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## The BBC Radio and Working Class Entertainment: The Case of ‘Variety’

By Mohamed Chamekh

*I should like also to have said a great deal about Marie Lloyd, ... about Little Tich, who took Paris by storm; about Vesta Tilley and Mark Sheridan; also about Miss Ada Reeve, and about Mr. George Robey. To her, and to him, and to the shades of those others, I apologise for my silence. The work of all of them gave me great delight in my youth.<sup>1</sup>*

Beerbohm, Max. ‘Music Halls of My Youth.’ *The Listener*, vol. 51, no. 1298, 14 Jan. 1954, p. 95.

As the theme of this conference is the BBC and Fiction, it is important to establish the relations between the BBC and music and in a second stage the relations between music and fiction. For the BBC and music, it is relatively easy to establish the relationship as this could be described as an intrinsic relationship as it is almost impossible to talk about broadcasting without music.

For music and fiction, it is important to refer to the ‘intermedial’ relationship between the two. Many musical works were appropriated in literature and musical works were adapted in literature (for instance, Bach’s Goldberg Variations) and some fictional works adapted musical forms. There were attempts by several composers to render musically the works described in meticulous detail in Thomas Mann’s *Doktor Faustus*—and that is a case of fiction into music.<sup>2</sup>

The various relations between fiction and music belongs to the ‘intermedial’ potential of fiction/literature in general.<sup>3</sup> This makes part of an expanding field commonly referred to as intermediality studies dealing with ‘inter-art relations’.<sup>4</sup> The term ‘intermediality’ refers to the

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<sup>1</sup> Beerbohm, Max. ‘Music Halls of My Youth.’ *The Listener*, vol. 51, no. 1298, 14 Jan. 1954, p. 95.

<sup>2</sup> Theodore Ziolkowski (2017). *Music into Fiction : Composers Writing, Compositions Imitated*. Publisher: Boydell & Brewer.

<sup>3</sup> Handbook of Intermediality Literature - Image - Sound - Music de Gabriele Rippl. CHAPTER BY 24. Literature and Music: Theory. Werner Wolf. pp. 459–474

<sup>4</sup> CHAPTER BY Werner Wolf. Literature and Music: Theory. Werner Wolf. pp: 459–474

relationships between media and is used to describe a huge range of cultural phenomena which involve more than one medium.<sup>5</sup>

To recapitulate, the relation between music and fiction is omnipresent and the same applies to the relationship between the BBC and music. This talk is focused on the BBC and a strand of British music, the music hall, which is used interchangeably in this paper with the word ‘Variety’. The selection of Max Beerbohm’s quote to start this talk is meant to illustrate the importance of the music hall and music hall performers like Little Tich, Vesta Tilley, Mr. George Robey and others, who managed as stated by Mx Beerbohm, to bring delight into the lives of the masses.

Part 1 of this talk describes the development of Variety on the BBC. Part 2 deals with the problems between the Variety interests and the BBC and the last part explores the perceptions of the Variety programs by the BBC audience.

Since its inception in 1922, the BBC made music a major aspect of its programming. The BBC started by offering ‘serious’<sup>6</sup> music with the major purpose of uplifting the audience. However, the late 1920s and early 1930s saw the adoption of Variety programs, commonly classified as ‘common culture.’<sup>7</sup> According to a 1933 *Listener* report on ‘British Broadcasting’, Music made 62.5% of BBC programmes, with serious music making 16.6% of the programmes while Variety made 3.4% of programmes.<sup>8</sup> The BBC started in 1930 a ‘Revue and Vaudeville Section’ which introduced ‘series’ programmes (*Songs from the Shows* (1931), *Music Hall* (1932),

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<sup>5</sup> Gabriele Rippl. Handbook of Intermediality Literature - Image - Sound - Music de Gabriele Rippl. Introduction. P. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Christina L. Baade. (2012). *Victory through Harmony: The BBC and Popular Music in World War II*. Oxford Scholarship Online. P. 16.

<sup>7</sup> The expression ‘common culture’ was used by D. L. Le Mahieu. Le Mahieu, Dan Lloyd. *A culture for democracy: mass communication and the cultivated mind in Britain between the wars*. Oxford University Press, USA, 1988. 227.

