming Through the Rye," he asked Lampe to

have the orchestra play something different at the next performance. The conductor agreed, and substituted one of his own compositions. But the cocky kid did not ask to rehearse (or even hear) the new music! At the performance Cohan was horrified to find himself on stage trying to do his dance to “the weirdest melody I had ever heard.” But rather than walk off, he improvised an entire new choreography to fit it. Amazingly, Cohan’s comic, grotesque, rubber-legged steps sent the audience into hysterical applause. Eureka! As he recalled in 1924, “For twenty solid years I did this same dance to the same music. . . . The ‘Cohan style’ they used to call it. But little did they guess that the thing was nothing more or less than an accident brought about by an orchestra playing a two-four melody instead of six-eight. Before the following season [1897] was over I had risen from the ranks of the ordinary ‘hoofers’ and had become known as a great eccentric dancer.”

Al Jolson fans will probably be the only living beings already familiar with “**That Haunting Melody**”; their hero “covered” it in his very first phonograph recording, made for Victor on December 22, 1911. That hit record was a result of the sensation Jolson (real name: Asa Yoelson, 1886–1950) was making with the number in a non-Cohan musical called *Vera Violetta*. In the show, Jolson—in blackface—played an African-American waiter named “Claude,” and delivered “That Haunting Melody” in minstrel-style “dialect.” Because of this connection, it has been suggested that George Cohan wrote the song especially for Jolson, or at least for use in the production. But Jolson’s performance on the disc (Victor 17037) bears little resemblance to the way Cohan had written his song. Further, “That Haunting Melody” had appeared in print well before the opening of *Vera Violetta*. So it seems more likely that Jolson had simply run across the sheet music and decided to interpolate it into the new musical. Cohan’s thoughts on the matter are not known, but it is interesting to note that for the rest of Cohan’s life, his songs were never again performed or recorded by Al Jolson. (“Jolie’s” famous rendition of “Give My Regards to Broadway” was recorded years after Cohan’s death.) In any event “That Haunting Melody,” performed from the original score, is a work of considerable subtlety. A true ragtime song, and full of syncopation, it makes a smooth, mysterious, and infectious addition to any Cohan retrospective.

The evening of April 7, 1917 found George M. Cohan at his Manhattan apartment with his family. He had returned from his usual Saturday visit to the Cohan and Harris offices with a newspaper that shrieked, “**WAR WITH GERMANY DECLARED!**” Cohan restlessly paced the living room, and then closed himself into his study. Early the following morning he emerged and called a family meeting: He had just finished a new song and wanted everyone to hear it. Dropping a large kitchen pot over his head and slinging a broom over his shoulder, he began to march about bellowing, “Johnnie get your gun, get your gun, get your gun! . . .” By the time he had finished this world premiere of “**Over There,**” his little daughter Mary was in tears! Shortly thereafter, the song fell flat when Cohan gave it its first public performance at a troop rally in Virginia. But finally, in the fall of 1917, “Over There” began to click: It was successfully sung by the film actor Charles King (1895–1957) at a huge Red Cross benefit concert, and then—better still—it was taken up with gusto by the vaudeville star Nora Bayes (1880–1928) who plugged it relentlessly (her photo graces the cover of the sheet music’s first edition). Overnight it seemed, “Over There” had the nation singing, humming, whistling, and—most important, marching. Cohan had published the song through his own sheet music subsidiary. But soon the rival Leo Feist firm offered him an unprecedented \$25,000 for the song, and he accepted. (Characteristically, the Yankee Doodle Boy donated every cent to charity.) Of the more than one thousand songs written about the “Great War” during 1917–18, “Over There” was by far the most popular and longest-lived. By the end of the conflict it had sold more than two million copies of sheet music and an even larger number of phonograph records (numerous singers covered it, including Caruso). Today, “Over There” remains one of the few generally recognized “artifacts” of that terrible conflict. The rousing orchestral arrangement recorded here was specially written in 1917 for George M.

Cohan's own public performances of the song. Coda: In 1936, the United States Congress awarded a special Medal of Honor to George M. Cohan in recognition of "Over There"'s extraordinary role in helping America win the World War. But Cohan had a curious aversion to ceremonies (and a dislike for the Roosevelt Administration); finally in 1940 he traveled to Washington, D.C., and accepted the medal personally from President Franklin Roosevelt. After returning home, all Cohan could say was, "Funny about them giving me a medal. All I wrote was a bugle call."

