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Vera Lynn on Screen: Popular Music and the ‘People’s War’

‘It is odd to reflect,’ opined music journalist Spike Hughes, ‘in the middle of a war being fought for the rights of the Common Man, that there was never a time in the history of music when the divisions between various types of music were so marked as they are today.’¹ It was the mid-1940s and, contrary to the more pessimistic predictions made at the start of the war, Britain’s artistic culture had flourished throughout the conflict. But for all the wartime talk of national unity and ‘the people’, cultural divisions had remained strongly entrenched in musical life, as Hughes was at pains to demonstrate.

Harking back to a fictitious past when a benevolent aristocracy governed under a ‘semi-feudal system’, the writer imagined a time when such divisions supposedly did not exist: when art and life blended seamlessly; when ‘*Kunstmusik*’ was the preserve of the everyman; when ‘[t]here was no such thing as “light”, “popular” or “classical” music. [...] Handel was not a “highbrow” composer, any more than Mozart was.’² While the terminology with which Hughes mapped out the cultural terrain was, as he suggested, relatively new to Britain, his sweeping characterization of music making before the nineteenth century leaves much to be desired. Nevertheless, his assessment is revealing. The problem, it seemed, was not

¹ I am especially grateful to Christina Baade, Harriet Boyd-Bennett, Christopher Chowrimootoo, Roger Parker and Laura Tunbridge for their comments on earlier versions of this article.

Spike Hughes, ‘Popular Taste in Music’, in *Pilot Papers: Social Essays and Documents*, ed. Charles Madge (London: Pilot Press, 1945), 88.

² Hughes, ‘Popular Taste in Music’, 88.

so much the divisions *per se*, but rather the situation to which they had given rise, whereby the ‘common people’ were predominantly interested in second-rate popular music.

To be precise, Hughes’s critique was directed not at ‘the cult of “Jazz”’, nor ‘its modern development, “Swing”’. On the contrary, since the early 1930s, when he established his reputation as a composer and performer of jazz music, he had played a significant role in promoting both movements in Britain, not least through his advocacy of Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong.³ His objection was rather to ‘the kind of music known in Charing Cross Road [i.e., the home of Britain’s popular music industry] as “commercial”’ and epitomized by dance bands and their crooning vocalists. Far from respecting the public’s apparent preference for this type of music, he charged the elite with failing to realize their duty of cultural care: through their ‘high-falutin’ rhetoric and ‘unbearable’ superiority, they had overlooked the ‘rights of the Common Man’.⁴ The result was a disjuncture between rhetoric and reality – the paradox of a ‘people’s war’ that had supposedly unified the nation, but which had, to Hughes’s mind at least, failed to produce a common, people’s culture.

By the time that Hughes was writing, what the public listened to – and whether such music was of sufficient merit to form the basis of a national culture – were the subjects of long-running debate. In brief, since the mid-nineteenth century, sweeping social changes wrought by urbanisation, educational reforms, and technological advances had combined to transform Britain’s cultural landscape. On the one hand, the literature, art, and music that had once been the

³ Spike Hughes, *Second Movement* (London: Museum Press, 1951), 112-13.

⁴ Hughes, ‘Popular Taste in Music’, 88, 92.

preserve of the bourgeoisie became available to an ever more diverse audience. On the other hand, a burgeoning mass culture industry created a rival for public attention;⁵ its increasingly hegemonic presence inspired an array of concerns among advocates of elite culture. Perhaps the most fundamental stemmed from the impression that the popular music industry was premised on a value system that seemed fundamentally to be at odds with that of the art world. As historian D.L. LeMahieu has explained, while elite culture was judged on the nebulous grounds of artistic merit, the emerging popular music industry more often seemed to measure success in terms of sales.⁶

As cultural critics struggled to navigate these changes, they developed a new set of categories to distinguish, or defend, the various genres and styles from one another. Frequently drawing distinctions in binary terms, they constructed what literary scholar Andreas Huyssen termed ‘the great divide’, pitting high against low, modernism against mass culture, art against entertainment.⁷ Among those who articulated this dualism was C.S. Lewis. Sketching the two supposed

⁵ For an account of how these developments impacted on literary culture, see John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London: Faber, 1992). America witnessed a similar trend, for more on which see: Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow / Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

⁶ D.L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 2-3.

