

# Musicians on Television at the BBC, 1936 - 1972

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(2006/ 2018)

This is an edited and slightly revised version of an article that started life as a public lecture at Goldsmiths, University of London ('Shot From Both Sides: Musicians on Television', 1 February 2005). It was then developed further and published in the *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* as 'Musicians on Television: Visible, Audible and Ignored' (Vol 131 No 2, 2006).

For the original published article follow this link -

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1093/jrma/fkl005>

I have edited out what I now consider to be some unnecessary theoretical waffle, and added a few details. If anyone spots any errors, or has any suggestions for improvements please email me at [K.Negus@gold.ac.uk](mailto:K.Negus@gold.ac.uk)

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Public television broadcasts in the United Kingdom commenced on 2nd of November 1936. From the beginning music and musicians were a prominent feature of programming.<sup>1</sup> On the first day of transmission, following a brief opening ceremony, the service began with a variety show. It featured Adèle Dixon, billed as a 'musical comedy star'; Buck and Bubbles, a black song and dance act from the United States then touring Europe; The Lai Founs - Chinese jugglers; and the newly formed BBC Television Orchestra led by Boris Pecker.<sup>2</sup> Within two weeks the first operatic extract had been broadcast, comprising four scenes from Albert Coates's *Mr Pickwick*, transmitted between 3.35 and 4pm on 13th November, prior to its premiere at Covent Garden. During the following year 14 operas were broadcast in a similar way. Ballet featured very early, as did ballroom dancing, singers, instrumentalists and a range of variety acts, cabaret performers and dance bands.<sup>3</sup> The BBC was also responsible for rare television appearances by the jazz pianists Fats Waller and Art Tatum, and the programme *Starlight* featured such acts as Manuela del Rio and Sophie Tucker (although no longer appearing in blackface she was still known as the last of the 'red-hot mommas'). Light music found a place as theme tunes, interval music and accompaniment for test card transmissions. The earliest BBC programmes attempted to be visually interesting and entertaining whilst representing a broad range of performers and musical styles.

Broadcasts in the late 1930s occupied only two hours per day (3-4, and 9-10pm) and were received by a small audience. Most people did not watch at home but in public viewing rooms, mainly those of retailers, or in the few hotels with televisions (the BBC

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<sup>1</sup> Experimental television broadcasts were demonstrated from the late 1920s and into the early 1930s. The first public broadcasts were in Britain. In the USA public broadcasts commenced during 1939 in New York City.

<sup>2</sup> These descriptions are from the first *Radio Times* television supplement, initially only distributed in the London area with the edition published on 30 October 1936.

<sup>3</sup> Details can be found in old copies of the *Radio Times* held at the British Library Newspaper Library at Colindale in London.

circulated lists of locations where television could be viewed). Those who had access to a television set could receive programmes only within a 35-mile radius of the transmissions from Alexandra Palace in North London, and the signal required constant retuning. Only 280 television sets had been sold by the end of 1936.<sup>4</sup> By 1939 television was broadcasting about 3 hours per day and it was calculated that 23,000 homes had a television set. As Britain entered the Second World War, television services were abruptly halted at noon on 1st September 1939, freeing the airwaves for military use. Transmission recommenced on 7th June 1946, but television became a widely adopted domestic medium only during the 1950s. In 1948 the number of sets being viewed was approximately 200,000. By 1952 this had risen to nearly 2 million, and by 1954, over 4 million.<sup>5</sup>

Although television took its place as a public entertainment medium only gradually, many of the issues that concerned broadcasters, critics and musicians during the 1930s had enduring relevance in debates about how music should feature on television, and in discussion about the impact and consequences of the appearance of performers. From the beginning many commentators enthusiastically embraced television as the facilitator of an educated and informed viewer capable of participating in a new form of public dialogue. More specifically, it was hoped that television might encourage a more imaginative approach to musical performance.

The idea that the combination of music and television offered great potential and new possibilities was a feature of numerous early commentaries in newspapers and periodicals. During 1927 in the USA, radio entrepreneur David Sarnoff proclaimed that television would herald a 'new art ... as boundless as the imagination'.<sup>6</sup> A few years later in the UK, an editorial in the *Radio Times* two weeks before transmissions commenced advised its readers 'You will be watching the beginnings of a new art'.<sup>7</sup> A similar emphasis on 'new art' appeared in the same publication when broadcasts re-commenced in 1946. Recalling the early days of broadcasting, Ernest Thomson wrote: 'There was literally nothing else like it. Television isn't cinema, it isn't a peep-show, it isn't a toy - it is a new art medium which does something never achieved before, something difficult to describe'.<sup>8</sup> Equally excited was Denis Johnston, BBC Programme Director, again writing in 1946: 'Television is a new art providing almost unlimited opportunities for new discoveries'.<sup>9</sup> This theme continued in articles, reviews and commentaries throughout the 1950s.

