

Judge Dennis Davis | Irving Berlin Dreaming of a White Christmas

- [Judi] So welcome everybody, and welcome to Dennis, and over to you.

- Thank you very much, Judi, and again, may I thank you particularly a luddite like me when it comes to technology, you are a wonderful facilitator of these, and I just want to pay tribute to you. And may I also wish everybody happy holidays, and I hope that under the dreadful situation that so many of us find ourselves, certainly where I'm sitting in South Africa now, the COVID second wave is rampant. And I just hope that everybody is safe and healthy. So I have been asked to talk about somebody who really did make a significant contribution to music.

Those of you who know me, and might have followed my lectures on Mahler would know that my instincts probably were to do something else, because the idea was to have something at least musical, something to take our minds off the stresses and strains of the history that we've being taught so splendidly by Trudy. So I thought perhaps let's do Beethoven, after all, it's the 250th anniversary of the great Ludwig. But Wendy and Trudy, who know a lot more about curating a lockdown university than I do, basically suggested that I talk about somebody entirely different. And so here we are on a Sunday night talking about Israel Beilin. You may say, "Who on earth is Israel Beilin?" Born in Russia in 1888, and who moved to America when he was five-years-old. And, of course, like so many Jews who came from Europe, in this case from Russia, hard times fell upon them. His father, who was a cantor, died when he was very young. They lived in the Lower East Side under very difficult circumstances.

And old Israel Beilin, as a young boy, found himself landing a job as a singing waiter at Mike Pelham's Cafe on the Lower East Side. And it was there that he changed his name to the name that we all know, Irving Berlin. And it's so hard to talk about Irving Berlin, because there's so much to say, and there's so much that I want to say with regard to, as it were, the incongruities of his life and his career. So let me just give you a few instances of what I'm talking about. He lived an extraordinarily long life. Born in 1888, he died at 101-years-old in 1989. Effectively over a long career, he composed over 900-songs, 19-musicals, musical scores, and 18-scores for movies, more than 1,500 songs all in all, it's an extraordinary amount. And that of course poses an incredible problem for somebody like myself seeking in one-hour to give you a lecture on somebody like Irving Berlin. What am I going to choose?

And I'll come back to that in a moment. And it's very interesting just the place that he held in American musical life. Jerome Kern famously once remarked that Berlin had no place in American popular music. "He is", said Kern, "American music itself." And remember that Kern himself, as the composer of "Showboat", and the great Astaire/Rogers "Swing Time" may have regarded Berlin as a competitor. But it was interesting in those days when Berlin and Kern, and Cole Porter, and Richard Rodgers, and the Gershwin brothers all were active, how collegial they were one to the other. Berlin himself, a very intensely private man, once said in a note to Cole Porter in 1933, "I am mad about 'Night and Day', "and I think it's your high spot. "All the orchestra leaders think "it's the best tune of the year, and I agree with them."

There was a generosity of spirit, but most certainly in terms of what Jerome Kern said, Irving Berlin was really essentially the encapsulation of American music at that time. Living for 101, he really stopped composing by the time he was round about 60-odd. And it's interesting that all of this massive production of 1,500 songs, all produced in the career until he was about 60, and then silence, in which he fell into a considerable level of depression and anxiety. It's interesting that it parallels to some extent one of my favourite composers, which was Sibelius, who although he lived to 1957, composed all his famous symphonies, and a couple of further works, all by the time 1926, and then for the last 30-years of his life, in a similar way to Irving Berlin, composed absolutely nothing.

So now let me give you a couple of interesting points that I'd like to foreshadow in this presentation. It is extraordinary to me that Irving Berlin could not read music. It has said that he played the piano in the key of F-flat sharp, so he could stay on the black keys as much as possible. And he then was quoted as saying, "The key of C is for people who read music, unlike me." The story is told that in 1938, before the movie "Carefree", the orchestrator, Robert Russell Bennett, recalls Berlin composing "Change Partners". And at one point, Bennett played a diminished chord. "Is that the right chord?", Bennett asked.