⁷ Andreas Huyssen, *After The Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986).

extremes, he explained that art usually connoted values such as ‘literary, classical, serious, or artistic’, whereas entertainment implied ‘popular, common, commercial’ and more passive forms of consumption.⁸ Whether such traits were positive or negative was, of course, a matter of opinion: once the terminology of highbrow and lowbrow entered the vernacular (which did not take long), both labels were invoked critically by detractors and affirmatively by advocates.⁹

As Genevieve Abravanel, among others, has recently observed, the distinction between high and low was more an ideological than a material reality.¹⁰ It was perhaps because of this that champions of both sides of the cultural divide remained so deeply invested in rehearsing the grounds for distinction. But the Hughes article suggests another reason for the apparent preoccupation with marking cultural boundaries. Framing his argument in relation to the conflict, Hughes suggested that the war had put a new perspective on the issue of ‘popular taste in music’: as ‘the rights of the Common Man’ became a hot political topic for 1940s Britain, the question of how to ‘elevate’ public taste acquired a new urgency. To put his point more broadly, the recent changes in mid-century Britain’s political and social climate shifted the stakes of the debate over highbrow and lowbrow culture.

⁸ C.S. Lewis, ‘High and Low Brows’, in *Rehabilitations and Other Essays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), 95-116; quote at 95.

⁹ For an account of the negative use of ‘highbrow’, see Leonard Woold, *Hunting the Highbrow* (London: Hogarth Press, 1927); for an example of the connotations of the lowbrow being invoked positively, see the reading of the film below.

¹⁰ Genevieve Abravanel, *Americanizing Britain: The Rise of Modernism in the Age of the Entertainment Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 17.

Taking a cue from Hughes, this article explores how the urgent need to survive and win the Second World War confounded established value systems. While highbrow and lowbrow were equally implicated in the debate about music's possible role in the conflict, my primary concern here is the latter (i.e., the lowbrow or popular), as I consider how the value of entertainment was re-negotiated in the context of war. Entertainment is obviously a broad term that encompassed a range of media and musical styles, from swing and jazz to light music or 'pops', and from music hall to cinema; during the war, the label 'entertainment' was even on occasion appropriated by the artistic elite to boost the cause of high culture.¹¹ To be more specific, then, my focus is on how this debate played out in relation to perhaps the most iconic entertainer of Britain's war years, a singer who, in her own words, remains a 'symbol of the era' to this day: Vera Lynn.¹² The decision to explore this debate through the lens of an individual performer is inspired by film scholar Richard Dyer's suggestion that one of the primary functions of stars is to mediate – or in his terms, “manage” or resolve – the ‘contradictions within and between ideologies’.¹³ As we will see, the strategies for

¹¹ For example, see ‘Entertainment and Culture: Aims of New Council’, *The Times*, 12 December 1939, 6; Wilfrid Howard Mellers, ‘Musical Culture To-day: A Sociological Note’, *Tempo* 7 (June 1944), 5.

¹² Vera Lynn, *Some Sunny Day: My Autobiography* (London: HarperCollins, 2009), 3. For Lynn's continuing association with the Second World War, see my ‘Review-Article: Soundtracks to the “People's War”’, *Music and Letters* 94, 2 (2013), 324.

¹³ Richard Dyer, *Stars*, 2nd ed. (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 34. Traditionally, a star's media identity – the product of all the publicly-available information about her – has been referred to by the phrase ‘star *image*’, coined by Richard Dyer in his seminal text *Stars*. The use of the word ‘image’ betrays the privileging of the visual that has historically

promoting Lynn's star persona also sent messages about the value of popular music to wartime Britain.

Lynn's formation as a national icon was an on-going, contested process throughout the war. But if her unique association with this period has a beginning, it was surely in April 1940, when she came top in a survey conducted by BBC employee Leslie Perowne to identify the British Expeditionary Force's (BEF) favourite singer.¹⁴ The victory won her the timely accolade 'the Forces' Sweetheart', a title that she consolidated through her high-profile contributions to the war effort. Alongside her continuing appearances on the music hall circuit, she toured with the Entertainment National Services Association, providing concerts for the troops, most famously in Burma. She gave a personal touch to her war work: she famously replied to thousands of letters from fans serving in the forces overseas and visited hospital wards to show solidarity with both invalids and new mothers.¹⁵ However, her greatest impact surely came through her

characterized star studies – a tendency that probably reflects the discipline's historical emphasis on Hollywood stars, the majority of whom were made famous by the film industry and for whom screen appearances were 'privileged sites, the primary reason for their stardom': Bruce Babington, 'Introduction: British Stars and Stardom', in *British Stars and Stardom: From Alma Taylor to Sean Connery*, ed. Bruce Babington (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 2. The situation in Britain was somewhat different (see below: 19–20), and particularly in the case of stars, like Vera Lynn, who were primarily famous for their vocal performances. In the light of this, the phrase 'star persona' seems more appropriate here than 'star image'.