Yet the introduction of television during the 1930s also produced anxieties. Some feared its potential as a vehicle for propaganda (across Europe many people were acutely aware of the activities of Mussolini, Franco and Hitler). More specifically, with regard to music, there were concerns that television would merely provide a poor imitation when judged against 'live' music experienced in the presence of performers. In one of the first ever reviews of an opera on television a writer for *The Times* was disconcerted by the way that 'doll-like Marionettes let forth at us immense voices' and concluded that, although revealing much potential, it was unlikely that television would be anything more than a 'substitute for the real thing'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Asa Briggs, *A History of Broadcasting in the UK, Volume 2, The Golden Age of the Wireless*, (Oxford, 1965), 611.

<sup>5</sup> The figures cited in this section are approximate estimates derived from BBC Handbooks. For a discussion of such figures and attempts to measure the audience see Asa Briggs, *A History of Broadcasting in the UK Volume 4, Sound and Vision*, (Oxford, 1979), 239-243.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Joseph Horowitz, *Understanding Toscanini*, (New York, 1987), 270.

<sup>7</sup> 'The Coming of Television', *Radio Times*, (23 October 1936), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Ernest Thomson 'What is this Television?', *Radio Times*, (17 May 1946), 3/23.

<sup>9</sup> 'What You Will See On Your Screens', *Radio Times*, (7 June 1946), 24.

<sup>10</sup> 'Opera by Television, Mr. Coates' Pickwick', *The Times* (14 November 1936), 10.

The perceived tension between creative opportunity and unimaginative imitation was still being discussed fifty years after these initial anxieties surfaced. In 1984, Thomas Hartman and Francis Routh pointed an accusing finger at the BBC when arguing for the potential of television as a disseminator of new music, and also when emphasising the perennial problem of the relationship between a real event and its representation:

Good television, which all can acknowledge, is more likely to be achieved with new music than with old. The reason for this is that music of the past bears the encrustations of history. We know too much about it already and it is far better performed straight, in the concert hall. Why should TV compete with the concert hall? Yet the BBC panders in this way to an assumed consumer. Moreover, it is with the music of the past that concert promoters cater for the mass market. So again, why should TV tamely follow suit? There are audiences ready and waiting for new ideas and forms, and it is to these audiences that TV should attend.<sup>11</sup>

At the time, Hartman and Routh were the latest advocates of the idea that television provides great opportunities for musicians. Although these potentials had so often been vaguely defined (television providing the opportunity for a somewhat nebulous 'new art') Hartman and Routh argued more clearly for something new and distinct, a shift away from the familiar conventions and repertoires of the concert hall. Why should television be saddled with the historical burden of following the live experience, they asked? Musicians, composers and broadcasters should be thinking about new 'ideas and forms'.

Yet, very few musicians, composers, songwriters or performers seem to have used television to develop a distinctively new art form. Regardless of genre (big band, opera, rock, symphonic, chamber), musicians and television personnel have tended to treat television as if it were a neutral lens, rather than a transformative medium that can redefine, or develop innovative types of musical performance. Attempts to challenge conventions or develop a new aesthetic can be cited as the exceptions that prove the rule, as suggested by Michael Chanan when referring to the *Not Mozart* films made for the BBC and visual effects used in the transmission of a piano recital by Saar Television.<sup>12</sup>

### **Close your eyes: the unpleasant appearance of musicians.**

From the first days of broadcasting many programmers and critics were concerned that television images would be detrimental to the experience of music (both classical and popular). Such anxieties were informed by an aesthetic of art music listening, consolidated during the nineteenth century, whereby music became valued for its invisibility, according to ideas about its apparent structural purity and lack of referentiality. There is a long history of attempts to render music invisible in Western cultures, whether this has entailed the concealing of choirs or chanting monks in Christian churches, or the hiding of musicians in medieval mystery plays or Elizabethan masques.<sup>13</sup>

In the early years of television a preference for invisible music-makers cropped up in commentaries, reviews, and articles claiming that the performance of symphonic music was not suitable for television. Although a belief in the value of listening without the

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Hartman & Francis Routh, 'Today's Music on Television, A New Art Form' *The Composer*, No 82, (Summer 1984), 6

<sup>12</sup> Michael Chanan 'Television's problem with (classical) music' *Popular Music*, 21, 3, (2002), 367-374.