He then was asked to play a whole series of chords, and then Berlin finally said, "No, that's the right one," not really being able to do it himself. So it's remarkable that the man who was considered to be American music itself, really had no musical education himself. That's the genius he was. Secondly, consider the following, and we will play both of these. If you think about "White Christmas", "Dreaming of a White Christmas", and you think about "God Bless America", is it not anomalous that the person who composed both of these was a Jew born in Russia, not even born in America.

And, yes, these are two of the most paradigmatic compositions in all of American music, and we'll get to them and their background in a moment. So we are talking about somebody who in some way encapsulates, and I want to emphasise this, encapsulates that experience of poverty-stricken Jewish talent that arrived in America, in this case in the late 19th century, or if you wish, in the early 20th century. Tomorrow night, I have the privilege of talking with David Peimer about the Marx Brothers, and although they were born in America, you could argue that the parallels about where they came from, and the poverty in which they were born are very similar.

And so here he was growing up in this poverty-stricken part of New York, being a singing waiter at Mike Pelham's Cafe where what he did, and this is particularly interesting, because it was a quintessential melting pot, the Lower East Side, he basically confronted a whole range of different cultures, which were there at the time. And what he was famous for in his early days, as a youth, was effectively being able to parody a mixture of Italian, German, Irish, and Jewish songs. That's what the customers wanted. When the pianist at the rival restaurant Callahan's wrote "Marucci Take A Steamboat" to gather publicity, Berlin's boss at Pelham's Cafe, Mike

Pelham's Cafe, Mike Salter, asked him to try his hand at writing lyrics. At that point, he'd only performed parodies, but he composed a song called "Mary from Sunny Italy" in 1907. And that was effectively the first original song that Berlin actually composed. And from then on, he started to get noticed. He got noticed by Waterson and Snyder, the publishing company, receiving an offer of \$25 for music and lyrics which he was supposed to compose.

And he rose very quickly eventually sharing the stage with Florence Ziegfeld. And it was at that particular point in time that he started getting his breakthroughs. The big breakthrough was in 1911 when he wrote what became a very major song, you could say the theme song for an entire generation called "Alexander's Ragtime Band." But I don't want to talk about that. I've tried to choose five of his compositions to give you a flavour because of the background to them, and how interesting they are, and how much they reflect on him as a person. So the first of the songs I want to play was composed the next year, in 1912, and because Berlin wrote so much, it's sometimes forgotten just how wide the repertoire was, and how, as it were, extensive the emotions that he was able to capture in his songs really were.

So here the first song I want to play for you is in 1912 he composed a song called, "When I Lost You." The background to this is simple. He married a woman called Dorothy Goetz in February 1912, they had their honeymoon in Chile. She then contracted typhoid fever, and by July she was dead. And for the next 13-years, Berlin was in excruciating mourning, regularly going to the grave to put flowers on the grave until he remarried. And he wrote this song, as it were, a lacrimose song in memory of his wife, who really, to a large degree, had been the love of his life. And just the first four-lines, or lines which would capture exactly what I'm talking about, "I lost the sunshine and the roses. "I lost the heavens of blue, "I lost the beautiful rainbow, "I lost the morning dew." A sense of considerable loss. Here it is sung by the incomparable Frank Sinatra.

Audio plays.

♪ I lost the sunshine ♪ ♪ And roses ♪ ♪ I lost the heavens of blue ♪ ♪ I lost the beautiful rainbow
♪ ♪ I lost the morning dew ♪ ♪ I lost the angel ♪ ♪ Who gave me ♪ ♪ Summer ♪ ♪ The whole
winter through ♪ ♪ I lost the gladness ♪ ♪ That turned into sadness ♪ ♪ When I lost you ♪ ♪ And I
lost the angel ♪ ♪ Who gave me ♪ ♪ Summer ♪ ♪ The whole winter through ♪ ♪ I lost the gladness
♪ ♪ That turned into sadness ♪ ♪ When I ♪ ♪ Lost ♪ ♪ You ♪

- Well, only probably Frank Sinatra could sing it like that. But many people have, although I think that's probably the most beautiful rendition, and that sense of sadness, of loss is quite extraordinary. And then I will play one other song, which reflects similar sentiments in Irving Berlin. But I want to move on to 1918. In 1918, Berlin became an American citizen. And it wasn't entirely coincidental, therefore, that he wrote a soldier-centric musical called "Yip Yip Yaphank" which would raise roughly something like \$150,000 on Broadway for the camp, which was an army camp during World War I.