¹⁴ Jonah Barrington, 'British Girl Wins B.E.F Radio Voice', *Daily Express*, 17 April 1940, 11.

¹⁵ Lynn recounts her war work in *Some Sunny Day*, 137–79.

radio show, *Sincerely Yours*, and her three film vehicles, *We'll Meet Again* (1942), *Rhythm Serenade* (1943) and *One Exciting Night* (1944), through which she reached huge audiences. (The first of the films, *We'll Meet Again*, provides a case study for this article). Through both her own actions and the public discourse that developed around her, Lynn's identity as an entertainer became enmeshed in the prevalent discourses of wartime Britain, and it is on account of this that her performances became significant – and controversial – reference points in the debate about the role of entertainment in wartime Britain.

However, if Lynn became an advocate for popular music, to what extent she shaped this mediating role is harder to pin down. For one thing, unlike female singers such as Billie Holiday and Dusty Springfield, whose defiance of social norms has invited characterizations of 'independency and agency both professionally and personally', Lynn represented a more compliant womanhood – in her own words, that of 'the girl next door, big-sister, universal fiancée'.¹⁶ If such conformity has traditionally – and, as recent scholarship has argued, mistakenly – been taken as evidence of passivity, this image is further complicated by the collaborative nature of both film and popular song, and Lynn's own position within this.¹⁷ For instance, while Lynn was usually responsible for choosing her repertoire, there is no evidence that this extended to the songs for her film

¹⁶ Annie J. Randall, *Dusty! Queen of the Postmods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 25; Lynn, *Some Sunny Day*, 145.

¹⁷ Among recent scholarship arguing for a more complex understanding of 'seemingly compliant cultural production' is Christina Baade, "'Sincerely Yours, Vera Lynn": Performing Class, Sentiment, and Femininity in the People's War', *Atlantis: A Women's Studies Journal* 30, 2 (2006), 37; and Jacqueline Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture: Popular Music and Identity in the 1960s* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007).

vehicles.¹⁸ Furthermore, any autonomy she did exert was necessarily circumscribed by the choice of songs available (she never composed her own music) and the need for commercial success. The veneer of sincerity in which she was covered adds yet another layer of complexity: central to her image as a straight-up member of the working-class, this characteristic was also invoked in such a way as to neutralize any sense of political agency. An example is her claim that her wartime performances ‘showed the boys what they were *really* fighting for, the precious personal connections rather than the ideologies and theories’.¹⁹ While Lynn certainly aided the rhetoric tying her music to the war, whether she recognized her role in wider debates about cultural hierarchies is less clear.

In what follows, I begin by briefly sketching how Britain’s Second World War came to be characterized as the ‘people’s war’, considering the broad impact of this rhetoric on popular culture. A biographical overview documenting Lynn’s rise to fame during the first years of the conflict then provides the contextual backdrop for a reading of her first film vehicle, *We’ll Meet Again*. A backstage musical set in wartime Britain, *We’ll Meet Again* was produced in the aftermath of a heated controversy over Lynn’s vocal style (of which more later). The controversy provides a telling backdrop against which to interpret the film narrative’s attempts to project positive values onto Lynn’s music by emphasising its exceptional contribution to the war effort. Beyond simply throwing light on how the film negotiates Lynn’s own cultural standing, this backdrop also suggests how her star persona was mobilized in the broader cultural debates of the moment. By exploring how Lynn’s critics and advocates negotiated the contention between highbrow and lowbrow, I seek not only to inspire a fuller understanding of the political and cultural work carried out by her star persona in Britain during the early

¹⁸ Lynn, *Some Sunny Day*, 85, 134–5.

¹⁹ Lynn, *Some Sunny Day*, 147.