<sup>13</sup> I am drawing here on some of the discussion in Richard Leppert, *The Sight of Sound, Music, Representation and the History of the Body* (Berkeley, 1993).

distractions of the visual gained currency in the latter part of nineteenth century *prior* to the introduction of the gramophone, recorded sound clearly allowed a quite radical separation of sound from visual context. Beliefs in the elevated value of invisible music gradually became more pervasive throughout the early part of the twentieth century and took hold amongst an influential group of critical listeners, and classical music critics - those who invested heavily in gramophones, and who joined gramophone societies. Many continued a practice that was increasingly adopted in concert halls during the second part of the nineteenth century: they closed their eyes, hoping to experience the music more intensely and intimately.<sup>14</sup>

During the period when recordings were becoming more available people were not only closing their eyes in the concert hall. Many now closed their eyes at home in an attempt to achieve an equally intense and intimate musical encounter, often one that entailed an imaginary journey *to* the ideal concert hall. The visual was blocked off but in order to replace the domestic environment with an imaginary one populated with idealised musicians. This is exemplified in the following letter written by A. J. Penfold of Littlehampton to *The Gramophone* in 1935:

May I suggest to those of your readers who have not already done so, to play their gramophone with eyes closed - to lose sight of their surroundings, their room, their gramophone - to visualise, with their mind's eye, their favourite concert-hall - with its conductor, its serried rows of players, even to the timpani up on high! They will be hearing from a more or less back seat, but they will be THERE, and hearing the record far more intimately than they ever heard it before.<sup>15</sup>

Listening to music with the eyes closed became connected to two entangled desires. First is an attempt to imagine the music being performed in ideal conditions with ideal(ised) musicians. Such a perspective might be thought of as a more middlebrow attempt to appreciate the music as produced by real musicians in a real place. Such a desire chimed with the growth of 'music appreciation' in the early part of the twentieth century, but it elicited only contempt from those whose aesthetic involved an attempt to engage with the structures of pure music. A desire for a form of concentrated 'structural listening' united such apparently contrasting figures as Eduard Hanslick, Heinrich Schenker and Theodor Adorno. And Kierkegaard was not the only philosopher to give weighty intellectual backing to the idea that music should be solemnly appreciated with closed eyes.<sup>16</sup>

A belief in the purity of music, uncontaminated by the visual, was not just applied to art music. It went hand in hand with the serious intellectual appreciation of jazz and became an integral aspect of rock ideology during the late 1960s and 1970s, when concentrated attention was often given to rock music in darkened rooms. Unlike art music, rock was formed in and through the modern electronic mass media and burgeoning consumer culture. Simon Frith has noted the irony that rock music depended upon

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<sup>14</sup> James Johnson, *Listening in Paris, A Cultural History*, (Berkeley, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> 'Correspondence and Gramophone Society Reports', *The Gramophone*, (September 1935), 175.

<sup>16</sup> Timothy Day, *A Century of Recorded Music, Listening to Musical History*, (New Haven, 2000), 205. For an extended discussion of the history and problems of structural listening see Rose Rosengard Subotnik 'Towards a Deconstruction of Structural Listening: A Critique of Schoenberg, Adorno and Stravinsky' in *Deconstructive Variations* (Minneapolis, 1996) 148-176. See also Anthony Dell'Antonio (ed), *Beyond Structural Listening? Postmodern Modes of Hearing*, (Berkeley, 2004). Philosophical arguments against structural listening can also be found in James Levinson, *Music in the Moment* (Ithaca, New York, 1997).

television for its formation and dissemination to a large audience, yet was frequently defined *against* television.<sup>17</sup>

A belief in the superiority of the music as sound without vision was informed by a high-art aesthetic, developed during the nineteenth century, it also arose as a direct response to *seeing* musicians on television. On the one hand there were philosophical principles at stake (the apparent purity of music). On the other hand, there were more visceral reactions to the appearance of the bodies of musicians. Such concerns were first expressed when the BBC was conducting test transmissions. A.P. Herbert wrote, in *The Listener*, of what he called 'the plain singer'. He remarked that 'the decent darkness of the wireless has been a godsend to them.'<sup>18</sup> A BBC document from 1937 entitled 'Television Advisory Committee Comments on Programmes' considered cabaret performers, and the Director of Television declared: 'Many of the better artists are dreadful to look at.'<sup>19</sup>

Broadcasters were also concerned about dance bands. In a BBC Memo dated 11 August 1947, Cecil McGivern, Television Programme Director, wrote: 'Dance bands are generally not good television and we simply must cut down the number of times we use them' [emphasis in original]. McGivern despatched another memo seven days later, on 18th August:

I think they are poor television and am trying to keep the number of appearances down to the minimum. This is bound to give rise to questions and probably complaints by dance bandleaders. Our answer is, of course, 'Provide a visual show and we'll put you in'.<sup>20</sup>

Here, in a slightly different way, are some of the anxieties that emerge as television adapts to and incorporates pre-existing styles. Dance music was by definition created for dancing, whether those responding to it were waltzing around their living room or jitterbugging in the Hammersmith Palais ballroom. It was not performed for people giving musicians their undivided or even primary attention.