<sup>8</sup> “British Broadcasting.” *The Listener*, vol. 11, no. 264, 31 Jan. 1934, p.8.

the *White Coons' Concert Party* (1932), and the *Kentucky Minstrels* (1933). These series were under the director of Variety Eric Maschwitz (1933 to 1937) and John Watt, the Head of the 'Revue and Vaudeville Section.' Maschwitz pioneered new shows like *In Town Tonight*, hosted by Henry Hall. New stars and performers made their way thanks to Maschwitz who adopted new stars like Clapham and Dwyer Sandy Powell, Elsie and Doris Waters, Ronald Frankau, and Tommy Handley. The BBC established a theatre at St George's Hall in 1933 with a Variety orchestra which was used for live broadcasts. Variety broadcast featured comic singers, satirists, impersonators ... These broadcasts were live (from Variety theatres), in the form of sketches and studio-serials. The BBC variety broadcasting saw a steady growth and the amount of Variety broadcast almost trebled between 1933 and 1939. (It started with 16 hours a month in 1933 and reached 49 hours in 1939) and programmes like *Palace of Varieties*, *Monday Night at Seven*, *Band Waggon* attracted large audiences.<sup>9</sup>

The establishment of a BBC Variety Department was a major turn in the history of the BBC. It signaled a change in Reith's policy and led to a controversy on the growing 'Americanization' and commercialization of the BBC programming, especially as Variety was considered vulgar and debasing, and this goes against the mission of the BBC which supposedly should 'preserve radio from the commercialism infecting the popular press and cinema and instead [should] help promote higher values.'<sup>10</sup>

Variety broadcasting on the BBC was shaped by competition from European stations, in particular German stations, which targeted British listeners. At the same time, the BBC faced growing competition from American Radio stations whose programs, in particular Variety shows,

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<sup>9</sup> James J. Nott.; *Music for the People: Popular Music and Dance in Interwar Britain*. p.62-63.

<sup>10</sup> Reith quoted in Christina L. Baade. (2012). *Victory through Harmony: The BBC and Popular Music in World War II*. Oxford Scholarship Online. P. 19.

attracted British listeners despite the fact that the BBC considered American radio as ‘chaotic, commercial, and vulgar,’ while the BBC programs were considered by critics as ‘paternalistic and dull.’<sup>11</sup>

In brief, Variety broadcasts were part of an attempt to counter the popularity European radio stations with British listeners and they were adopted despite the fact that BBC radio was considered as a vanguard against commercialization and low taste. However, to better understand the association between Variety and commercialization and Variety and common culture, it is important to give a brief summary of the evolution of the music hall into Variety and why this working class ‘art’ is commonly associated with the ‘vulgar’ and the ‘debased’.

### **History of Variety/Music Hall**

The music hall is a Victorian institution which developed in the Victorian era as a ‘culture of consolation’ that kept the Victorian working man happy<sup>12</sup> and that alleviated political and social impotence<sup>13</sup> and that was why, according to Mullen, ‘the worker felt at home’ and ‘the term ‘people’s palace’ was not used without a reason.<sup>14</sup> According to Peter Bailey, the music hall as an ‘art’ was focused on ‘booze, romantic adventure, marriage and mothers-in-law, dear old pals and seaside holidays, ... [It] demonstrates a recurrent emphasis on the domestic and the everyday.’<sup>15</sup> To Peter Bailey, the popularity of the music hall emerged from the songs’ ‘exploits of a comic

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<sup>11</sup> Christina L. Baade. (2012). *Victory through Harmony: The BBC and Popular Music in World War II*. Oxford Scholarship Online. p. 18.

<sup>12</sup> Bratton, Jacky. (2004). The Music Hall. In K. Powell (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre* (Cambridge Companions to Literature, pp. 164-182). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CCOL052179157X.010. p. 164.

<sup>13</sup> Bailey, Peter. "Conspiracies of meaning: music-hall and the knowingness of popular culture." *Past & Present* 144, no. 1 (1994): 141.

<sup>14</sup> John Mullen. What Voices Can Be Heard in British Music Hall Songs of the First World War?, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Bailey, Peter. "Conspiracies of meaning: music-hall and the knowingness of popular culture." *Past & Present* 144, no. 1 (1994): p. 139.

realism that validates the shared experience of a typically urbanised, class bound world, seen from below.’<sup>16</sup>

As an art, the music hall developed from the Singing Saloons and the Penny Gaffs that were spread in poor areas in London and the provinces in the 1830s and 1840s. Public houses which served food, drink and offered entertainment extended their spaces to accommodate Singing Saloons. In these spaces, performers needed ‘to capture the attention of a large crowd most of the time eating, drinking, conversing, gazing, posing, lounging, and sometimes flirting. Performers mixed singing with various forms of stage business and ‘a high degree of physicality’, mainly ‘winks and gesticulations’ in a ‘street style’. They dressed in eccentric and sometimes extravagant stage dress often to capture audience attention in this rowdy milieu.<sup>17</sup> According to the chairman of Moss Empires, Mr. Gillespie, ‘the typical music hall of the old days was really the outcome of the long bar in a public house, called in Yorkshire ‘a singing room’, where casual performers came in and literally ‘sang for their supper’ or a drink.<sup>18</sup>