1940s, but also to reveal how her performances contributed to a wider debate about the value of entertainment for a country at war.

Entertainment in Wartime Britain

One of the most enduring axioms of the Second World War is that it was ‘the people’s war’ – a war, that is, in which the civilian public of the home front played as vital a role as the soldiers serving abroad. Although this phrase predates the 1940s, it acquired a particular significance in this era on several counts. For one thing, the Blitz brought the battlefield closer to home than any recent hostilities. For another, this was the first conflict in which the general public had ready access to radio. A novel weapon in the age of ‘media wars’, domestic radio provided a means to connect instantly with the nation.²⁰ Fearing a widespread lack of enthusiasm for another conflict, the government used this medium to promote the idea of a people’s war for their own ends. Drawing on utopian ideals such as ‘egalitarianism, community and participation’, they employed language that would encourage the British public to believe that they were all in the war together.²¹ The idea of a people’s war became so pervasive that it ‘shaped the rhetoric of five years of official and unofficial propaganda’.²²

²⁰ The Crimean War is often cited as a defining moment in the history of ‘media wars’: it was the first time that newspapers, aided by new telegraphic communication, could print reports from correspondents writing first-hand from the front line. Stephanie Markovits, *The Crimean War in the British Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

²¹ Christina L. Baade, *Victory through Harmony: The BBC and Popular Music in World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4.

²² Calder, *The People’s War: Britain 1939–45* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), 138.

The entertainment industry – sometimes officially, at other times less so – played a part in propagating this rhetoric. As Christina Baade has suggested, ‘entertainment [...] structured which needs were recognized’ by foregrounding ‘morale and unity, rather than problems, say, of social inequality’.²³ In so doing, it reflected the wider processes of restructuring necessitated by the conflict. With Britain moving rapidly towards total war, securing victory went to the top of the political agenda; this demanded that more and more of the nation’s resources, both material and ideological, be mobilized. If cultural organizations were to survive, they would have to make clear their contribution to the war effort.

At the BBC, this meant a new maxim: ‘to maintain national unity and to secure the nation’s morale’.²⁴ It began by reorganizing its services – first streamlining them into a single programme to limit the chances of the transmitters being tapped by the enemy; then launching a second programme in January 1940 specifically aimed at the BEF (although it quickly became as popular with civilians as with soldiers).²⁵ At the same time, recognizing that popular music had a positive impact on public morale, the corporation softened its attitude towards broadcasting popular artists. Despite ever-present anxieties about the supposedly mind-numbing impact of mass culture, it increased the amount of airtime given to dance bands and popular vocalists, especially on the Forces’ Programme; it also began to pay greater attention to the quality of their offerings. Such concessions were in part an attempt to prevent dissatisfied popular music fans from tuning into

²³ Baade, “‘Sincerely Yours, Vera Lynn’”, 43.

²⁴ Baade, “‘Sincerely Yours, Vera Lynn’”, 36.

²⁵ One critic went so far as to claim that ‘[t]he Forces nowadays is really the Housewives’ programme, and might well be renamed. It is tap listening for the home; many keep it on unbrokenly all day’: Tom Harrison, ‘Radio’, *The Observer*, 19 July 1942, 2.

enemy radio stations to hear their preferred music. They also reflected an awareness that the extended working hours necessitated by war would inevitably lead to more background listening, for which popular music was supposedly better suited.²⁶

The film industry broadly conceived of its contribution to the conflict in similar terms: cinema could serve both as a means of raising morale and as a vehicle for propaganda. Facing the hardships of home front life – the rationing, long working hours, distant loved ones, blackouts, and bombs – the general public increasingly looked to film for light relief: average weekly cinema attendance rose by around half between 1939 and 1945.²⁷ From the industry’s point of view, there was a careful balance to be struck here. While producers and entrepreneurs recognized that indulging the public’s preferences helped revenue flow, the Ministry of Information (MoI) Film Division remained committed to combining entertainment with propaganda, cultural uplift, and high quality productions.²⁸ Pursuing a policy of co-operation rather than coercion with regard to commercial cinema, the MoI sought the role of overseer, advising ‘on the suitability of subjects’ and helping to monitor the distribution of film-making resources. To offer just one example of the sorts of negotiations that resulted, in 1942 the British Film Producers Association, sensing the public’s waning interest in war films, asked for more support in securing resources for non-war-themed productions. The MoI agreed, but with the proviso that preference would be given to ‘realistic films about every day life dealing with

²⁶ For a rich account of the BBC’s attitude towards the broadcasting of popular music, see Baade, *Victory Through Harmony*.