Television forced jazz and big band musicians to become more aware of their appearance. Singers, announcers and instrumentalists who had become used to performing in the recording studio or for radio broadcasts were given strict instructions about their visual image. They were told about the patterns and colour of clothes that would televise better than others. Musicians were instructed not to wear gold watchbands or jewellery. Studios used very bright lights at the time and instrumentalists were warned about the undesirable effects of shiny instruments. The magazine *Downbeat* advised musicians who were to appear on television: 'Don't polish your horn.'<sup>21</sup> Performers were asked to be aware of any habitual mannerisms. In 1948, the trade magazine *Variety* mentioned an announcer who was 'scratching various parts of his anatomy on a recent telecast - something he may

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<sup>17</sup> For a discussion of the 'ideology of rock', a belief that rock music emerged independently of commercial interests and consumer culture (before being co-opted) see Simon Frith, *The Sociology of Rock* (London, 1978), *Sound Effects, Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock'n'Roll*, (London, 1983). For specific commentary on rock and television see Simon Frith 'Look! Hear! The Uneasy Relationship of Music and Television', *Popular Music*, 21, 3, 277-290 (2002).

<sup>18</sup> A.P. Herbert, 'Some Thoughts on Television', *The Listener*, (2 September 1936), 421.

<sup>19</sup> *Television Advisory Committee Comments on Programmes*, (27 April 1937), File T16/207/1 Television Advisory Committee 1935-40, BBC Written Archive Centre, Caversham. All BBC archive material cited with permission.

<sup>20</sup> *TV Light Entertainment Memos 1937-51*, T12/230/1, BBC Written Archive Centre, Caversham.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in Murray Forman, 'One Night on TV is Worth Weeks at the Paramount', *Popular Music*, 21 3, (2002), 268.

have gotten into on radio.<sup>22</sup> In response to these pressures many bandleaders took acting lessons, and bands incorporated novelty songs and humorous routines into their repertoire.

Three years later, writing in *Opera for the People*, Herbert Graf argued that opera was ideal for television as a form of 'musical-dramatic art'. But he was concerned that both orchestral and operatic performances might not benefit from what he called 'the magnifying eye of the close-up.'<sup>23</sup> Reflecting on his productions for television, Graf advocated the economical use of close-ups to highlight details of the facial expressions and emotional gestures of singers. However, when it came to the orchestra and to instrumental passages, he was less convinced of their utility:

In television the close-ups of the performing musicians reveal details that more often detract from the musical content than enhance it. The gestures and facial expressions of some conductors and players may reflect their interpretation of the work, but those of others, interesting in themselves, perhaps, may produce the opposite effect. In a radio broadcast of Wagner's 'Siegfried Idyll', for instance, the listener hearing the beautiful passages of the solo violin and the individual woodwind instruments can make his own imaginary picture of the romantic peace and the twittering birds in the deep forest; but in one telecast of this work I witnessed the close-ups of the musicians' somber, bespectacled faces diminished the possibility of any such poetic illusion.<sup>24</sup>

Nearly twenty years after Graf's argument about how the 'somber, bespectacled faces' of musicians 'diminished' the 'poetic illusion' of music, John Culshaw, who was then head of music at BBC TV, was contemplating the possibility of televised performances being available to consumers on videotape. In the wake of this new technology he wrote in the *Gramophone* during 1970, asking about the consequences of visual repetition:

People today buy records with the conscious intention of playing them many more times than once; and people tomorrow will only buy video if there are very good reasons for watching more than once. What can be perfectly valid and useful on transmitted television is therefore not necessarily valid and useful for replayable video. Do you really want to see that oboe player with a pimple on his nose every time a certain phrase comes up in a Beethoven symphony?<sup>25</sup>

Concerns about the influence of the physical appearance of musicians when performing did not simply arise due to television, but the arrival of television exaggerated, accentuated and focused a set of more general anxieties. As musicians, musicologists, critics and fans we continue to live with the tensions between the physical and abstract character of music.

### **The quest for musical realism**

Not only was the programming and critical appreciation of music on television been judged according to the physical appearance of musicians, but it was informed by a series of beliefs about musical and visual realism. Never mind that the oboe player has a pimple on his nose;

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<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Forman, 'One Night on TV'

<sup>23</sup> Herbert Graf, *Opera for the People*, (Minneapolis, 1951), 222.

<sup>24</sup> Graf, *Opera for the People*, 219-20.

<sup>25</sup> John Culshaw, 'The Outlook for Video Music' *The Gramophone*, (September, 1970), 399.

at the crucial moment when the oboe has a brief solo we do not wish to see clarinettist - that's the assumption.