The music hall was criticised by the advocates of ‘improving entertainment’<sup>19</sup>/rational entertainment for the rowdy behavior of the audience and moral panics of reliance on sexual innuendo for comics.<sup>20</sup> This led to attempts by social reformers to abolish music halls and some councils tried to ban ‘vulgar’ content. To reduce criticism, music hall managers started to impose a code of conduct on music hall performers in a bid to ‘cleanse’ the music hall. This was part of

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<sup>16</sup> Bailey, Peter. "Conspiracies of meaning: music-hall and the knowingness of popular culture." *Past & Present* 144, no. 1 (1994): 140.

<sup>17</sup> Bailey, Peter. "Conspiracies of meaning: music-hall and the knowingness of popular culture." *Past & Present* 144, no. 1 (1994): 142-143.

<sup>18</sup> "Old Music Hall days". *The Listener*, vol. 37, no. 945, 6 Mar. 1947, p. 319.

<sup>19</sup> Scott, Harold. "The Friendly Music-Hall." *The Listener*, vol. 38, no. 967, 7 Aug. 1947, p. 217.

<sup>20</sup> Brad Beaven (2005) *Leisure, Citizenship and Working class Men in Britain*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 2005, p. 59.

what historian Brad Beavan referred to as ‘attempts to purify’<sup>21</sup> the music hall. However they failed ‘to curb the audiences’ appetite for the double entendre and the performers’ ability to side-step managers’ bids to introduce more respectability’.<sup>22</sup>

The heyday of the music hall was roughly between 1890 and 1910.<sup>23</sup> This period saw the change of the music hall from ‘small scale entertainments’ controlled by pub owners into a big business functioning under strict rules, commonly known as Variety theatres (in the 1860s). Colossal halls which accommodated thousands of ‘pleasure seekers’ were constructed to attract pleasure seekers. This marked the beginning of the commercialization/capitalization of an institution which was born from below and was mainly working class in character.<sup>24</sup> As a consequence, small halls were closed. This entailed according to historian Jacky Bratton, the ‘deracination of an institution.’<sup>25</sup> The new version of the old music hall was considered by Max Beerbohm, drama critic and essayist, the ‘virus of Variety’. In his words:

The magic had fled, the dear old magic of the unity... of song after song after song, good bad and indifferent, all fusing one with another and cumulatively instilling a sense of deep beatitude, a strange sweet foretaste of Nirvana...[is gone].<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Brad Beavan (2005) *Leisure, Citizenship and Working class Men in Britain*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 2005, p. 60.

<sup>22</sup> John Mullen. British Music Hall Songs of the First World War, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Bratton, Jacky. (2004). The Music Hall. In K. Powell (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre* (Cambridge Companions to Literature, pp. 164-182). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CCOL052179157X.010. p. 164.

<sup>24</sup> Brad Beavan (2005) *Leisure, Citizenship and Working class Men in Britain*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. 2005, p. 51.

<sup>25</sup> Bratton, Jacky. (2004). The Music Hall. In K. Powell (Ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Victorian and Edwardian Theatre* (Cambridge Companions to Literature, pp. 164-182). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CCOL052179157X.010. p. 164.

<sup>26</sup> Beerbohm, Max. "Music Halls of My Youth." *The Listener*, vol. 51, no. 1298, 14 Jan. 1954, p. 92.

Note: nirvana refers in this context to the state of perfect peace and happiness.

As an industry the music hall entered a phase of decline (from the late nineteenth century), but as an 'art' or as 'a style of comic entertainment'<sup>27</sup> it segued into the new media especially the radio.

### **Variety and the BBC**

The broadcasting of Variety on the BBC was not an easy process despite the fact that Variety was among the early programs that appeared on BBC radio.<sup>28</sup> This was a direct consequence of the capitalization of the music hall which changed from 'small scale entertainments' controlled by pub owners into a big business functioning under strict rules. These new Variety spaces were controlled and monopolised by business managers who protected their interests through contracts with performers which limited the time on the stage and especially controlled their appearance in other theatres and later on radio.