²⁷ Baade, *Victory Through Harmony*, 3. See also Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1994), 81–3.

²⁸ Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It: British Cinema in the Second World War* (London: Tauris, 2007), 7–9.

matters not directly about the war but featuring events in various phases of life in the factory, the mines and on the land'.²⁹

If the cultural elite admitted entertainment's capacity to raise morale and promote the participatory and egalitarian ideals of a 'people's war', they remained anxious to continue their long-standing mission to elevate public taste. Meanwhile, as cultural entrepreneurs sought to defend a place for entertainment within wartime Britain, they often found themselves balancing commercial interests against the heightened political demands of the moment. Navigating these various, oft-conflicting cultural agendas posed a challenge for even the most high-profile performers of the era.

An Icon for a 'People's War'

In many respects, Lynn was well positioned to become representative of a 'people's war'. A 'plumber's daughter' from the East End, who had started her career at the age of seven touring the local working men's club circuit, she had an obvious link to 'the people'.³⁰ What is more, she had already started to make a name for herself through radio during the late 1930s: she had her first big break in 1935 when publisher and friend Walter Ridley arranged an informal audition that won her three broadcasts with Joe Loss's band; the same week, she also sang for Charlie Kunz and was signed a second time. Two years later, she made her first hit recordings, 'The Little Boy That Santa Claus Forgot' and 'Red Sails in the Sunset'. Another significant event of 1937 was her debut with Bert Ambrose, whose dance band was, by her own account, 'generally recognized to be the best [...] in Britain'.³¹ By the outbreak of war, then, her star persona was already

²⁹ *Kinematograph Weekly*, cited in Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 11–12.

³⁰ Barrington, 'British Girl Wins B.E.F Radio Voice'.

³¹ Lynn, *Some Sunny Day*, 81–4.

enmeshed in a medium – popular music – that would prove vital to the British war effort.³²

It was only a matter of months before her appropriation as a national icon was confirmed with her aforementioned designation as the ‘Forces’ Sweetheart’. This new status roughly coincided with – and was surely reinforced by – her decision that the time had come to pursue a career as a solo artist. Having worked as a vocalist with Britain’s foremost bandleader for several years, Lynn felt this was the only way to progress her career.³³ With variety impresarios proving eager to facilitate the move, she made her first appearance as a ‘fully fledged solo act’ on 1 July 1940 in Coventry.

By August of the same year, her growing popularity was reflected in a bout of fan mail requesting that she be given more airtime on the BBC’s Forces’ Programme.³⁴ It was in response to these pleas that producer Howard Thomas made plans for Lynn to have her own radio show, *Sincerely Yours*. Thomas’s vision was for a weekly half-hour show that would combine popular songs (sung by Lynn), instrumental numbers (performed by Fred Hartley and his orchestra), and brief accounts (read by Lynn) of home front activities. Taking advantage of radio’s unprecedented powers of dissemination, the show

³² John Mundy, *Popular Music on Screen: From the Hollywood Musical to Music Video*

(Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 155. Lynn’s strong association with the radio inspired her stage entry for the revue *Applesauce*, where she appeared inside a giant radiogram: Mundy, *Popular Music on Screen*, 132.

³³ Mundy, *Popular Music on Screen*, 119.

³⁴ An unsigned letter to Mr. Macdonnell, 3 August 1940, notes that Lynn’s singing had been specially requested by members of the Royal Air Force: BBC Written Archives Centre (hereafter WAC), RCONT 1: Artists: Vera Lynn, 1935–1944 File 1 (hereafter RCONT-1-1).

was styled as a site of community gathering – a space in which Lynn could use a modern medium to traverse limitations of time and place, to mediate between battlefield and home front.³⁵ As her publicity put it, it was a ‘sort of rendez-vous, where husbands and wives torn apart by war [could] be brought together by music’.³⁶ At the same time, and despite having an audience of millions, *Sincerely Yours* sought to create an intimate, homely atmosphere. Described as a ‘personal letter in words and music’, and with touches such as the announcement of the arrival of a baby to a man in the Forces, the tone was unashamedly sentimental.³⁷ The initial six-week run began on 9 November 1941 with a prime broadcasting spot: 9.30pm on Sunday evening – i.e., after the News, which invariably attracted large numbers of listeners.³⁸ Within three weeks, *Sincerely Yours* had ‘soared into the exclusive top rank of radio shows with an audience of more than 20% of the radio public’.³⁹ Since Lynn’s busy performance schedule prohibited an extension of the initial run, plans were quickly made for another series in February and March the