This is an aesthetic, educative and a technical issue. It is aesthetic in that it is informed by assumptions about the value of presenting musicians realistically. Yet achieving it requires considerable technical skill and equipment. The effect of realism has to be actively created. Musicians do not spontaneously appear as 'real'. In producing a sense of reality, programmers became concerned about the contrasting perspectives suggested by the music and the visual image and the potential for a type of cognitive dissonance - giving the impression an oboe tone has been produced by a clarinet. There is also an educative issue here in terms of the BBC's mission to contribute to public knowledge by giving the viewing public a tangible sense of how music is made. Hence, the philosophical tensions were compounded by the technical difficulties of transmitting sound and image simultaneously (and this was on top of concerns about the 'telegenic' qualities of performing musicians). All this became condensed into a recurrent dilemma that can be traced throughout the history of television: should a close-up in the visual seek to be consonant with a close-up, as it were, in the music?

In 1962 the BBC published an Engineering Monograph, *The Broadcasting of Music on Television*, which summarised some of the technical and aesthetic principles that had been developed since the 1930s. The following instructions proved to be one of the enduring principles of televising musicians:

If the camera approaches an orchestra player - still more if it comes into close-up - an immediate contradiction of sight and sound is precipitated if the part he is playing cannot be easily distinguished by the ear; yet at the same time it would be clearly physically almost impossible, and artistically quite intolerable, if the sound perspective were constantly to be changed. The onus here must rest on the producer, who should avoid close-ups unless they are musically motivated i.e. unless the instrument concerned has a real solo.<sup>26</sup>

The aim is to match the visual and sound perspectives to give the illusion of reality. Such an approach privileges a notion of visual realism over that of audio realism. It assumes that television must have a real relationship to the music in terms of what the camera shows us. Yet the visual perspective offered by television is only partly grounded in realism. No viewer could ever gain access to the multiple, composite visual perspectives offered by television. This is apparent when viewing just a few seconds of a broadcast of The Proms or Glastonbury Festival for example.

Yet broadcasters came to believe that viewers would direct their attention to whatever instrument is most salient to the ear, as if music audiences are similar to those following the ball in tennis or a football match. This led to an approach to televising music driven by an obsession with the 'musically motivated' close-up. Nicholas Cook is just one writer who highlighted how this can disrupt rather than enhance the musical experience:

One's musical enjoyment of a televised concert can be disrupted by the kind of over-enthusiastic picture-editing in which the oboe cannot echo the clarinet's three-note motif without the two players appearing in turn upon the screen in monstrous close-up: the disruption of the musical experience is the result of the facticity, so to speak, and the spatial proximity of the players being thrust upon one.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *The Broadcasting of Musicians on Television*, BBC Engineering Monograph No 40, (1962), 7.

<sup>27</sup> Nicholas Cook, *Music, Imagination and Culture*, (Oxford, 1990), 153.

However, it is not always clear just where the ‘musically motivated’ close-up should be directed, particularly during ensemble passages when no one instrument or voice is prominent. It is during these moments when orchestral broadcasters privilege the authority of the conductor. Television helped create what Theodor Adorno called the ‘celebrity conductor ... a twentieth-century musical fetish.’<sup>28</sup> Formative influences here were the NBC television broadcasts of Arturo Toscanini. In 1952 it was estimated that the television audience for Toscanini’s broadcasts in the United States was 10 million. Kirk Browning directed them and quite consciously wished to emphasize the conductor as a charismatic figure presiding over the entire orchestra. At the time Browning explained that he aimed to ‘treat these telecasts primarily from the point of view of the Maestro’s conducting’. He wished to ‘eliminate’ the ‘detail shots of the brasses, strings, woodwinds, and so forth’ as he thought these a distraction, undermining the authority of the conductor.<sup>29</sup>

The common alternative to showing the musicians or conductor (or rock musicians and vocalist for that matter) is to pan around the auditorium (or festival site). However, this is usually in darkness and sustains interest for a fleeting few seconds. The architecture and ambience of the event may be part of the illusion of realism. Yet, when auditoriums are featured prior to the performance, the images of empty seats being filled and people chatting can be equally uninspiring.

Until the end of the twentieth century these details were received on a small television screen. As a result, any detail of a dark auditorium was usually lost, whilst the actions of musicians and conductors appeared exaggerated due to the size of the television screen.

If screen size seems an obvious limitation when presenting musicians according to a realist aesthetic, so too is sound quality. For much of the twentieth century television was associated with small poor quality speakers. This characteristic was often emphasised by those writers who argued for television’s detrimental impact on music. Simon Frith is just one commentator who emphasised television’s limitations here, arguing that:

Most people’s television sets have poor sound quality ... Even now that digital recording is the norm few people have - or seem to want - good television sound. They do not want it because television is not primarily a sound medium. The musical experience is by its nature enveloping. Music may have a specific source of origin (the orchestra; the CD player) but it is heard as being everywhere (in the concert hall, in the room). As listeners we put ourselves into the music, and as radio became more portable so music became something to take with us, to change our sound environment. Television cannot offer this sort of musical experience whatever its sound quality.<sup>30</sup>

Despite Frith’s point, television sound quality was not *experienced* as an impediment by the public. Indeed, early judgements about television sound were quite different. During October 1936 the BBC was broadcasting test transmissions, and HMV and Marconiphone were demonstrating their new television receivers. The *Gramophone* magazine employed a technical expert who reviewed sound equipment in terms of its sonic quality:

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Joseph Horowitz, *Understanding Toscanini*, (New York, 1987), 236.