The "God Bless America" was supposed to be the finale, but in fact it was a comical musical,

and as a result, he actually shelved the publication of "God Bless America" for a number of years. And what happened was that in 1938 there was a famous singer called Kate Smith, and she was in the market for a new song. Several years earlier she had won a Presidential Medal of Freedom. She wanted to change her image, and she approached Irving Berlin in need of a new patriotic song to perform on Armistice Day, which is now called Veterans Day, in 1938. And he basically raked up this old song that he had stashed away from his army days of 20-years earlier, and therefore what was born was "God Bless America".

It became a sensation within a very short space of time. It was somewhat controversial, because Smith herself was a controversial person who had performed racist songs in the past, and therefore there was some controversy in relation thereto. But it's very interesting, this song which essentially, if you may recall, has been sung over and over again, according to the book, "God Bless America - The Surprising History "of an Iconic Song", by Sheryl Kaskowitz, Smith sang it on the radio nearly every week for more than two-years. Berlin sold more than half-a-million copies of the sheet music in 1939 alone. When America entered the war, World War II, that song was consistently performed. It still is, on the night of September 11th, 2001, the terror attacks, several dozen members of Congress gathered at the steps at the Capitol, and after observing a moment's silence, they broke into a rendition of "God Bless America".

It's consistently sung thereafter. Let's just drill down a little bit, before I play the original Kate Smith's version from 1938. It's interesting, if Berlin had published the song at the time, it might not have been so successful, because the initial words had the following, it was a war song, "God bless America, "land that I love, stand beside her and guide her "to the right with the light from above "make her victorious on land and foam, "God bless America, my home sweet home." It's interesting that when I compare some of that to the prayer which we now say in shul, when we get there, for the State of Israel, there's some similarity there in the manner in which the words actually appear. But be that as it may, what is interesting, according to one of the biographers of Berlin, when he changed the words for 1938, he revealed a desire to promote peace.

And I quote from Bergreen's book, "Many Americans felt, as Berlin did, "almost no one wanted to go to war. "To express this widely shared aspiration, "the songwriter began giving thought "to the tricky task of composing a peace song "rather than a war song. "'I'd like to write a peace song' "he told the visiting journalist, "but it's hard to do so "because you have trouble dramatising peace, "easy to dramatise a war. "Yet music is so important, it changes thinking, "it influences everybody whether they know it or not. "Never before had he contemplated "writing a song to change or to mould public opinion "rather than articulating it, but here he did." And so what we've got is a song which essentially did allow patriotism to dramatise itself.

But in a sense, it was addressing the timeless desire for peace rather than the temporary pursuit of victory. And it became a song which in many ways became the national symbol for the United States. How extraordinary it was that a song written originally in 1918 by a man who'd just become an American citizen, became the paradigmatic song for the national symbol of the

United States. Here is the 1938 version sung by Kate Smith who, as I indicated, basically piloted the song in its early days.

Video plays.

- [Announcer] And now we take great pleasure in presenting to you the star of our programme, Miss Kate Smith.

- Hello, everybody. It is my happy privilege to introduce a new song "God Bless America". ♪
While the storm clouds gather ♪ ♪ Far across the sea ♪ ♪ Let us swear allegiance ♪ ♪ To a land
that's free ♪ ♪ Let us all be grateful ♪ ♪ For a land so fair ♪ ♪ As we raise our voices ♪ ♪ In a
solemn prayer ♪ ♪ God bless America ♪ ♪ Land that I love ♪ ♪ Stand beside her and guide her ♪
♪ Through the night with the light from above ♪ ♪ From the mountains to the prairies ♪ ♪ To the
oceans white with foam ♪ ♪ God bless America ♪ ♪ My home sweet home ♪ ♪ God bless America
♪ ♪ Land that I love ♪ ♪ Stand beside her and guide her ♪ ♪ Through the night with the light from
above ♪ ♪ From the mountains ♪ ♪ To the prairies ♪ ♪ To the oceans ♪ ♪ White with foam ♪ ♪ God
bless ♪ ♪ America ♪ ♪ My home ♪ ♪ Sweet home ♪ ♪ From the mountains ♪ ♪ To the prairies ♪ ♪
To the oceans white with foam ♪ ♪ God bless ♪ ♪ America ♪ ♪ My home ♪ ♪ Sweet ♪ ♪ Home ♪