³⁵ In the words of *The Observer*’s Tom Harrisson, ‘[r]adio’s kindest work is the crossing of barriers, barriers of space, barriers of ignorance, doubt, apathy, or contempt’: ‘Radio’, *The Observer*, 6 December 1942, 2.

³⁶ *Sincerely Yours*, Forces’ Programme, 8 March 1942. BBC Sound Archive, LP 24054.

³⁷ This news item eventually had to be dropped due to the flood of responses. Baade, *Victory Through Harmony*, 132. For a fuller analysis of the programme’s sentimental tone, see Baade, “‘Sincerely Yours, Vera Lynn’”, 36–49.

³⁸ *Radio Times*, ‘Broadcasting Schedule’, 9 November 1941, 7. Apart from its prime time position, a late slot allowed Lynn to get from her evening theatre performance to the studio.

³⁹ ‘Programme Parade’, 30 November 1941, BBC WAC, R19/683: Entertainment/Vera Lynn Programmes 1941–53 (hereafter R19/638).

following year.⁴⁰ Before the second run of *Sincerely Yours* had come to an end, a variety show opened at the Palace Theatre using the same name.

It was during the radio series' second run that a fierce debate erupted over the BBC's programming of popular music, a controversy that has been documented at length by Christina Baade and in which Lynn took centre stage.⁴¹ In brief, following a series of British military defeats in Northern Africa, detractors claimed that the extensive airtime given to 'crooners and sloppy sentimental rubbish' was having an adverse affect on the Forces' conduct.⁴² Of the numerous culprits, Lynn's vocal performances seemed to epitomize more than any other the effeminate sentimentality that was supposedly undermining soldiers' virility.⁴³ Such objections put the BBC in a difficult position: 'There is no doubt whatever, of course, that the programme is solidly popular with the ordinary rank and file of the Forces', Basil Nicolls explained; but nevertheless, the BBC did not want 'a reputation for "flabby amusement"': something 'constructive' had to be done about Lynn's appearances.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ The programme makers initially wanted to extend the series from six to nine weeks. Thomas, Memo: Vera Lynn Series, 21 November 1941, RCONT-1-1.

⁴¹ Baade, 'Sincerely Yours: The Trouble with Sentimentality and the Ban on Crooners', in *Victory Through Harmony*, 131–52.

⁴² Lt.-Col. V.C., letter to *The Daily Telegraph*, 7 March 1942, cited in Baade, *Victory Through Harmony*, 131.

⁴³ The BBC controller of Programmes Basil Nicholls identified Lynn as the cause of 'much of the rather wild criticism of the Forces' Programme': B.E. Nicolls, Memo: Vera Lynn, 17 March 1942, RCONT-1-1.

⁴⁴ B.E. Nicolls, Memo: Vera Lynn.

In an attempt to resolve matters, a Dance Music Policy Committee, known colloquially as the ‘anti-slush’ committee, was set up to review the popular music programming policy. The verdict was announced in July – dance band programmes would henceforth ‘provide “more virile and robust music”’: ““Anaemic or debilitated” vocal performances by male singers, “insincere and over-sentimental” performances by women singers, and songs “slushy in sentiment” are to be prohibited.’⁴⁵ Such music, the committee concluded, was unsuitable for a nation at war.⁴⁶ But as critics observed, the marching genre of war song that the BBC now sought to promote had already proved unpopular. At the start of the war, Charing Cross Road had produced ‘a spate of war songs, each advertised as the “Tipperary” of World War II’; the Forces had ‘ignored them’. This might have reflected a continuation of the interwar trend, described by Alison Light, to reject ‘formerly heroic and officially masculine public rhetorics of national destiny’ in favour of a Britishness ‘at once less imperial and more inward-looking, more domestic and more private – and, in terms of pre-war standards, more

⁴⁵ ‘B.B.C. Order to Dance Bands: “More Virile Music”’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 22 July 1942, 5.