One of George M. Cohan's most important—and largely overlooked—contributions to American music was his role as a mentor to Irving Berlin. Berlin (real name: Israel Baline, 1888–1989) had idolized Cohan's music since his days as a singing waiter in the Lower East Side's seedy Pelham Café. As Berlin rose from waiter to chorus boy to minor Tin Pan Alley song plugger and lyric writer, he somehow came to the attention of Cohan. There were many similarities between the two men: both were self-educated, wrote words *and* music for their own songs, and both could play the piano in only one key—F sharp major. Cohan took a great shine to the young Russian immigrant, and opened many doors for him. He introduced Berlin to publishers, producers, star performers and, in 1911, sponsored his membership in the elite Friars Club. Around that time Cohan also surprised Berlin with a bulkier gift: a Weser transposing piano. This ingenuous instrument allowed a one-key-only pianist to mechanically shift the keyboard so that the music coming out could be made to *sound* in any key desired. (Cohan owned three of these instruments.) This piano, in the words of the biographer Laurence Bergreen, freed Berlin to ". . . develop the harmonies, nuances, rhythms, and fill notes he needed to embellish his tunes. At the touch of a lever, he could test a chord or a phrase in a different key; he could experiment with interactions between chords and melodies without having to seek out a collaborator whose patience and endurance was as great as his." Not surprisingly, Irving Berlin's early songs were very much influenced by Cohan's, especially in their penchant for expressing patriotic themes. At last, in the fall of 1917 Berlin had a chance to return some of the favors: Cohan was laboring on a new show—a revue slated for a New Year's Eve opening, and for the first time he was without inspiration. As Cohan recalled several years later, "I was all in, dead tired, and for the first time in my life acknowledged the fact, but only to myself. My mind was dull, the piano seemed out of tune, or out of sympathy, I couldn't tell which. The melodies were commonplace, the lyrics were worse. 'What'll I do?' I thought. An idea flashed in my mind. I ran to the telephone. 'Get Irving Berlin on the wire,' I hollered, and waited for the connection. 'Hello Irving! How'd you like to do a *revue* with me?' 'I'll be right over,' he sang back." And thus, for the only time in Broadway history, these two icons of words *and* music collaborated on a show, dubbed *The Cohan Review of 1918*. Berlin was tremendously honored by the invitation, and worked studiously on his assigned parts of the project. He was rather astounded by his idol's fast and casual working methods; when a fortune-teller number was required for Act I, Cohan went backstage and reappeared twenty minutes later with "**The Eyes of Youth See the Truth.**" This gorgeous and unusual song was such a stylistic departure for Cohan that it is often incorrectly attributed to Irving Berlin (furthering the confusion is the fact that in 1919 Berlin wrote his own song—a waltz—that he named "Eyes of Youth"); but "The Eyes of Youth See the Truth" heard here is indeed a George M. Cohan creation.

By the early 1920s George M. Cohan's presence on Broadway more and more came to represent nostalgia. That decade was the busiest ever in the history of "The Great White Way"—over *four hundred* new productions opened. A dozen of these crossed the magical five-hundred-performances mark. This was the beginning of Broadway's "Golden Age"—that now-fabled era of Kern, the Gershwins, Cole Porter, Rodgers & Hart, Vincent Youmans, and others. It was into this glittering atmosphere that the old pro, George M. Cohan, ventured forth with *Little Nellie Kelly*. This show, unofficially dedicated to his parents (the leads were named "Nellie" and "Jerry"), opened November 13, 1922. While Cohan's score (of eighteen songs)

was beautiful, the book showed little advance from his early 1900s efforts: Set in the Bronx, it joyfully swarmed with a millionaire, wholesome working girls, charming Irish cops, and various stock city characters, all with hearts of gold. But somehow, once again the Cohan alchemy worked—*Little Nellie Kelly* was a “wow!” The *New York World* enthused, “This is not revue. Yet it is not conventional musical comedy. It is a little bit of drama, a great deal of comic pertness, a scenic delight and through all runs an almost continual strain of lovely music. . . .” *Little Nellie Kelly* ran on Broadway for two-hundred-seventy-eight performances—a Cohan record surpassed only by the combined 1904/05 runs of *Little Johnny Jones*. But it was to be the veteran showman’s last successful musical. Audiences of 1922 certainly must have found the book and score to be old fashioned. But they did not mind—yet: The “Roaring Twenties” had still not overwhelmed the gentler era of entertainment that George M. Cohan represented. But when *Little Nellie Kelly* at last ended its run in the summer of 1923, it was clear that Cohan’s day as the “The Man Who Owns Broadway” was finally over too. Here, with the **Overture to *Little Nellie Kelly***, we capture a fleeting glimpse of the autumnal beauty of this forever-vanished show.