- By the way, I just saw while on the chat line, quite rightly, as always on these lectures you give, there are people who know much more, certainly I feel always know much more than me about every topic that I do. And I'm sure it's probably true about others, but certainly who am I to speak about anybody else other than myself. And quite right, in 1940 Berlin established the God Bless America Fund, which gave royalties from the song to the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts Greater New York Councils. And I'm told certainly when I last looked since 2001, it had given each council more than \$2.5 million each. So yes, absolutely correct, whoever noted that on the chat line, quite right. So let me move on. I'm going to come back to "God Save America" a little later, 'cause I can't let it go quite. But I want to move on, if I may, because in this little menu of mine in an hour to try to capture this all is not easy.

Can I just say, 'cause I'm going to forget this, there are a whole series of books that I'm going to cite two, the one I just want to tell you about right now. And actually it's a series that we have on the series are very worthwhile. And that is a book by James Kaplan called "Irving Berlin, New York Genius." It's part of the Yale University series about Jewish genii. There are a whole range of them, and if you go on Amazon, you'll capture all of them. There's ones on Kafka, they're ones on Buber, they're all sorts of wonderful books. And the book by James Kaplan on Irving Berlin, if you're interested, is fabulous, and certainly I found really useful. So let me move on to "White Christmas", which of course has got its own history, and a very interesting history.

And as I indicated before we started the lecture, it's actually hard to lecture on Berlin, because there's so many different stories about him in this regard. But I'll give you a couple just to give you a sense. So the one story is that early in January 1940, he came bright and early in the morning, and he spoke to his longtime arranger, Helmy Kresa. By the way, I noticed on the Q&A

about how on earth could he compose this music? He had a whole system of people who actually transcribed the music for him. The man was a genius, they were all in his head. Mozart, they were all in his head, but Mozart could transcribe himself.

I'm not suggesting that Berlin was Mozart, but he was able to do that. Anyway, he comes down, he sees he's arranger Helmy Kresa and he says, "I want you to take down a song "I wrote over the weekend. "Not only is it the best song I ever wrote, "it's the best song anybody ever wrote." And that was "White Christmas". Now that's one version. There are other versions too that he may have actually begun composing the song rather earlier than 1940, in 1938 or 1939, when he started thinking about it. And it is interesting, we'll come back to this about the nature of the song, but there's no question about it that this song, which of course, utterly remarkable, it sold more than 50-million copies. It is one of the great singles of all time.

And when I say 50-million copies, I'm talking about just simply the Bing Crosby 1942 recording. We'll come back to Bing Crosby in a moment. But the tune itself has really been subjected to extraordinary levels of analysis. So, for example, Philip Roth, one of our great novelists, I never understood why he never won the Nobel Prize for literature, but I suppose that's another topic. He spoke about it as an example of schlockified Christianity, although he did say it had the power to diffuse antisemitism. The musical writer, Philip Furia, who wrote a lot about Berlin, called it the counterpart to Robert Frost's great modern poem, "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening", which used the simplest of rhymes and the barest of imagery to evoke a beautiful but melancholy scene.

The poet Carl Sandburg, writing in the midst of the Second World War said rather, I think very accurately, "We have learned to be a little sad, "a little lonesome without being sickly about it. "This feeling is caught in the song "of 1,000 juke boxes and the tune whistled "in streets and homes. "'I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas', "when we sing that we don't hate anybody, "way down under this latest hit of his, "Irving Berlin catches us where we love peace." And what is interesting about the song is of course there is a considerable level of nostalgia in the song. And it's very interesting, if I may say, and I'm going to come back to this again in this talk, but Berlin himself said, "Songs do well if they're based on one of three ideas, "firstly, home, secondly, love, "and thirdly, self-pity." We'll come back to self-pity in a moment, although the first song I played for you very much reflects that.

