

## Film Commentary: *The Sound of Music*

I consider *The Sound of Music* (1965) to be a perfect film. It has the grandeur of Salzburg and the Austrian Alps as its background, it has very charismatic and talented actors and voices, and it balances a beautiful love story with clever musical lyrics. It was also inspired by actual events from 1938, when Austria was under the impending threat of invasion by NAZI Germany. Phillip Scheuer of the **LOS ANGELES TIMES** described the film as "*three hours of visual and vocal brilliance.*"

**Maria** (Julie Andrews) is an aspiring nun (or "Novitiate") at Salzburg's **Nonnberg Abbey**. She is spirited, pious and humble, but headstrong and undisciplined. Yet, despite her virtues, she doesn't fit in at the abbey where quiet reflection and discipline are expected. Thus, the **Mother Abbess** (Peggy Wood) wisely recognizes that **Maria's** personality is much better suited to the world outside the abbey. She sends her to be a governess to the seven children of Retired Naval **Captain Georg von Trapp** (Christopher Plummer,) whose children lost their mother a few years before. (Song: "*How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?*")



Film Location for the "*von Trapp Villa*"

When **Maria** arrives at the von Trapp villa, she immediately gets into trouble as she often did at the abbey. While waiting to meet the **Captain**, she enters an elegant ballroom, and pantomimes dancing to an imaginary orchestra. She is interrupted by the **Captain**, who rebukes her and sternly insists that there are certain rooms in the house that are not to be disturbed. He also criticizes the drabness of her dress. She explains that she willed her clothes to the poor when she entered the abbey, but kept the dress she's wearing because "**the poor didn't want this one.**"

Since the **Captain** lost his wife, he has sought refuge in military discipline to mask his grief. Upon **Maria's** arrival at the von Trapp household, the **Captain** emphatically tells her that "**The first rule of this house is discipline.**" He has trained his seven children to respond to a *bosun's whistle*, which he uses to order them to fall into formation or march. Each responds to a unique signal, so the **Captain** insists that **Maria** adopt this technique to summon them. **Maria** defiantly refuses to whistle at the children -- or respond to it herself -- because it is too humiliating. She declares that whistles are for cats and dogs, not children.



**Captain von Trapp's Strict Military Discipline**

After **Maria** stubbornly rejects his whistle, the **Captain** asks her, "**Fraulein, were you this much trouble at the abbey?**" To this she sincerely and hilariously replies, "**Oh, MUCH more, sir.**" Now the stage is set for a battle of wills between the **Captain's** insistence upon military discipline, and **Maria's** spontaneity, candor, sincerity, and *joie-de-vivre*. In his grief, the **Captain** has failed to recognize that by prioritizing military discipline, he has removed all the joy, affection, laughter and music from his home, as if the NAZIs had already invaded. **Maria** believes it is God's Will that she help to make the von Trapp family whole again.

When **Maria** arrived, the **Captain** was courting a wealthy woman from Vienna, **Baroness Elsa von Schrader** (Eleanor Parker.) The children treat her respectfully, but the **Baroness** is hardly the maternal type. Her world consists of endless parties, attended by frivolous socialites for whom it's important to *see and be seen*. One day after **Maria's** arrival, the **Captain** left to visit the **Baroness**, planning to return by car with her later to meet his children. Meanwhile, **Maria** defied the **Captain's** orders to study and march every day in his absence, and instead, taught the children to sing and took them on picnics and adventures throughout Salzburg.

After the **Captain** returns with the **Baroness**, they find **Maria** and the children laughing joyfully as they return from boating on the lake, which ends abruptly when the boat overturns near the shore. Angered by the chaos, the **Captain** whistles them into formation to introduce them to the **Baroness**, and then tersely dismisses them to change clothes. After the **Baroness** discretely excuses herself, the **Captain** heatedly reprimands **Maria**, who pleads with him to show the children greater love and affection. He resents the children's frivolity -- and **Maria's** critique of his parenting even more -- and abruptly discharges her. Just then he hears voices in song coming from the house, which **Maria** informs him are his children serenading the **Baroness**.

**Maria** explains to him that she taught them some songs to sing for the **Baroness** while he was away. When the **Captain** finds them in the

ballroom harmonizing angelically, he is profoundly moved. He even joins them by singing "***Edelweiss***," an Austrian love song he hasn't sung since his wife died. It is here where he finally recognizes that ***Maria*** has returned joy, laughter and music to his home. He admits to ***Maria*** that he behaved badly, and apologizes to her. He insists that she stay as governess, but then quickly catches himself and **asks** her to stay.



### **Maria Returns Joy, Laughter and Music to the House**

The **Baroness** mildly reprimands the **Captain** for not telling her how charming his children are. She then suggests that he throw a gala party, which he obligingly does to introduce her to his friends, neighbors and acquaintances. ***Maria*** and the children observe the dancing from the adjacent, outdoor patio, where ***Maria*** shows them the *Ländler* folk dance. The **Captain** is irresistibly drawn to the patio where ***Maria*** is, and dances with her. When they dance very closely, she becomes flustered and embarrassed, and even blushes brightly. The **Baroness** discovers them and declares facetiously, "**What a lovely couple you make.**"

The **Baroness** is guileful, so her jealousy prompts her to tell **Maria** how obvious it is that she and the **Captain** are in love. **Maria** is shocked by this possibility, so perhaps fearing scandal, she returns to the abbey and remains in seclusion for days. Finally, the **Mother Abbess** summons **Maria** to find out why she returned, and manages to extract from her that she may be in love with the **Captain**. **Maria** assumes this is wrong because she has vowed to devote her life to God: however, the **Mother Abbess** wisely observes that, "**If you love this man, it doesn't mean you love God any less.**" She then orders **Maria** to return to the von Trapps.



**Maria Returns to the von Trapps**

Music is a beautifully employed *motif* in this film. Salzburg was the birthplace of Mozart, so music may have greater significance and meaning there than elsewhere. Music is also a metaphor for the joy,

freedom and spirituality found in free societies, which are under threat from the impending NAZI *Anschluss* ("invasion.") **Maria** has known and loved the Alps since she was a child, and believes they sing to her. (Song: "*The Sound of Music.*") And, it was the **Salzberg Music Festival** that provided the opportunity for their escape to Switzerland.

The Austrian Alps also serve as a recurring *motif*. The opening scene consists of breathtaking aerial views of Salzburg and the Austrian Alps, emphasizing their majesty and timeless beauty. When the **Mother Abbess** orders **Maria** to return to the von Trapps, she encourages **Maria** to find God's Will in her life. (Song: "*Climb Every Mountain.*") At the end of the film, the von Trapps must flee invading NAZIs by crossing the Alps into Switzerland with two very young children. The **Mother Abbess** soothes **Maria's** fears by quoting *Psalm 121*, Verse 1 (KJV): "**I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help.**"



**von Trapp's Escape the NAZI *Anschluss* Through the Alps**