

## **Is TV the Future of the Musical?**

By Brooke Thomson

In recent years, maybe starting with the rise of HBO's series *The Sopranos*, we've seen a shift in high-quality drama entertainment make its way from the silver screen to the home theater. Although we will still go see the Oscar-Noms like *Unbroken*, there isn't the turn out there used to be to sit through a 3 hour movie for a book everyone's read, in a theater with gum on the seats and smells like popcorn.

Don't get me wrong, the movie experience is wonderful and there's nothing that can replace it. But as home entertainment gets better, people stay in. Especially our darker, complicated shows like *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men*, and *Game of Thrones*, have come into vogue.

But is it the same for the more light-hearted musical genre? In film studies, it is typically remarked that popularity of the musical reflects a dark time and story line, and the score serves to show the character's dreams that are removed from reality. Yet, with the ability to binge-watch and a changed viewing experience, that can be changing. Audiences are becoming willing to hang in there with complicated shows.

There may be other predecessors, but I mark *Glee* as the first genre-changer. HBO might have been the trendsetter with its *Flight of the Conchords*, but *Glee* was the first network show with a big appeal. The troop also performed their shows live touring the country. The show peaked popularity around 2009-2011 when it's catchy renditions of pop songs and oldies brought everyone into high school *Glee Club*.

Jump forward to 2015, ABC's *Galavant* tops IMDB's list of most popular television musical, with *Glee* in second. The Monty-Pythesque show is set in medieval times, with outbursts of glib tunes and quippy present day dialogue. The only other show on the list that isn't for children is "Smash", the Debra Messing show about New York Broadway actors. It crashed and burned in its second season.

But we are seeing a number of musicals on TV even if they aren't labeled as such. ABC's hit drama *Nashville* features at least 2 or 3 songs an episode, special concerts with real country stars, and live music. Without the music it's almost a soap, but every season there are a number of hit-worthy songs that the show will have you buy on iTunes.

This year Fox came out with *Empire*, the show about a rapper trying to keep his record label thriving and choose one of his 3 sons to run the label. Again, Fox doesn't market this as a "musical" but each episode is heavy with rap and R&B music that seamlessly fits into the plot line and is downloadable on iTunes. Fox also holds it's reputation for being a little younger and edgier than other networks and probably plans to do well by generating it's own popular music if the show succeeds.

Amazon also chose a musical for one of its first breaks in producing TV. *Mozart in the Jungle* features the cutthroat world of the New York City Orchestra. Although produced by Roman Coppola and Jason Schwartzman, *Mozart in the Jungle* is very stylistic and compelling to watch. On the downside, its attempt at “high society New York” comes across a little contrived, and might not have the strength to compel viewers to start listening to classical music. The highbrow audience it might be trying to reach (one with an Amazon Prime subscription who will download the soundtrack there) might be turned off by its “sex, drugs, and classical music” attempt.

So is TV a place to unwind with a musical after work? Maybe. The structure is very profitable for network shows that risk losing viewers to streaming services. There’s additional revenue to make from the songs, and new songs to generate every season. And at the end of the day audiences seem ready to invest in more diverse and complicated shows, even if they don’t know they’re watching “a musical”.