But in this particular sense of homelessness, or home, there was no coincidence that the huge initial popularity of "White Christmas" was amongst millions of American soldiers and sailors far away from home during World War II. And the words, "Just like the ones I used to know", that conjured up for so many of these American soldiers and sailors at this particular point of time in the year, and one can imagine this, they return to some form of home, of perhaps an idyllic childhood, of a return to normality, of something which may not have been there other than in the imaginary, but which looked a lot better than that which they were experiencing through the horrors of war. And so there's much about that song, about nostalgia. You could say it's very Jewish in its own way. In a way, if you listen to the text of the song, which was changed itself, I

might add, it very much captures that idea that we say when we put away the Torah on a Shabbat morning, , renew our days as of old, the longing for something that's no longer there, which we want to return to. And therefore it's a curious song, because it doesn't only just celebrate Christmas in a happy sense.

There is something of the melancholy, of the sadness in it. And there is something else about this, by the way, that Berlin himself, whole life was scarred by profound loss. I've already indicated that, 13 when his father died, losing of his first wife, as I've mentioned. And when he was 40-years-old, his son Irving Berlin Jr. died from a crib death. When, on Christmas morning, 1928. So when you listen to the song, it's a song that encapsulates so many different emotions. And it certainly did for many people at the time that it came out in the early '40s, a time of war, and a time, as it were, in which there was something beautiful to celebrate, which was both in the imaginary, and as it were in the home. And here we have the famous Bing Cosby version which he sings now.

Audio plays.

♪ I'm dreaming ♪ ♪ Of a white Christmas ♪ ♪ Just like the ones I used to know ♪ ♪ Where the
treetops glisten ♪ ♪ And children listen ♪ ♪ To hear sleigh bells in the snow ♪ ♪ I'm dreaming ♪ ♪
Of a white Christmas ♪ ♪ With every Christmas card I write ♪ ♪ May your days ♪ ♪ Be merry and
bright ♪ ♪ And may all your ♪ ♪ Christmases be white ♪ ♪ I'm dreaming ♪ ♪ Of a white Christmas
♪ ♪ Just like the ones I used to know ♪ ♪ Where the treetops glisten ♪ ♪ And children listen ♪ ♪ To
hear ♪ ♪ Sleigh bells in the snow ♪ ♪ I'm dreaming ♪ ♪ Of a white Christmas ♪ ♪ With every
Christmas card I write ♪ ♪ May your days ♪ ♪ Be merry and bright ♪ ♪ And may all your ♪ ♪
Christmases be white ♪

- You know, until I read about Irving Berlin, I never quite understood this song. When I was a student in UCT, during my law studies, I used to work. Those of you who know me find that rather hilarious, given my notorious reputation for sartorial elegance. But I used to work at the tie department at Garlicks in Cape Town. Those of you who come from South Africa and Cape Town, probably remember it, Adderley Street. And of course, I used to work at Christmas time, and this song amongst others, like "Jingle Bells", would blare all the time. I could never quite understand, I never quite understood at the time why this song seemed so sad when this was supposed to be a celebration.

And so let me offer you one final interpretation of it. In the book by Furia and Wood, who write about Irving Berlin, this is what they say, "'White Christmas' sidesteps all religious associations. "But where 'Easter Parade' converted "the religious holiday into communal urban festival, "'White Christmas evokes the associations of home, "family and landscape that are as endemic to Christmas "as the religious celebration, "but makes them all the more poignant "by having them voiced by a singer "who cannot share but only recall them. "If Berlin's melancholy Russian heritage "ever came to bear on the perfect subject, "it was in this secular carol of nostalgic loneliness."