The final track on this CD is an historic recording of George M. Cohan speaking as the guest of honor at the Catholic Actor’s Guild annual dinner on April 24, 1938. Held at the Hotel Astor in New York, more than one thousand guests attended to pay tribute to the Yankee Doodle Boy. The proceeds were donated to charity, and many of the old showman’s longtime friends and associates (including his former partner, Sam Harris) were present to salute him. Rising to address the throng, Cohan reminded them of his late father’s role in the founding of the Guild. Poignantly, the last of the Four Cohans, brings his remarks—and an era—to an emotional close by paraphrasing the legendary curtain speech he had used with the family’s act so long before: “*My father thanks you, my mother thanks you, my sister thanks you, and I thank you.*”

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Founded in 1985, **The Paragon Ragtime Orchestra** is the world's only year-round, professional ensemble specializing in the authentic re-creation of "America's Original Music"—the sounds of early musical theater, silent cinema, and vintage ballroom dancing. PRO came into being as the result of Rick Benjamin's discovery of thousands of early 1900s orchestra scores of the Victor recording star Arthur Pryor. In 1988 the Orchestra made its formal debut at Alice Tully Hall—the first concert ever presented at Lincoln Center by such an ensemble. Since then PRO has appeared at hundreds of leading arts venues, including the Ravinia Festival, the Smithsonian Institution, the Chautauqua Institution, the Brucknerhaus (Austria), the New York 92nd Street Y, and the American Dance Festival. In 1999, PRO's music inspired the master choreographer Paul Taylor's new dance, *Oh, You Kid!*, which was premiered at The Kennedy Center jointly by the Paul Taylor Dance Company and the Paragon and has since toured the world. In late 2003 the Orchestra premiered Rick Benjamin's reconstruction of Scott Joplin's 1911 opera *Treemonisha* to acclaim at the Stern Grove Festival. More recently, PRO had the honor of appearing twice as special guests of the Minnesota Orchestra in Orchestra Hall in Minneapolis.

In addition to its world-wide concert hall, university, and festival appearances, PRO has acquired a considerable following both here and abroad through its radio programs on the *New York Times's* WQXR, National Public Radio, the British Broadcasting Corp., and the *Voice of America* networks. Since 1989 the Walt Disney Company has relied on the Orchestra for the recorded theme music at its *Main Street, U.S.A.* attractions, and in 1992 PRO proudly served as "Ambassador of Goodwill" for the United States at the World's Fair in Seville, Spain. Over the years the Paragon Ragtime Orchestra has been heard on the soundtracks of many films and television programs, and its audio and video recordings have been widely praised and considered instrumental in rekindling interest in the rich history and tradition of the American theater orchestra. (Website: <http://www.paragouragtime.com>)

Conductor **Rick Benjamin** has built a career with the discovery and performance of American music from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He is the founder and director of the Paragon Ragtime Orchestra, which uses his extraordinary 9,000-title collection of antique theater and dance orchestra music (c. 1870-1925) as the basis of its repertoire. In addition to his work with Paragon, Mr. Benjamin maintains active careers as a pianist, arranger, and tubist. As a guest conductor he has led many symphonic ensembles, including the National Orchestra of Ireland in Dublin, the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, the Aalborg and Aarhus Symfoniorkester in Denmark, the Olympia Symphony (Washington State), the National Orchestra of Iceland, and the Erie Philharmonic. Mr. Benjamin is a leading researcher in the field of silent film music; he has unearthed the original orchestral accompaniments to many important motion pictures of the 1900s, '10s, and '20s, and has conducted for more than five-hundred-sixty screenings across North America and Europe. His articles on popular music appear in several international publications, and lecture tours have taken him to more than a hundred colleges and universities throughout North America. Mr. Benjamin's multi-year reconstruction of the Scott Joplin opera *Treemonisha* was premiered to great acclaim in 2003 at San Francisco's Stern Grove Festival, and was recently performed by the Cape Town Opera in South Africa. He is continuing work on his books *The American Theater Orchestra* and *Encyclopedia of Arrangers & Orchestrators: 1875-1925*.