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Horowitz, *Understanding Toscanini*, 273.

<sup>30</sup> Simon Frith ‘Look! Hear! The Uneasy Relationship of Music and Television’, *Popular Music*, 21, 3, (2002).



These demonstrations proved conclusively that television *is* entertainment, and they also gave a hint as to what we may expect of the television sound transmissions. Both the HMV and the Marconiphone instruments exhibited musical characteristics the like of which we seldom hear from any ordinary radio receiver or radiogramophone. They were really outstanding.<sup>31</sup>

Early radio reception suffered from signals wandering off and from static interference. Television sets had to be separately tuned to visual and sound signals. Yet the sound was considered superior to that of radio and gramophone recordings.

An equally positive appreciation of television sound can be found by thumbing through the BBC's small-scale surveys of audience views, held at the written archive in Caversham. During the 1930s the live transmission of music on radio and television was considered to be of better audio quality than gramophone recordings. The sound of television was still perceived as good nearly twenty years later. An audience research report from February 1954 concluded that the findings were 'a tribute to the completeness of the illusion created by sound in TV programmes ... more than half (56%) had nothing but praise for the sound in television.'<sup>32</sup>

Viewers were not unanimous in their praise. The most common complaint concerned the way that a realistic attempt to convey the dynamic range of music would result in certain passages becoming too loud, often provoking viewers to get up and turn down the volume (there were of course no remote control devices). As the report concluded, 'viewers ... desire the full range of musical tones though not the volume. In these respects it is clear that they demand less realism in the sound than in the picture.'

Viewers objected to the way that music became too loud, even though this was an attempt by broadcasters to present a realistic audio perspective. Again, this is a technical and aesthetic issue. First, a considerable amount of technological skill, knowledge and sonic manipulation is required to provide a realistic impression of music coming to us unmediated. Second, aesthetic judgements (or pragmatic judgements with aesthetic consequences) had to be made about the fidelity and character of the music, by programme directors, composers, musicians, singers and audiences. Here, in the domestic context of television listening, the aesthetic judgement of producers and listeners did not always coincide.

### **Drama, distraction and the domestic aesthetic**

The critical appreciation and the academic analysis of music often assume an ideal listener who is attentive to melodic, harmonic and rhythmic detail, and who receives a sonic perspective acquired from within an engulfing three-dimensional space. This assumption is readily apparent in a whole range of books and journals, irrespective of whether the writer is concerned with art music, jazz or contemporary pop music. The analyst of art music often assumes a listener (and indeed a musically literate reader) attentive to the finest nuances of an ideal performance and score. In studies of popular music, the writer often presupposes a listener located in an ideal sonic space, attentive to textural and timbral detail (even here the analyst often assumes the relevance of conventional notation). Yet, such ideal listening conditions and a comprehensive sonic awareness are far removed from how many people experience music, whether listening to recordings or attending a performance. In his

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<sup>31</sup> 'Trade Winds and Idle Zephyrs', *The Gramophone*, (November 1936), 263.

<sup>32</sup> *The Sound in Television Programmes*, BBC Audience Research Report, (8th February 1954), VR/54/54, BBC Written Archive Centre, Caversham. Based on a survey of a viewing panel of just under 500 people (644 sent and 481 received).

history of the 'acoustic cultures' of listening that allowed for recorded sound to be developed and accepted, Jonathan Sterne highlighted how approaches to listening changed historically in relation to technologies and social circumstances.<sup>33</sup>

When gramophone players became portable during the 1920s and when the use of transistors shrank the size of radios during the 1950s, these technologies were not used for creating engulfing musical experiences. They were taken out into the country, or to a beach, or to a city park, or placed in a car. The radio or gramophone occupied a place in a modern soundscape, an ambience that R. Murray Schafer characterised as 'lo-fi', where 'individual acoustic signals are obscured in an overdense population of sounds.'<sup>34</sup> These technologies were listened to in a world full of other noises - planes, trains, cars, sirens, machines, the hum of heating, alarms and so on. The engulfing experience of the personal stereo or car hi-fi is relatively recent. Recorded music has often been enjoyed in sonic environments where it is difficult to register fine details with any clarity

For many people, significant musical pleasures were obtained from small transistor radios and monophonic gramophone boxes (within or away from the home). Or from listening to a live low volume performance of a folk singer or string quartet, attending to a jazz performer amidst chatter from tables or a bar, or even viewing a distant rock band in a windy field. Such experiences often entail a sonic quality far removed from the immersion gained from a personal stereo, or quiet contemplation between two speakers. And we can adopt various listening strategies, shifting attention, moving from distracted to highly attentive listening and stopping at various points in between.