The broadcasting of Variety on the BBC led to a dispute with the variety theatre owners, the General Theatres Corporation (GTC), an amalgamation which owned 80 per cent of the music halls in London and the provinces, and with contracts with most of the variety artists. These contracts included a clause that 'forbid [Variety artists] to broadcast without obtaining the firm's permission'.<sup>29</sup> The General Theatres Corporation justified the ban on the ground that attendance at the Variety theatres will be affected by broadcasting as people would not go to the theatres when Variety was broadcast.<sup>30</sup> These contracts were a major problem for the Variety artists who were under the mercy of the GTC. In 1930, for example, when the BBC announced its music hall programme which featured Gracie Fields, a music hall star, the Theatres' Corporation gave consent, after a series of conferences<sup>31</sup> and it was explained to Gracie Fields that this concession

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<sup>27</sup> Bailey, Peter. "Conspiracies of meaning: music-hall and the knowingness of popular culture." *Past & Present* 144, no. 1 (1994): 139.

<sup>28</sup> See for example 'Music Hall Broadcast.' *Daily Telegraph*, 9 Oct. 1928, p. 7.

<sup>29</sup> "Waiting for B. B. C." *Daily Mail*, 22 Dec. 1932, p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> "B. B. C. and Stars." *Daily Mail*, 14 Jan. 1933, p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> "Broadcasting by Variety Artists." *Times*, 31 Dec. 1932, p. 6.



was made so that not to disappoint listeners after the announcement of the BBC programmes.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, the BBC has to appeal to the General Theaters Corporation to allow Mr. Max Miller, Comedian, and Miss Nellie Wallace to appear in the New year's eve programme.<sup>33</sup> Even worse, the BBC could not broadcast the Royal Variety performance attended by the King and the Queen at the London Palladium on May 22, 1933.<sup>34</sup> Mr. George Black, director of the production policy of the General Theatres Corporation, stated:

I have told the BBC that we have no objection to occasional broadcasts of actual performances from one of our London music halls.... But, with regard to individual artists under contract to appearing before the microphone, we have made it clear that we must retain the right to decide whether it is expedient to give permission or not. If the BBC have any suggestions to offer for a compromise, it is for them to offer a compromise, it is for them to make the next move.<sup>35</sup>

Sir Oswald Stoll and Mr. Gulliver, owners of two of the largest music hall circuits, stipulated an arrangement with the BBC to reach an arrangement on 'satisfactory terms' which included a sum of £ 15,000 a year for his circuit, around £686,781.00 in today's money<sup>36</sup>, and a total annual payment of £60,000 to music halls, around £2,747.12 in today's money.<sup>37</sup> Surprisingly, the BBC agreed to 'negotiate.'<sup>38</sup> Speaking to the *Daily Mail*, Sir Oswald Stoll stated: 'I would suggest that a financial recompense of at least £60,000 a year against all possible loss due to music hall artists broadcasting.'<sup>39</sup> This conflict led to the cancellation of BBC appointments with variety artists like

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<sup>32</sup> Theatre Correspondent. "Truce in Broadcast War." *Daily Mail*, 30 Dec. 1932, p. 9.

<sup>33</sup> Our Theatre Correspondent. "Truce in Broadcast War." *Daily Mail*, 30 Dec. 1932, p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> Special "Daily Mail" News. "B. B. C. And Royal Variety Show." *Daily Mail*, 5 Apr. 1933, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> "Waiting for B. B. C." *Daily Mail*, 22 Dec. 1932, p. 5.

<sup>36</sup> This approximation is done with <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/index.php#currency-result>.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> "Music Halls & B. B. C." *Daily Mail*, 21 Apr. 1927, p. 9.

<sup>39</sup> "£60,000 a Year." *Daily Mail*, 20 Apr. 1927, p. 12.

Max Miller, Norman Long, Miss Nellie Wallace,<sup>40</sup> but at the same time, the BBC started a talent hunt on its own. Broadcasters wrote in the *Radio Times*:

For his music hall programme on February 4, the Vaudeville producer intends to dispense entirely with recruits from the halls. The programme will consist of artists who first made their names and later developed their reputations with the BBC... [though] It might not prove as difficult as some critics imagine for the BBC to discover, "groom" and maintain star performers of its own"<sup>41</sup>

This was one of the effective solutions the BBC resorted to in its conflict with the GTC. A conflict which received wide coverage in newspapers and was mainly referred to as the BBC VS GTC war. Most of the newspapers used a 'war' register in reference to the ramifications of this conflict. It is replete with war-related terms like struggle<sup>42</sup>, dispute<sup>43</sup>, war<sup>44</sup>, veto, deadlock<sup>45</sup>, truce<sup>46</sup>, armistice<sup>47</sup>, "bury the hatchet<sup>48</sup>". This conflict was even described in the *Daily Telegraph* as a 'trench warfare.'<sup>49</sup> The theatre correspondent of the *Daily Mail* stated 'the war between the BBC and the biggest variety theatre group in the country, the General Theatres Corporation is to begin afresh... This time it looks like developing into the greatest struggle which has yet taken place in the entertainment world.'<sup>50</sup> This nomenclature proves that the conflict between the BBC and Variety theatre owners was high in stakes as the BBC adoption of Variety stars would lead to the

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<sup>40</sup> Our Theatre Correspondent. "New Shock in B. B. C. v. Variety War." *Daily Mail*, 28 Dec. 1932, p. 7. See also "Waiting for B. B. C." *Daily Mail*, 22 Dec. 1932, p. 5.