Bernadette Ulrich Boerckel is a high school English, drama, and journalism teacher at Warrior Run High School in Pennsylvania who performs in musicals, operas, and operettas throughout the mid-Atlantic region. As a soloist, she has an extensive repertoire that includes the Mozart *Requiem*, the Rutter *Magnificat*, and Saint-Saëns's *Christmas Oratorio*. This is her second recording with the Paragon Ragtime Orchestra.

Colin Pritchard is an actor/dancer/singer living in New York who has garnered rave reviews for his portrayal of George M. Cohan in theatrical productions. He has performed internationally and across the U.S. in such shows as *42nd Street*, *A Chorus Line*, *Singin' in the Rain*, *Contact*, *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, *Crazy for You*, *No, No, Nanette*, and *Hairspray*, among others. When not performing, he teaches tap dancing, and follows politics and international affairs. He holds a degree from the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University.

The Paragon Ragtime Orchestra

Rick Benjamin, director

Caroline Chin, first violin and concertmaster

Bryony Stroud-Watson, second violin

Corrina Albright, viola

Alistair MacRae, 'cello

Deb Spohnheimer, bass

Leslie Cullen, flute and piccolo

Sarah Beaty, clarinet

Kevin Cobb, cornet

C.J. Camerieri, cornet

Tim Albright, trombone

James Musto III, drums and bells

Diane Scott, piano

The Yankee Doodle Singers

Tim Albright, Bernadette Boerckel, Gary Boerckel, C.J. Camerieri,

Kevin Cobb, Diane Scott, Deb Spohnheimer, Ted M. Tobani

Soloists

Bernadette Boerckel, soprano

Colin Pritchard, baritone

SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY

George M. Cohan

Maybe Someone Ought to Wave a Flag. Vaudeville Archive Records 1009.
A Tribute to George M. Cohan. Folkways F-RFS604. (LP)

The Paragon Ragtime Orchestra

Black Manhattan: Theater and Dance Music of James Reese Europe, Will Marion Cook, and Members of the Legendary Clef Club. New World Records 80611-2.
From Barrelhouse to Broadway: The Musical Odyssey of Joe Jordan. New World Records 80649-2.
Knockout Drops: American Popular Music from the Ragtime Era. PRO 6002.
More Candy: Theater & Dance Music from the Ragtime Era. Rialto Records 6003.
On the Boardwalk: Music from the Arthur Pryor Orchestra Collection. Newport Classic NCD 60039.
On the Level: Songs of Vaudeville and Tin Pan Alley. Gretel Bailey Records GBR-1.
'Round the Christmas Tree: Vintage Yuletide Favorites. Rialto Records 6004.
That Demon Rag! Dorian DIS-80107 (reissued as PRO 6001).
The Paragon Ragtime Orchestra (finally) Plays "The Entertainer." Rialto Records 6005.
The Whistler and His Dog: More Music from the Arthur Pryor Collection. Newport Classic NCD 60069.

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Virtual Vaudeville. <http://www.virtualvaudeville.com/>
George M. Cohan in America's Theater. <http://members.tripod.com/davecol8/index.htm>

Orchestrators:

Rick Benjamin: *track 5*

Alfred Dalby (1875-?): *track 9*

Charles J. Gebest (1873-1937): *tracks 2, 3, 6, 7, 10, 11*

M.L. Lake (1879-1955): *track 13*

J. Bodewalt Lampe (1869-1929): *track 8*

Frank Saddler (1864-1921): *track 4*

William Schulz (1882-?): *track 1*

uncredited (attributed to Frank Saddler): *track 12*

Frederick Watson (1885-1935): *track 14*

Performance editions prepared by Rick Benjamin.

All orchestrations from the Rick Benjamin Collection.

Album concept by Rick Benjamin

Produced and engineered by Judith Sherman

Engineering and editing assistance: Jeanne Velonis

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