Which I think that idea of nostalgic loneliness captures exactly what I was trying to say earlier. I want to move on, if I may, to the fourth of the songs that I am going to play for you. But in order to do that, I need to cite another text, which I found particularly influential in preparing for this lecture, and which I'd read some while back. Trouble is I can't find the damn book anymore, but it's somewhere in my library, a book by Andrea Most called "Making Americans, Jews and the Broadway Musicals." Andrea Most, M-o-s-t, published in 2004. And why I'm mentioning her is because the next song that I'm going to play, "There's No Business Like Show Business", comes from the 1946 musical, "Annie Get Your Gun."

And Most says an interesting insight, she says that "Annie Get Your Gun" is an immigrant story in which Sitting Bull is the assimilated native who actually supports love. In short, he's a Jewish character hidden inside the ethnicity, which is still acceptably caricatured, and Annie must be assimilated into high society and show business. Now where she's correct, if you read her book, is the practise of what she refers to as veiling Jewish characteristics inside others characters, which Berlin together with Rodgers and Hammerstein helped invent, follows the same phenomenon that occurs in Berlin's life. Although the Jew will always still be there, it is hidden in the primary identity, the American. Once "Annie gets Your Gun" is viewed as an assimilatory musical, similarities to Berlin's life exude.

The most important being the fact that in America, Berlin and Annie both learn that they can achieve incredible wealth and fame and stature by doing what comes naturally, participating in show business. And therefore the hit song, one of the hit songs from "Annie Get Your Gun", I could have played many, "There's No Business Like Show Business" is not only an anthem for his profession, but for his life, because it actually shows how excited he is by the opportunities that existed for him and others in American theatre. So here is "There's No Business Like Show Business".

Audio plays.

♪ There's no business like show business ♪ ♪ Like no business I know ♪ ♪ Everything about it is appealing ♪ ♪ Everything the traffic will allow ♪ ♪ Nowhere could you get that happy feeling ♪ ♪ When you are stealing that extra bow ♪ ♪ There's no people like show people ♪ ♪ They smile when they are low ♪ ♪ Yesterday they told you you would not go far ♪ ♪ That night you open and there you are ♪ ♪ Next day on your dressing room they've hung a star ♪ ♪ Let's go on with the show ♪ ♪ The costumes, the scenery, the makeup, the props ♪ ♪ The audience that lifts you when you're down ♪ ♪ The headaches, the heartaches, the backaches, the flops ♪ ♪ The sheriff who'll escort you out of town ♪ ♪ The opening when your heart beats like a drum ♪ ♪ The closing when the customers don't come ♪ ♪ There's no business like show business ♪ ♪ Like no business I know ♪ ♪ You get word before the show has started ♪ ♪ That your favourite uncle died at dawn ♪ ♪ And top of that, your Pa and Ma have parted ♪ ♪ You're broken-hearted, but you go on ♪ ♪ There's no people like show people ♪ ♪ They smile when they are low ♪ ♪ Even with a turkey that you know will fold ♪ ♪ You maybe stranded out in the cold ♪ ♪ Still you wouldn't

change it for a sack of gold ♪ ♪ Let's go on with the show ♪ ♪ Let's go on with the show ♪

- That was Ethel Merman known actually when she was born as Ethel Zimmerman, who was a very famous actress and singer, singing that particular song, which she made very famous in her own right. And of course, I do think it encapsulates the celebration that Berlin felt in so far as his own success was concerned at the time by 1946. So I now, as we come towards the end of this lecture, I come to the fifth of the songs I want to play. And this goes back again to a remark I made earlier. I said to you that Berlin said that songs are successful if they reflect on home, on love or self pity. Well here is a song again written in 1922, well sorry, in 1926, but we're going to hear a different recording, I'll come to that moment, called "All by Myself".

And it was written just before his mother died in 1922. It was written as a meditation on solitude and the misery of getting old, of growing old. It really is about that. And in the 74-weeks after it came out in '26, it sold 1.5 million records. Just think of the words, they're so simple, and yet they're so interesting. "I sit alone with a table and a chair, "so unhappy there, playing solitaire". And he takes this idea of the children's boast, all by myself, and he converts it into a song of despair. The despair he felt when his mother died, and the loss of his mother, as it were, the last real connection to his family. Now what is interesting, I've chosen because I think it's the best recording I've ever heard, the 1962 recording by Bobby Darin.