<sup>41</sup> "Broadcast Variety Dispute." *Daily Telegraph*, 13 Jan. 1933, p. 12.

<sup>42</sup> See also Conway, Harold, Our Theatre Correspondent. "Radio War Again." *Daily Mail*, 12 Jan. 1933, p. 7./For "struggle" see "Sir Oswald Stoll and B. B. C." *Daily Mail*, 25 Jan. 1929, p. 9.

<sup>43</sup> "Broadcast Variety Dispute." *Daily Telegraph*, 13 Jan. 1933, p. 12.

<sup>44</sup> See for example. Theatre Correspondent. "Truce in Broadcast War." *Daily Mail*, 30 Dec. 1932, p. 9./ See also Conway, Harold, Our Theatre Correspondent. "Radio War Again." *Daily Mail*, 12 Jan. 1933, p. 7.

<sup>45</sup> "Waiting for B. B. C." *Daily Mail*, 22 Dec. 1932, p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> "Radio Truce Ending." *Daily Mail*, 7 Jan. 1933, p. 7.

<sup>47</sup> Our Theatre Correspondent. "Offer to Artists." *Daily Mail*, 4 Jan. 1933, p. 5. For armistice, see "Radio Truce Ending." *Daily Mail*, 7 Jan. 1933, p. 7.

<sup>48</sup> Knox, Collie. "Radio v. Variety 'War' Ended." *Daily Mail*, 9 July 1934, p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> Gander, L. Marsland. "B.B.C. and the Variety 'War'." *Daily Telegraph*, 9 Feb. 1933, p. 6.

<sup>50</sup> Conway, Harold, Our Theatre Correspondent. "Radio War Again." *Daily Mail*, 12 Jan. 1933, p. 7.

death of the Variety industry. It is a death or life war where the stakes for the Variety owners were very high and that was why they were not ready to 'give in'.

Nevertheless, the BBC started negotiations from the second half of the 1920s with directors of the leading music halls throughout the country on the 'future of broadcasting by Variety 'stars'.<sup>51</sup> These negotiations continued into the 1930s. As a first move, the BBC considered offering rival contracts to well-known variety artists so that to ensure regular microphone work in case they decided to put an end to their contracts with the GTC.<sup>52</sup> The first breakthrough emerged with the lifting of the ban on Variety artists who appear in the music halls of by Sir Oswald Stoll in the 1930s. The agreement included regular broadcasting from the London Coliseum and Alhambra. Hence, broadcast started from Alhambra on February 12, 1929 and the following was on February 16, 1929.<sup>53</sup>

However, despite the fact that the General Theatres Cooperation asked for compensation for the loss inflicted by the broadcasting of variety on the BBC, Sir John Reith, the BBC Director General, did not yield to the pressure of the GTC and he managed to settle the dispute with the General Theatres Corporation on "ordinary professional terms"<sup>54</sup> especially after the BBC reached an agreement with the Variety Artists' Federation. At the same time the BBC started a "hunt" for music hall artists by Mr. Eric Maschwitz, the BBC's first Director of Variety and that was why Mr. Maschwitz started visits to seaside concert parties and provincial musical halls in search of "hidden talent."<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> "Music Halls & B. B. C." *Daily Mail*, 21 Apr. 1927, p. 9.

<sup>52</sup> Our Theatre Correspondent. "Offer to Artists." *Daily Mail*, 4 Jan. 1933, p. 5.

<sup>53</sup> "Sir Oswald Stoll and B. B. C." *Daily Mail*, 25 Jan. 1929, p. 9.

<sup>54</sup> "Sir Oswald Stoll and B. B. C." *Daily Mail*, 25 Jan. 1929, p. 9.

<sup>55</sup> Gander, L. Marsland. "New Era in B.B.C. Variety." *Daily Telegraph*, 6 Apr. 1933, p. 8.