The introduction of televised music seemed to challenge the concentrated, attentive listening that was assumed to be most conducive to experiencing music, yet this characterised very little music listening at the time. A recurrent concern, voiced by critics, composers and programmers was that television audiences can be continually interrupted and are not fully attentive. For many broadcasters and critics the domestic setting of television reception was perceived to undermine the serious intent of showing opera on television. This was an issue that concerned Benjamin Britten when he was writing the opera *Owen Wingrave*, commissioned for television by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU). Interviewed in *The Gramophone* in 1970 a year before the broadcast, Britten said:

The medium presents one with a whole new set of problems. You have to persuade viewers to take the occasion seriously. On the other hand, you can't really calculate for those who are bored, arrive late, or are interrupted by the telephone. You can't keep repeating the plot, like a cricket score or something. Then there's the whole problem of making singers seem credible on television. So with *Wingrave*, we are really working hard on the acting side.<sup>35</sup>

Britten's approach to composition assumed an audience giving their undivided attention (he wanted the public to 'take the occasion seriously'). Yet, the respectful viewing and concentrated listening associated with the modern concert hall is relatively recent and culturally specific. As Jeremy Tambling has argued, also writing of opera on television:

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<sup>33</sup> Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past, Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction*, (Durham, 2003). For various approaches to listening and audio cultures see Michael Bull & Les Back (eds) *The Auditory Culture Reader*, (Oxford, 2003); Robert Philip *Performing Music in the Age of Recording*, (New Haven 2004); Clive Brown *Classical and Romantic Performing Practice, 1750-1900* (Oxford, 1999).

<sup>34</sup> R. Murray Schafer *The Soundscape, Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, (Rochester, Vermont, 1994), 43.

<sup>35</sup> 'Benjamin Britten Talks to Alan Blyth', *The Gramophone*, (June 1970), 29.

There is something artificial and repressed about the Modernist claim that the work of art should be absorbed in concentrated contemplation. In some ways, we have gone back to eighteenth-century opera when no one listened attentively to a piece throughout (and when arias, overtures and ensembles could easily be moved from opera to opera), or to nineteenth-century opera before Wagner first dimmed the house-lights at Bayreuth, to ensure audience concentration.<sup>36</sup>

Tambling's argument about the oddity of the western modernist approach to appreciating art music is echoed in a similar point made by Michael Talbot:

In the eighteenth century ... an opera was treated more like a floorshow at a nightclub. The expectation was that patrons would come to it several times in the season and assimilate it in stages (alongside such other activities as eating, gambling and gossiping)... patrons often visited more than one theatre in the same evening before ending up, as likely as not, at the casino.<sup>37</sup>

James Johnson's study of *Listening in Paris* outlines how, between 1750 and 1850, audiences 'stopped talking and started listening'. Johnson charts the political circumstances and class changes that led to the emergence and consolidation of a set of bourgeois conventions that entailed restraining bodily responses, listening in silence and minimising applause.<sup>38</sup>

Listening is shaped by broader social relationships, collectively shared assumptions about the most suitable way to appreciate music, and within this context by the specific listening strategies that may be adopted by individuals alone and in small groups. With this in mind, I am tempted to propose an ironic reversal of the old distinction between active and passive audiences, a dichotomy that numerous scholars of television have shown to be clichéd and misleading.<sup>39</sup> The audience in the modern concert hall and opera house can be viewed as relatively passive. They are attentive to music in a darkened hall with few distractions other than the performance. The classical musicians are often distant. Without small binoculars, it is often impossible to see details of their bespectacled faces or pimpled noses.

Television audiences are not usually in the dark, and are actively engaged in a range of other activities such as eating, drinking, gossiping, reading a newspaper, flirting, playing with the kids.<sup>40</sup> The sound can be muted or turned down low, and varying degrees of attention can be given to the visual. The listener can move between rooms whilst paying attention to the sound. Studies of television reception suggest a highly active, but not necessarily attentive audience engaged in all manner of viewing strategies. Historically, a vast amount of music has been broadcast to actively distracted audiences. This is what so disconcerted Benjamin Britten. Yet, it was integral to television's possibilities.

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<sup>36</sup> Jeremy Tambling, 'Introduction: Opera in the Distraction Culture' in J. Tambling (ed), *A Night in at the Opera*, (London: John Libbey, 1994), 15.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Talbot, 'A Venetian Operatic Contract of 1714' in M. Talbot (ed) *The Business of Music*, (Liverpool, 2002), 25.

<sup>38</sup> James Johnson, *Listening in Paris, A Cultural History*, (Berkeley, 1995).

<sup>39</sup> For a discussion of the issues entailed here see Karen Lury, *Interpreting Television*, (London, 2005).

<sup>40</sup> For just two examples of work illustrating this see David Morley *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies*, (London, 1992) and Roger Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life* (London, 1994).