Those of you who listen to these lectures will know that David Peimer, a lovely lecturer that he gave not that long ago, played one of my favourite songs "Mack the Knife" sung by Bobby Darin, it was fantastic. Why this is particularly interesting as well is because Bobby Darin died in 1973 at the age of 37. And as some of the commentaries on the song point out, ironically his own mother suffered the same fate of loss, solitude, of being by herself as a result of the death of her son Bobby. But here is Bobby Darin absolutely just building up the tension of the song with the craft that he exhibited throughout his short career.

♪ All by myself in the morning ♪ ♪ All by myself in the night ♪ ♪ I sit alone with a table and a chair
♪ ♪ So unhappy there ♪ ♪ Playing solitaire ♪ ♪ All by myself I get lonely ♪ ♪ Watching the clock on
the shelf ♪ ♪ I long to lay my weary head ♪ ♪ On somebody's shoulder ♪ ♪ How I hate to grow
older ♪ ♪ All by myself ♪ ♪ All by myself in the morning ♪ ♪ I am all by myself in the night ♪ ♪ I sit
alone with a table and a chair ♪ ♪ So unhappy there ♪ ♪ Playing solitaire ♪ ♪ 'Cause I'm all by
myself, I get lonely ♪ ♪ Watching the clock on the shelf ♪ ♪ I want to lay my weary head ♪ ♪ On
somebody's shoulder ♪ ♪ I don't want to ever grow older ♪ ♪ All by myself ♪ ♪ I am all by myself
in the morning ♪ ♪ I am all by myself in the night ♪ ♪ I sit alone with a table and a chair ♪ ♪ So
very unhappy there ♪ ♪ Just dealing solitaire and cheating ♪ ♪ All by myself I get me lonely ♪ ♪
Just watching the clock on the shelf ♪ ♪ I'm going to lay my weary head ♪ ♪ On somebody's
shoulder ♪ ♪ I'm never growing older ♪ ♪ Not by myself ♪

- I can't help but end this lecture with a story that some of you know, I've picked up on the chat

line, and some of you don't know, so let me share it with you. It's the famous story of Irving Berlin and Winston Churchill. And even if you've heard it, it's still damn funny. So it turns out that Irving Berlin comes to London and he receives an invitation to have lunch with Winston Churchill in Downing Street. The point was Churchill had been getting these incredibly fine dispatches about the war, and about what was going on in America through Isaiah Berlin, you may remember, he's been mentioned many times, and certainly deserves his own lecture on our series because his contribution to social theory, political theory is just immense.

And even those of us who are lawyers would certainly have studied him because of the extraordinary lecture he gave with regard to the question of liberty. But be that as it may. So old Winnie Churchill was getting these fantastic, these thoughtful dispatches, written by Isaiah Berlin from Washington. And when he heard that Berlin was visiting London, he immediately got his staff to invite Isaiah Berlin to lunch. The problem was, as often happens, the bureaucrats got it all wrong, and so they invited Irving Berlin. So Irving Berlin presents himself at 10 Downing Street. He's given a cigar and a glass of brandy. Churchill then appears, thinking he's now going to be talking to Isaiah Berlin. And Churchill immediately gets on to the details at hand, he says to Irving Berlin, "How is war production in the United States?"

Berlin's a bit taken aback by the question, he's a composer, not a war correspondent, "No, we're doing fine," he said. "What do you think of Roosevelt's chances of reelection?", said Churchill. Again he's thinking, "I don't quite know what to say." He gives the obvious answer, "I think he could win again," "Good", says Churchill, "Very good." And then Churchill says, "But if he won't run again", and Berlin says, "I don't think I'll vote at all then." Then Churchill then says, "Well that's very interesting, "you mean you think you have a vote?" Churchill said. "Well that's an extraordinary manifestation "of Anglo-American cooperation that you'd have a vote. "That would be wonderful," he said. "If only Anglo-American cooperation reached such a point "that we could vote in each other's elections, Professor, "you have my admiration, you must stay for lunch."