Another step on the settlement of the dispute appeared when Mr. George Black, the Managing Director of the General Theatre Corporation, broke away from the ban and allowed broadcasts from the Palladium (his theatre). Commenting on this change Sir Oswald Stoll stated:

The situation between the BBC and the theatres, music halls included, has been radically altered during the past few weeks. Variety theatre managements ceased to hold together on the question of music broadcasting. Their unity, which had continued unimpaired from the inception of the BBC, was irretrievably broken a few months ago. The future of stage broadcasting would now appear to rest with theatre managers individually rather than collectively.<sup>56</sup>

However, this was a temporary arrangement, rather than a long term solution and the 'war' erupted again.<sup>57</sup> The final settlement was reached in July 1933. Collie Knox, *Daily Mail* theatre correspondent, announced: 'the radio versus variety stage war that has broken out at various times during the year can now be said definitely to have ended.'<sup>58</sup> Under the new arrangement, Mr. George Black, Managing Director of the General Theatre Corporation circuit, was to present the variety show on the BBC starting from September 1934. He would be in charge of the production of the "George Black Hour" and will himself announce the items at the microphone. This radio show was with artists under contracting with his management. Commenting on this settlement, Collie Knox stated "Now the BBC is burying the George Black hatchet, an interment which augurs well for the variety profession as a whole."<sup>59</sup>

### **Perceptions of Variety**

The broadcasting of variety on BBC radio was highly controversial and perceptions were polarised. Variety hours were considered "the most popular, [but at the same time] the most

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<sup>56</sup> "Sir Oswald Stoll and B. B. C." *Daily Mail*, 25 Jan. 1929, p. 9.

<sup>57</sup> "Radio Truce Ending." *Daily Mail*, 7 Jan. 1933, p. 7.

<sup>58</sup> Knox, Collie. "Radio v. Variety 'War' Ended." *Daily Mail*, 9 July 1934, p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> Knox, Collie. "Radio v. Variety 'War' Ended." *Daily Mail*, 9 July 1934, p. 5.

criticized hours.”<sup>60</sup> BBC variety was considered a source of comfort especially for workers. *The Times* wrote:

The labourer trudging homeward in a winter dusk, the music lover cut off from concerts in in manor house, and the gay young man whose fondness for a good time has persuaded his family to remove him from the distractions of a capital city are all supposed to find in the programmes sent out from broadcasting House and antidote to isolation.<sup>61</sup>

BBC variety hours were described as ‘rollicking’ and ‘refreshing.’<sup>62</sup> One listener stated:

I like funny men: and I want more and more of them. I know that “Music Hall” means a place where you hear music, but this conception was abandoned years ago, when music halls began to admit the conjurers and sword swallows and Japanese wrestlers that the microphone happily spares us.”<sup>63</sup>

Other listeners waited impatiently for artists like “Mr. Nelson Keys and Mr. Arthur Marshall to come back and be funny again.”<sup>64</sup> Others welcomed the Two Leslies as a source of fun and gusto.<sup>65</sup>

The combination of “the BBC Orchestra and a comedian was considered as an association of good music with good fun.”<sup>66</sup> One of the listeners referred to Variety broadcast as bringing “some juicy brain waves.”<sup>67</sup> This was mentioned in a context when the BBC wanted to cut its entertainment expenses and that was why the people planning these cuts were described as the BBC “killjoys”.<sup>68</sup>

On the other hand, Variety programs were criticised. Grace Harvery, organist and music writer, decried the levelling of the music and the absence of enjoyment of the comic or the other variety turns.<sup>69</sup> Variety on the air was not considered a source of fun as it never gets the gaiety it needs as one listener put it,<sup>70</sup> and when the music hall was broadcast on the ether it left, according

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<sup>60</sup> Gander, L. Marsland. "New Era In B.B.C. Variety." *Daily Telegraph*, 6 Apr. 1933, p. 8.

<sup>61</sup> "Finite Variety." *Times*, 1 Oct. 1936, p. 7.

<sup>62</sup> "Old-Time Music-Hall Broadcast." *Daily Telegraph*, 3 Mar. 1934, p. 6.

<sup>63</sup> Goldie, Grace Wyndham. "Variety and H. G. Wells." *The Listener*, vol. 14, no. 338, 3 July 1935, p. 16.

<sup>64</sup> Goldie, Grace Wyndham. "Variety and H. G. Wells." *The Listener*, vol. 14, no. 338, 3 July 1935, p. 16.

<sup>65</sup> Goldie, Grace Wyndham. "Variety and H. G. Wells." *The Listener*, vol. 14, no. 338, 3 July 1935, p. 16.

<sup>66</sup> Grace, Harvey. "Good Music in Comic Programmes." *The Listener*, vol. 5, no. 110, 18 Feb. 1931, p. 275.

<sup>67</sup> Knox, Collie. "B. B. C. Killjoys Want to Economise." *Daily Mail*, 6 Apr. 1934, p. 17.

