

Music

# No passion in Phantom

*The Phantom of the Opera*  
Original London Cast  
Polydor Compact Disc

review by E.S. Petrusczak

Perhaps we may frighten away the ghost of so many years ago with a little illumination...

And so begins *The Phantom of the Opera*, arguably Andrew Lloyd Webber's best and most sumptuous work to date. Millions of dollars in advance ticket sales, along with Broadway's recent creative malaise, ensure that Webber's spectre will haunt America's theatre for a long while to come.

*Phantom*, like the majority of Webber's megatriumphs (*Evita*, *Cats*, *Starlight Express*), is long on melody and soaring orchestrations. Unfortunately, what reduces this seeming tour de force to just below brilliance is its lack of passion.

Since 1971's *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Webber has been fashionably dismissed by critics as pandering to the mass audience by way of his distracting use of repetitive themes, overblown orchestrations, and technological gimmickry (high-tech production values). While his scores can be interpreted as derivative and dependent on pastiche, it is also worth noting that Webber is a prime subject of Broadway resentment toward British musical imports, especially since it seems that half the musicals currently playing there are his.

Lloyd Webber loosely bases his *Phantom* on Gaston Leroux's 1911 novel, *Le Fantôme de l'Opéra*, and focuses primarily on the relationship between the Phantom (Michael Crawford) and chorus-singer Christine Daae (Sarah Brightman). The story is reminiscent of the *Beauty and the Beast*: a disfigured musical genius, who lives in the basement of the Paris Opera House, falls in love with a beautiful chorus girl, and secretly coaches her to become the Opera's headliner. When

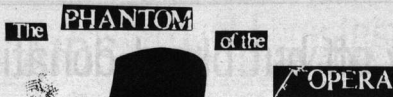
her boyfriend, the Vicomte de Chagny (Steve Barton), comes on the scene, the "Phantom" goes berserk and writes his beloved an opera, only to have her reject him. Defeated, he retreats into his prison to die.

*Phantom* contains some of Webber's loveliest songs. Tunes such as "Think of Me" and "All I Ask of You" showcase Brightman's lush, coloratura soprano. At times, however, novice lyricist Charles Hart dampens the full effect of Webber's melodies with departures to simplistic and trite lyrics that appear to reveal little about the characters who sing them. Pseudo-Hammersteins like "Think of me, think of me fondly, when we say goodbye" and "say you'll share with me, one love, one lifetime" sound wildly romantic, yet these clichés are devoid of feeling.

The title track, "The Phantom of the Opera", is the only "rock and roll" song of the musical, and is the most obvious departure from the predominant operatic style. In this piece, Webber's mastery at mixing musical styles into a congruous arrangement is evident. Both Crawford and Brightman are excellent in this composition — Brightman for her inspired vocals, and Crawford for his enormous depth and range.

The "opera" of *Phantom* takes the form of three parodies: "Hannibal", "Il Muto", and "Don Juan Triumphant", in which Webber references and spoofs such composers as Meyerbeer and Salieri. The obvious baroque elements of the score surround the Phantom and his theme, "Prima Donna", a noisy sextet, as Webber's only attempt at highbrow composing in the score, and is unlikely to become a landmark Broadway operatic.

The compositions, however, which are likely to become successes are "Angel of Music" and "The Music of the Night". "Angel" is a lavish, sweeping, gorgeous work. "Music of the Night", the richest and best song of Webber's musical, is the Phantom's declaration of love-to-and seduction-of Christine. Crawford's expressive tenor bewitches the



listener and includes him in the seduction which is really a cry for acceptance and perhaps a credo shared also by Webber in his own desire for critical acceptance.

Not surprisingly, the superstructure of *Phantom* is similar to other Andrew Lloyd Webber works: Act I introduces the major themes, and Act II recycles them. In *Phantom*, Webber keeps his themes fresh and an integral extension of his story. The score is symmetric throughout, and reflects Webber's effortless handling of his project.

Unlike the song-filled Act I, the story-based, mainly-sung Act II stems from the musical's plot exposition, and is, at times,

difficult to follow. More uneven than Act I, Act II introduces only one new ballad "Wishing You Were Somehow Here Again", for no apparent purpose, except perhaps to once again feature Brightman's (Webber's wife) talents.

Although pricey (at least on compact disc), *The Phantom of the Opera* is a must-have for both Andrew Lloyd Webber fans, and those curious about the current Broadway phenomenon alike. Fans of the silent or sound film adaptations will not be disappointed. "Music of the Night" alone justifies the investment. Although imperfect, *Phantom* is most enjoyable and sure to stand up as one of Webber's finest.

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