## Access and inspiration

For many people an inspiring, life changing musical experience was associated with the television screen. One legendary moment was the appearance of Jimi Hendrix on the *Happening With Lulu Show* in Britain on 4 January 1969 - an event that became etched into the popular memory of many people. John Walsh referred to it in his column in *The Independent* newspaper during October 2003 when taking issue with its exclusion from a list of great musical moments produced by *Mojo* magazine:

Jimi Hendrix and his band turned up as guest stars, started playing their first Top 10 hit, 'Hey Joe', live, and screeched to a halt in the middle of it. 'Uh, we're going to stop playing this, uh, rubbish' Jimi said 'and play a tribute to Eric Clapton, Jack Bruce and Ginger Baker', and launched into 'Sunshine of Your Love'. It was over in four minutes but it left me stunned. The dervish of rock guitar appearing on the Lulu show! (Like Picasso turning up at an exhibition of flower paintings in Penzance). A rock star saying he didn't like his own record! A chap saying 'rubbish' when he so obviously meant 'bullshit!' ... It was the truest moment of rock'n'roll attitude I'd ever seen on TV, and it was anarchy right there in the living room, and it was going out live...<sup>41</sup>

Much has been written about Hendrix's stage performances, particularly at festivals, and his impact on the sonic and gestural aesthetics of both popular and art music. Yet equally significant were those moments when Jimi inspired 10, 11, 12 year olds in front of the television - inspired them to find out more, to pick up a guitar, to listen to rock music.

There is a more general point here. Television in the home provided access to musical experiences for those who could not attend a live concert. This included children and youths who are too young to gain admission to dance clubs, pubs or theatres. It also included the very old, and people limited in their mobility. The history of rock music contains number of similar accounts of individuals being moved, inspired, or changed in some way as a result of a musical performance encountered via television. For example, journalist Andy Gill, writing of when, 'as a callow pre-teen', he saw the sequence of Bob Dylan dropping cards featuring keywords as an accompaniment to 'Subterranean Homesick Blues' recalled: 'The effect was immediate and, it seems, permanent. Nothing I had heard before had prepared me for this torrent of verbiage, with its mysterious frames of reference, its impenetrable slang and its sheer acidic bite'.<sup>42</sup> There are other obvious examples in writings about popular music. A celebrated case was the appearance of David Bowie performing 'Starman' on Top of the Pops on 6 July 1972, a moment that was remembered for its inspiration and influence by numerous musicians when marking the singer's death in 2016.

Classical music also provided inspiration. John Robert Brown wrote of a moment during a BBC Proms broadcast that he found unforgettable, inspired by a type of close-up that many had found distracting:

Close-ups of perspiring faces and bulging veins make for good drama... I've never forgotten seeing the shaking fingers of a British clarinettist caught in a close-up as he embarked on a taxing cadenza during the last night of the Proms, long ago.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> John Walsh, 'Tales of the City', *The Independent*, (16 October 2003), 7.

<sup>42</sup> Andy Gill, 'Blood on the Tracks: a critic's obsession', *The Independent Review*, (3 March 2004), 12.

<sup>43</sup> John Robert Brown, 'The Vision Thing', *Classical Music*, (12 April 2003), 43.

Television was particularly conducive to an aesthetic of overstatement, exaggeration, and excess (as implied in the examples above). This characterised rock and pop during the 1960s and 1970s, and is a feature of opera, and much Romantic repertoire.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, many dramatic musical moments leapt from the television screen. They had little to do with technical editing skills, hi-fi quality or the truth of television's relationship to a real event. Excess, exaggeration and drama made good television because it was *not* the real world of the concert hall, opera house, or rock gig.

Yet, from the earliest days, television was conducive to a musical aesthetic of understatement and unobtrusiveness. Earlier in this article I mentioned in passing that a considerable amount of music on television accompanied the still image, as opposed to the moving image: for example, the test card which was shown for much of television's history, or the images that accompanied interludes. The music here was chosen for its ability to function as both background *and* foreground, to be heard attentively and ignored. From 1936, the BBC compiled lists of recordings to be used in intervals, and an early memo from that year stated that light music used for 'intervals or for illustration' should not include vocals or vocal choruses.<sup>44</sup> The test card and interludes that featured so much during the early years of television provided an opportunity for many composers who were subsequently recognised for their contribution to light music.<sup>45</sup> There is another story that starts here. It is a tale about music on television with no musicians present, a narrative that is also an integral part of the history of BBC television. This article inevitably only touches on a small part of this history.

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<sup>44</sup> BBC Internal Memo from Tel. P.M. (16 November 1936), File T16/207/1 Television Advisory Committee 1935-40, BBC Written Archive Centre, Caversham.

<sup>45</sup> Andrew Lamb, 'British Light Music, Sound Good, Feel Good', *Gramophone*, (November 2002), 34-38.