<sup>68</sup> Knox, Collie. "B. B. C. Killjoys Want to Economise." *Daily Mail*, 6 Apr. 1934, p. 17.

<sup>69</sup> Grace, Harvey. "Good Music in Comic Programmes." *The Listener*, vol. 5, no. 110, 18 Feb. 1931, p. 275.

<sup>70</sup> "Finite Variety." *Times*, 1 Oct. 1936, p. 7.

to music hall funs, its 'glitter' and 'gleam' as the bodily expression of humour and miming, major aspects of the music hall that made it different from other forms of entertainment, were missing. In this way, the wireless led to the loss of what was considered in the *Listener* as the 'kinship'<sup>71</sup> or the intimacy between the music hall artist and his/her audience and that was why the transition to the wireless made it lose, according to the *Times*, its character.<sup>72</sup> This was a major issue especially for comedians, like George Robey, who depended on facial expression and the visual interplay of the audience which the ether deprived the audience of.<sup>73</sup>

In a similar vein, in several letters to editors, whether to the *Listener*, the *Times*, or the *Daily Mail*, many listeners complained about the quality of variety broadcasts. 'The variety broadcasts have been appalling,' wrote one listener to the *Daily Mail*. Another listener pointed to the fact that "the frantic enthusiasm of the BBC studio audience is not shared by the 'fireside audience'. Another listener pointed to the stale jokes which he thought were more than 25 years old. "The variety department work of the BBC needs thoroughly overhauling," wrote another listener, ... "Only people who know how to sing and speak should be allowed to broadcast and there should be some attempts at originality," protested another.<sup>74</sup> Other listeners complained that the BBC was running its variety programme "on the cheap" . "The millions of listeners have the right to be consulted, wrote the *Daily Mail*, as "they pay and they may possibly object to having immature or second rate talent inflicted upon them."<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> "Did You Hear That?" *The Listener*, vol. 58, no. 1489, 10 Oct. 1957, p. 557.

<sup>72</sup> "Finite Variety." *Times*, 1 Oct. 1936, p. 7. See also Goldie, Grace Wyndham. "About Variety." *The Listener*, vol. 15, no. 369, 5 Feb. 1936, p. 262.

<sup>73</sup> Goldie, Grace Wyndham. "Critic on the Hearth." *The Listener*, vol. 23, no. 580, 22 Feb. 1940, p. 389.

<sup>74</sup> Edwards, A. G., et al. "Improve the Variety Broadcasts." *Daily Mail*, 10 Nov. 1932, p. 12.

<sup>75</sup> B. B. C. and Stars." *Daily Mail*, 14 Jan. 1933, p. 8.

These complaints emanated mainly from the strict code of conduct imposed by the BBC on variety artists in its attempts to ‘cleanse’ the music hall. In fact, the BBC interfered the selection of the songs and drama. The BBC restrictions on materials hampered the broadcast of what was considered as “outspoken humour” which was customarily a major aspect of the music hall entertainment.<sup>76</sup> This affected the performance of music hall artists like Harry Lauder. One Critic on the Hearth, for example, complained:

When he sings, as he did sing, ‘Roamin’ in the Gloamin’, he is a master, supreme in his own style; when he sings ‘Sons of the Empire, where’er you roam, Pin your faith on the Motherland’, he is far less successful than any one of a hundred ordinary powerful baritones. Songs like these cut against the whole grain of his talent.<sup>77</sup>

Harry Lauder was criticized for trying to be evangelical and he was called to stop trying to do so: “All we ask of him is that he should give up his new attempts to be evangelical!”,<sup>78</sup> protested one listener. This was a major issue for music hall artists who were banned in case they fall into vulgarity and double entendre. Max Miller, for example, was banned by the BBC for 5 years and incidents of this type happened with other artists as well.<sup>79</sup> The BBC monitored scripts and if artists do without them, then they would be banned.<sup>80</sup> Listeners complained that they were deprived of the “the better part of a conventional unity of entertainment.”<sup>81</sup> Others were disappointed with the BBC variety. One listener stated complained:

I wish I were amused by the BBC’s variety programmes,’ she stated. I like music halls, revues, comic songs and funny men. I would go anywhere to see Mr. George Robey, Mr. Leslie Henson, Miss Nellie Wallace or Mr. Sydney Howard. I switch on eagerly when I see ‘Variety’ in the *Radio Times*. And I am almost invariably disappointed and bored.

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<sup>76</sup> Goldie, Grace Wyndham. "About Variety." *The Listener*, vol. 15, no. 369, 5 Feb. 1936, p. 262.

<sup>77</sup> Goldie, Grace Wyndham. "Critic on the Hearth." *The Listener*, vol. 23, no. 580, 22 Feb. 1940, p. 389.

