



1819 NEWS

Allen Mendenhall: 60 years of music and memory

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 12.01.25



YouTube/Rodgers & Hammerstein

Certain films arrive in childhood like unopened gifts beneath a tree, their ribbons gleaming with promise, their mysteries yet to be revealed. “The Sound of Music” was just that in my house, received annually as the calendar pages turned their final leaf, as inevitable and welcome as the scent of pine needles and cinnamon, as necessary to the season as starlight itself.

This year, I find myself contemplating, with wonder and melancholy, that 60 years have passed since Julie Andrews first appeared on that Austrian mountainside, arms flung wide, voice soaring into the impossible blue of a Hollywood heaven.

Sixty years.

Yet the film refuses to age, refuses to become merely nostalgic, refuses to relinquish its grip on generation after generation of hearts.

I have, stored in that repository of modern memory we call an iPhone, a small video treasure: my daughter Gabriela, then perhaps three years old, standing dangerously close to the television screen, her small voice earnest and slightly off-key as she performed “So Long, Farewell.” She even attempted that marvelous bit where little Gretl – the cherubic little one – lies down on the floor before bidding everyone goodnight.

The imitation was imperfect, wonderfully so, but the devotion was complete. Children understand instinctively what we adults sometimes forget: that ritual matters, that repetition contains its own magic.

A different enchantment colored my own childhood viewing. I watched Liesl with what I can only describe as male amazement: that breathless, wordless awe that precedes understanding.

Charmian Carr’s electric eyes and flowing hair seemed to me then, and perhaps still now, the most stunning combination of beauty the cinema had yet produced. She was 16 going on 17, and I was young enough to believe that such perfection might actually exist in the world beyond the screen.

But it was the music – always the music – that adhered to the soul like adhesive. “Edelweiss,” particularly.

That deceptively simple song, with its gentle three-quarter time and its aching tenderness, became the soundtrack to an entire semester of my life when, in college, I studied with a group of English majors at the Shakespeare Institute in Stratford-upon-Avon, part of the University of Birmingham.

One evening, innocent as we were, we gathered to watch “The Sound of Music” together, and for months afterward, “Edelweiss” played on an endless loop in my head, a hauntingly beautiful tune. Little did I know then that my son Noah, when he reached age 10, would stand before his school’s Christmas concert and sing that very song as a solo, his young voice carrying that same prayer-like melody into another generation’s memory.

I watched the film many times with my maternal grandmother, who departed this world in August 2024, taking with her so many stories, so many kindnesses, so many small, perfect moments. The film sat on a shelf at her beach house, among other classics that she and my grandfather, Papa, had collected: a carefully curated library of civilization's gentler dreams.

In December 2003, I found myself in Vienna, Austria, on the actual Sound of Music tour with a group of friends. The weather conspired against us; we couldn't climb the mountain where Maria had twirled in the opening sequence, though from our earthbound vantage point it became abundantly clear that Maria could never have descended in time before the church bells rang.

Movie magic, we reminded ourselves. The church and the Captain's mansion appeared much smaller in person, as monuments always do when myth meets reality. But walking those Christmas markets with friends, warming our hands on cups of hot cocoa, breathing in the scent of spiced cider, watching the lights transform the winter darkness into something enchanted, feeling the warmth that can exist between human beings even when the air itself is freezing – that was real.

As real as anything I've known.

The film, of course, contains multitudes. It's a love story set against the horrible backdrop of Nazism, romance blooming in the shadow of unspeakable evil. It reminds us – and maybe this is why it endures as a Christmas film, why it belongs to that season of hope and light – that beauty and goodness persist even in humanity's darkest hours. That a family can sing together while the world tears itself apart. That courage sometimes looks like seven children and two adults crossing the Alps on foot. That civilization itself, that fragile, precious thing we build together, depends not on grand gestures but on small acts of defiance: teaching children to sing, refusing to fly a flag, choosing love over expedience.

At Christmastime, we watch “The Sound of Music” because we need to believe that these small rebellions matter, that Maria and the Captain and those seven children made it over the mountains to freedom, that somewhere in the darkness, edelweiss still blooms, small and white and impossibly brave.

We need to believe that what we pass to our children – songs, stories, the capacity for joy – might suffice to save them, and in saving them, to save ourselves.

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