Throughout the lunch, Irving Berlin was clearly haunted by the feeling that he was at the wrong place at the wrong time, particularly as Churchill kept on referring to him as Professor. Eventually he turned silent, because that was the best he could do. And Churchill then decided to ignore him, and get on with the lunch and his brandy. The lunch came to the end and as Berlin left the room, Churchill was heard to whisper loudly, "Berlin's just like most of these bureaucrats, "wonderful on paper, but disappointing when you meet them "face to face." It's a fantastic story about mis-recognition that he really meant Isaiah Berlin.

I'm going to play out again with a version of "God Bless America". I couldn't resist this. Yes, there are a number of points on the chatline about Katie Smith being a racist, she was. Also Katie Smith being an antisemite, she was. I merely played that because she made the song famous. So on historical record, one has to do that, but here is the most magnificent rendition of it by our very own, the incomparable Barbara Streisand.

Audio plays.

♪ While the storm clouds gather ♪ ♪ Far across the sea ♪ ♪ Let us swear allegiance ♪ ♪ To a land that's free ♪ ♪ Let us all be grateful ♪ ♪ For a land so fair ♪ ♪ As we raise our voices ♪ ♪ In a solemn prayer ♪ ♪ God bless America ♪ ♪ Land that I love ♪ ♪ Stand beside her ♪ ♪ And guide her ♪ ♪ Through the night with the light from above ♪ ♪ From the mountains ♪ ♪ To the prairies ♪ ♪ To the oceans ♪ ♪ White with foam ♪ ♪ God bless America ♪ ♪ My home sweet home ♪ ♪ Please God bless my America ♪ ♪ My home sweet ♪ ♪ Home sweet ♪ ♪ Home ♪ ♪ Sweet ♪ ♪ Home ♪

- Well, that's it. I hope you enjoyed that. I noticed some people preferred the Katie Smith version, fair enough, I can understand why, it's done slightly differently, but there we are. Judi, I don't quite know, am I supposed to now do the... I can't find them now.

- [Judi] There seems to be 30-chats in the queue.

Q&A and Comments:

Q: I've suddenly gone. Yeah, but I wonder if I can just answer one question, which has come up over and over again before we end. 'Cause it seems to be the main one, which is how did he compose this music if he didn't know how to do music or understand music?

A: Well, there are a lot of musicians over time have been in that particular position. But the point about it was that at the time he was writing, particularly in the early part of the 20th century, many of the musical publishers had arrangers, and must remember that many African-American writers of music were similarly self-taught. They weren't able to do the notation properly. So like Berlin, they'd bring in what they had, sometimes they'd just whistle the melody, sometimes the piano cords to go with it, and the arranger would fill in the blanks. In fact, "Alexander's Ragtime Band", which was perhaps a song that made Berlin absolutely a star, was dictated to a man called Alfred Doyle. Shame, he got only 50-cents a page for it.

So there you are. And then of course the other thing was he bought was called a transposing piano, Berlin, around about 1910. And my understanding is on the one side of the keyboard was a small wheel and if you turned the wheel, the keyboard shifted right or left relative to the strings, positioning the hammers over the higher or lower notes that they would ordinarily strike. And this would allow him, as it were, to compose, to transpose, it was a transposing piano. So quite frankly it wasn't quite that unique, but there you are.

- [Judi] That's great, Dennis. I'm just having a quick look through the Q&A if there's anything...

- Okay, that was one that certainly kept on cropping up. And suddenly I've lost them all, I don't know why.

- [Judi] That's okay. I'm just having a quick look.

- And anything else that anybody wants that was pressing, of course?

- [Judi] It's really just wonderful.

- I'm more than happy, more than happy to do something on Beethoven at some point later. Nothing like Ludwig to build up spirits.

- [Judi] Does anyone have any other questions for Dennis? I don't think there's anything else, Dennis. But thank you so much, and we'll see you again tomorrow.

- Yeah, we'll see you tomorrow. Great, okay.

- [Judi] Thank you to everybody. And goodnight, thank you.

- Take care, all the best. Thanks, Judi, thanks so much for everything. Brilliant.

- [Judi] You're welcome, see you tomorrow.

- [Dennis] Works wonderfully for me, thanks, bye.