<sup>78</sup> Goldie, Grace Wyndham. "Critic on the Hearth." *The Listener*, vol. 23, no. 580, 22 Feb. 1940, p. 389.

<sup>79</sup> Miller, Max. "Max Miller and the smut in the eye of the beholder." *The Listener*, vol. 99, no. 2563, 8 June 1978, p. 733.

<sup>80</sup> Miller, Max. "Max Miller and the smut in the eye of the beholder." *The Listener*, vol. 99, no. 2563, 8 June 1978, p. 733+.

<sup>81</sup> "A Listener's Complaint." *The Listener*, vol. 2, no. 37, 25 Sept. 1929, p. 419.

Instead of the rich vulgarity of the music hall the microphone usually offers us a series of thin turns punctuated by the bright cold inhumanity of an announcer's voice.<sup>82</sup>

Variety artists found it difficult to be funny on the air as expected by the BBC. Mr. Gielgud, Director of productions, complained that 'too many of the plays written for the ether are about serious things'<sup>83</sup> and that was why the BBC could not sustain laughter on the ether as the cleansing of the music hall from vulgarity, which was the 'sauce of many jokes', affected the quality of variety on the BBC especially in comparison with the old music hall. The BBC could not sustain humour on the wireless and many artists fell into repetition.<sup>84</sup> One listener stated that the BBC failed to amuse the variety audience:

They fail because they are bloodless and because they so completely lack any kind of gaiety. Gay tunes and gay personalities are essential if variety on the wireless is to have an appeal at all equal to that of the music hall. And the words of the songs and the patter and the sketches must be much more amusing than it is necessary for them to be on the stage.<sup>85</sup>

## Conclusion

Despite this criticism, the broadcasting of the music hall on BBC was still referred to a cherished event. "The music hall was ... the home of outstanding talent and a place of admirable entertainment...[it] was a pleasant ending to an overworked day."<sup>86</sup>

BBC radio helped Variety theatres survive the thirties. It provided new employment opportunities for many of the displaced personalities of the halls, in addition to 'pruning' new stars and audiences.<sup>87</sup> The wireless offered, according to Asa Briggs, "a means of advancement to 'local' comedians who were conscious of the pressure of the cinema on their livelihood and were

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<sup>82</sup> Goldie, Grace Wyndham. "About Variety." *The Listener*, vol. 15, no. 369, 5 Feb. 1936, p. 262.

<sup>83</sup> "The B. B. C. Is Looking for Laughter-Makers." *Daily Mail*, 27 Feb. 1934, p. 16.

<sup>84</sup> "The B. B. C. Is Looking for Laughter-Makers." *Daily Mail*, 27 Feb. 1934, p. 16.

<sup>85</sup> Goldie, Grace Wyndham. "About Variety." *The Listener*, vol. 15, no. 369, 5 Feb. 1936, p. 262.

<sup>86</sup> Dark, Sidney, and a talk on August 23. "London Twenty Years Ago." *The Listener*, vol. 2, no. 34, 4 Sept. 1929, p. 301.

<sup>87</sup> James J. Nott.; *Music for the People: Popular Music and Dance in Interwar Britain*, P. 119.



engaged mainly in appealing to small intimate audiences in provincial after-dinner shows or summer holiday audiences on the pier at seaside resorts.”<sup>88</sup>

However, the post WWII era saw ‘the virtual end of traditional music hall ... The audiences stayed away in droves, ..., left the comic to their own way, and cinemas came into being.’<sup>89</sup> This was a continuation of a trend which started at the turn of the century and affected popular entertainment. According to Asa Briggs<sup>90</sup> what was ‘amateur’ entertainment changed into the professional, theatres gave place to cinemas.’<sup>91</sup> The *Daily Mail* deplored the death of the old music hall:

The music hall has been supplanted in popular esteem by cinemas, the wireless, and revues, and the very spirit which animated it seems to have vanished forever... But it is sad to think that the music hall, which produced so much genuine and so much harmless amusement, should have fallen upon such evil days.<sup>92</sup>

The demise of the music hall accentuated with the development of the phonograph, the cinema, the radio and finally TV.

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<sup>88</sup> Asa Briggs, Volume II, p. 262.

<sup>89</sup> Waterman, Jack. "The comedians: 1. Ken Dodd." *The Listener*, vol. 99, no. 2548, 23 Feb. 1978, p. 242

<sup>90</sup> Asa Briggs, Volume II, p. 72.

<sup>91</sup> Asa Briggs, Volume II, p. 72.

<sup>92</sup> "The Plight of the Music-Hall." *Daily Mail*, 25 Jan. 1928, p. 8.

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