

Musical Parody: Good or Bad?

MUSICAL parody, as practised by such people as Anna Russell, Victor Borge, Henry Reed (who wrote "Emily Butter") and, at a lower level, Spike Jones, has become extremely popular. Are its effects on musical taste likely to be good or harmful? Has it any special values or dangers for music in New Zealand? In what ways might it assist or retard standards of performance and appreciation? These questions were submitted to a group of musicians and critics, and their replies are printed below.

IN the climate of musical opinion in England, the occasional performance of musical parody worries no one—and, indeed, creates scarcely a ripple of effect. Donald Swann, who composed the music for Henry Reed's *Emily Butter* parodies, put it to me this way: "There's so much good modern music performed and appreciated that the

little bit of parody comes only as a rather welcome relief."

IN ENGLAND, NOBODY WORRIES

The kinds of parody mentioned by the Editor could not be described here as "extremely popular." The *Emily Butter* skits have been heard only on the Third Programme (a tiny minority of BBC listeners). Anna Russell appeared in London at a small club theatre, not before big musical audiences. Victor Borge is, I should say, unknown here, and Spike Jones is old stuff.

Other kinds of musical parody, however, have long formed a normal—and therefore not much discussed—ingredient of entertainment. Donald Swann and others have for years contributed such parodies to West End revues. On a less sophisticated level, everyone here knows the comic effect of opera tunes sung to absurd words: my own first acquaintance in boyhood with the Soldiers' Chorus from *Faust* was when a pre-war radio show put it into a shop scene with the words—

How dare you doubt our integrity?
D'you know these slippers cost one-and-three?

This apparently devastating experience did not prevent my becoming a music critic. Nor—admitting, of course,



VICTOR BORGE

that you can have too much parody, like too much everything else—do I think that a proper ration of parody should do anything but sharpen true appreciation. And in "appreciation" I include the recognition and rejection of what is bad.

—ARTHUR JACOBS (London)

MUSICAL parody is nothing new. Mozart in his "Musical Joke" poked fun at the silly clichés of contemporary composition. Saint-Saëns in the *Carnival of the Animals* retarded the Gallop from *Orpheus in the Underworld* to the gait of tortoises and the *Dance of the Sylphs* to that of an elephant, and Dohnányi's super-operatic prelude to the *Variations on a Nursery*

PARODY HAS VALUE

Theme introduces "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." English examples are Walton's *Façade* and Lord Berner's Waltz for Piano Duet, "Strauss, Strauss et Strauss." There is no evidence that these efforts debased the musical taste of their day, and I fail to see how their successors can debase present-day taste in New Zealand or anywhere else.

There is also nothing new in the parodist as public performer. The great clowns were often excellent musicians, witness Grock, and I remember some adorable slaughter of good music on violin and trombone. Anna Russell is in this tradition. It is true that after an evening with her, one feels that the whole edifice of music lies in ruins, and it may be that the low-brow is confirmed in his prejudices. But low-brow and high-brow alike have understood for the first time what actually happens in Wagner's *Ring*. Of course, Wagner in particular, and opera in general, is easy game for parody, which may only at this point be noxious. Opera is far from safely established in the English-speaking world and, except on a small scale, does not exist in New Zealand. Parody could do harm when the object parodied is unfamiliar; for instance, *Carmen Jones*, which was a theatrical triumph, but in part a parody of Bizet's music, might well cause the original, when heard later, to prove a disappointment. But we must take this risk. A performer who makes a new public aware that music exists is of value to the art—and the parodist surely does this. If the NZBS has the good fortune to be his sponsor, there may actually be a profit to help pay for the National Orchestra.

—JAMES ROBERTSON

IT would be foolish to deny the cleansing properties of astringent musical parody. Not that our appreciation of music attracts dirt. Rather, perhaps, over-appreciation produces a clogging—happily

REBUKE FOR ANNA

superficial in most cases. Of course, only great or very well known music can be successfully parodied, and then it is not so much the music as the style of performance it

occasionally receives, which is parodied.

Anna Russell has concentrated her efforts in this direction, and it is with her effusions that New Zealand listeners are most familiar. Her success was instantaneous and rightly so. But instructive and entertaining as she was, Miss Russell should be re-proved (brand me as a heretic) for delivering her Analysis of the *Ring* in New Zealand. In England and America the case is different, where audiences are very familiar with both story and music of the *Ring* drama, and can return to next year's Cycle having, for the moment, at least, shelved Anna's explanations. But New Zealand listeners are not so fortunate—it was only recently that the NZBS gave a complete *Ring* performance. Many friends of mine said that they thought of Anna Russell too often; she was their haven of refuge against insufficiently understood Wagnerian complexity, so called. A good Wagner parody once in a while works wonders on the intellect, but to present this to the near-uninitiated approaches mortal sin.

Again to stress how essential it is to know what is being parodied, examine *Emily Butter*. I think the music is a hotchpotch (BBC critics were fulsome); so few numbers are genuine parody on contemporary opera, and even these pale into insignificance beside Anna Russell's contemporary song, "My Heart is Red"—a masterstroke surely. An intimate revue running in London included a number, "Festival of Britten," which bit, chewed, and spat out delicious pieces of foible on contemporary opera. It had barbs and brevity, essentials which *Butter* lacks.

In this Mozart bi-centenary year, listeners may be offered Victor Borge if they require relief. Too earthy and unsubtle. Allow me to recommend Peter Ustinov's Mozart opera, infinitely superior.

Best parody really has its roots in bad performances, which unfortunately abound, and worse, are often too readily accepted. Here a parodist can be in clover—see how Anna Russell profits. But anyone can profit here—consistent inferior performance ought to be blatantly lampooned in front of large audiences. Necessary, because so many take no notice of the critics.

—LESLIE ATKINSON

AS I lay at rest, under Biblical sanction, the other Sunday afternoon a most unusual sort of musical noise began to come from the other end of the house. I listened for a while, trying to classify it. It might have been



ANNA RUSSELL

"One feels that the whole edifice of music lies in ruins"

some new kind of Negro spiritual, but somehow it sounded too odd for that. I was interested enough to get up from my bed of sloth and investigate. A

HEALING KNIFE

particularly cavernous contralto was singing a sentimental-sacred song on the radio; and my youngest daughter was at the piano, playing an impromptu boogie-woogie accompaniment.

If I had been listening to either on its own I should probably have found myself fumbling for words of abuse, and not quite managing to express what I felt. The combination produced quite a pleasing bit of musical satire. Two nothings added up to something. Similarly, at a professional level, Spike Jones takes a piece of music that has become as welcome as the cauliflowers left over from last spring, and just as palatable, and gives us a most sprightly entertainment. Why, then, complain about musical parodies?

Personally, I don't. I know of no work of art of any kind, of any permanent value, that has been destroyed, or even maimed, through being parodied. The arts are like an orchard that constantly tends to produce dead wood and surplus foliage instead of fruit, and one of the main functions of criticism is to carry out a continuous pruning process. Parody has an important part in this. What more nicely-calculated criticism has "Liebestraum" received than Borge's—and what could be funnier to listen to?

The art of parody has not been developed as far in music as in literature, but such people as Alec Templeton, Victor Borge and Anna Russell are at present making up some of the leeway. I wish them good hunting.

—A. R. D. FAIRBURN

IN discussion of this subject, the first thing to be determined is the exact meaning of parody. According to Brewer, the word itself is derived from

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