

Benjamin Ivry

Sighing For The Silvery Moon:
English Music Hall Songs Reexamined



Harry Lauder and wife, 1914

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Vesta Victoria, from the Actresses series (N245) issued by Kinney Brothers to promote Sweet Caporal Cigarettes, 1890

Preface

From the nineteenth century through the end of the Second World War, thousands of English music hall songs made an impact on society. Of this corpus, many remain powerfully encapsulated statements, especially as interpreted on record or film by performers of lasting charisma and charm. Although firmly anchored in their time, for listeners today these songs address still-relevant public issues such as race, gender, and militarism, sometimes for better or worse. At their best, the lyrics and melodies combined with rare communicative abilities to create an experience of shared humanity. As Barry Humphries noted in a 2022 blog about the performers who sang them: “These old jesters had the knack of seeming to fling their whole lives across the footlights, crying out, ‘Catch!’”¹

Recent academic publications have analyzed the societal impact of these music hall creations, but even in their heyday, some aficionados speculated on their wider significance. One such was Arthur Symons,² a British poet influenced by Baudelaire and Verlaine. *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (1899) by Symons was a meaningful text for W. B. Yeats and T. S. Eliot.

Symons was also a militant devotee of music hall songs.³ In 1892, he wrote an article describing their allure,⁴ leading the classical-minded *Musical Times* to decry what it described in a headline as

1 Barry Humphries, “Music hall’s last act,” blog posted at <https://www.theoldie.co.uk/article/music-halls-last-act-barry-humphries>; last accessed 19 October 2022.

2 See Karl Beckson, *Arthur Symons: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) and Karl Beckson, ed., *The Memoirs of Arthur Symons: Life and Art in the 1890’s* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1990).

3 See Barry Faulk, “Camp Expertise: Arthur Symons, Music-Hall, and the Defense of Theory,” *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2000), pp. 171-193.

4 Arthur Symons, “The Music-Hall of the Future,” *Pall Mall Gazette*, 13 April 1892.

“The Music Hall Mania.”⁵ Fretting over Symons’ attraction to lower class entertainment, the anonymous *Musical Times* critic deemed him a “hierophant of the new-fangled cult of the costermonger, the champion of the fin de siècle ‘serio-comic.’” Symons had praised the sheer range of music hall acts as the

“only form of entertainment which satisfies the modern rage for variety. The play in five acts is becoming as tiresome as the novel in three volumes, as the poem in twelve books. To the people who go out nightly for their entertainment, it is becoming more and more essential that entertainment should be provided in small doses.”

In a Wagnerian era, this concision seemed heretical to some. *The Musical Times* feared that any shortening of the public’s attention span might threaten the continued existence of traditional fine arts:

“Mr. Symons, it will thus be seen, is a fervent apostle of the snippet system... Away with symphonies and concertos, operas and oratorios! The great heart of the people, so the Pall Mall Gazette once assured us, can only be stirred by the music hall, and the essence of the music hall system is the ‘quick change’ and the short ‘turn.’”

At the time, a music hall programme might include 25 brief acts of dizzying multifariousness. Seven years later, the English essayist Max Beerbohm⁶ praised the music hall experience as “entertainment that is not only worthy of attention, but is even most exigent of all my æsthetic faculties.” A challenging and demanding art form for Beerbohm, music hall achieved its stature through “admirably written songs,” for example the ones sung by the comedian Gus Elen or the “swift *nuances*” expressed through saucy innuendo by another musical performer, Marie Lloyd.

Beerbohm noted that these melodies were penned with artistic subtlety, which singers communicated in skilled fashion:

5 Anon., “The Music Hall Mania,” *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, Vol. 33, No. 591 (1 May 1892), pp. 265-266.

6 Max Beerbohm, “The Blight on the Music Halls” (1899) in *More* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1922) pp 129-136.

"The words of their songs are quite pregnant with character and wit. The music to which they are set is no longer the eternal variation on one or two themes, but is often novel and always adapted to the words' meaning."

The interpreters, for Beerbohm, amounted to a

"swift succession of strongly, variously defined personalities, all trained and talented and self-conscious; all in pretty or appropriately grotesque costumes; all imitating this or that phase of modern life within the limits of their new art."

So in 1899, for Beerbohm, music hall songs were intensely stimulating to the creative mind in a concentrated way, rather than a form of relaxation: "I find no repose for my faculties in the Tivoli. The atmosphere from the stage of it is surcharged with artistic conscience."⁷ These bursts of comic energy were enhanced by practiced performances, some of which were captured for posterity on record and by camera.

Challenging the solely aesthetic value of the result, the poet T.S. Eliot claimed to find moral illumination in music hall songs. As if fulfilling the prediction of the *Musical Times* critic of 1892, Eliot was closer than Symons to a "hierophant of the new-fangled cult of the costermonger." The term hierophant, derived from the Ancient Greek, refers to an interpreter of sacred mysteries and arcane principles who brings religious congregants into the presence of something holy.

In an oft-cited posthumous appreciation of the artistry of Marie Lloyd,⁸ Eliot stated that she had "in a way a moral superiority" over other music hall performers, which, he posited, was why she was never heckled by audiences. Others might presume that her toothy smile, evident good health and humour won over the public with

7 This imperative allure addressing the artistic conscience may have also in part drawn other UK arts world habitués to the music hall, including Oscar Wilde, the poet Ernest Dowson, art historian Herbert Horne, and stained glass window designer Selwyn Image.

8 T.S. Eliot, "London Letter," *The Dial Magazine*, vol. 73.6. (December 1922) pp. 659-63