⁴⁶ Somewhat ironically, prior to this outburst, Lynn’s sentimental style had served the BBC as a useful propaganda tool, by playing into her image as an icon of domestic and dutiful femininity. If she embodied ‘the eternal appeal of the feminine’, it was that expressed in the ‘mother’, ‘big sister or the girl-friend who seems to know all your troubles’ – figures that implicitly combated claims made by German propaganda that British women liked to sleep around. ‘If They Were All Like Her!: An Appreciation By A Middle-aged Listener’, *Radio Times*, 30 May 1941, 6.

“feminine”⁴⁷ When war broke out, this recently re-imagined Britishness converged with the popular music of the day to project a new type of sentimental soldier. Indeed, the popularity of Lynn’s music challenges the assumption that, during the Second World War ‘patriotism, manhood, and virility became virtually indistinguishable’.⁴⁸

However, the explanation usually offered by contemporary critics for the failure of bellicose songs focused instead on the changing nature of warfare. Reginald Jacques, for example, argued that it was ‘no wonder’ that the Second World War had not had its own ‘Tipperary’: ‘it [Tipperary] was born in a war of marching tunes [but] you can’t sing in a tank’.⁴⁹ Hughes similarly observed that ‘Today’s tunes, being sickly sentimental, are unsingable at any but funeral march tempo and the modern army does comparatively little marching of any kind.’⁵⁰ These critics implied that the popularity of sentimental songs reflected the mechanized nature of modern warfare, while at the same time condemning such music as over-emotional, soporific ‘slush’.⁵¹ If Lynn’s music seemed to resonate with contemporary soldiers’ experiences, this did not alter the fact that it was ‘too sedative for seriousness’.⁵²

⁴⁷ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), 8–9.

⁴⁸ Karen Eliot, ‘Marking Time: The British Danseur and the Second World War’, *Dance Research Journal* 37, 1 (Summer 2005), 65.

⁴⁹ Reginald Jacques, *What’s the Point of Music?*, Home Service, 11 June 1945, BBC WAC, Radio Talk Scripts Pre 1970: JAB-JAM, T258.

⁵⁰ Hughes, ‘Popular Taste in Music’, 82.

⁵¹ Hughes, ‘Popular Taste in Music’, 79 and 82.

⁵² Harrison, ‘Radio’, 19 July 1942.

In other words, although this discussion was couched in terms of masculine and feminine popular musical styles, the gendered language rehearsed an issue that resonated more broadly: a pervasive discomfort among intellectuals about the effect of music's emotional appeal on listeners' capacity for intelligent engagement.⁵³ This was a central concern in the debate about the relative merits and limitations of entertainment and art. For many highbrow critics, 'sentimentality' seemed to be incompatible with art; it described cultural products that had been 'reduced to decoration' on account of their visceral appeal. One such was Michael Tippett, who argued that sentimentality was a product of the eighteenth-century division of the world into 'technical' and 'imaginative' – a division whose negative outcomes were epitomized by the culture industry. It was only, he argued, 'once the values of a spiritual order are re-admitted as valid in their own right for the full life natural to human beings' that culture could 'cease[] to be mere decoration, sentimentality and "dope" and come[] to be the creation and enjoyment of the products of the spiritual imagination'.⁵⁴ At the same time, this word also evoked a lack of good judgement or, as Eric Blom explained, 'an indulgence of feeling over a book, a picture or a play, in complete disregard of its qualities as a work of art' (or lack of

⁵³ The messy rhetorical relationship between gender, art, and emotion has a long history.

By the early twentieth century, anything that critics deemed to have too much emotion tended to be associated with the negative stereotype of the histrionic woman – or, in the most extreme cases, the hysteric. The more divisive expressions of modernist ideology have tended to position such cultural products firmly outside of the canon. Suzanne Clark expounds and complicates this narrative in *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

⁵⁴ Michael Tippett, *Abundance of Creation: An Artist's Vision of Creative Peace* (London: Peace News, 1944), Morley College Archive.

them).⁵⁵ To counterbalance these undesirable tendencies, elite culture had developed a high regard for objectivity and abstraction, often expressed through a focus on ‘a composer’s purely aesthetic preoccupations’. Or, as Wilfrid Mellers put it, “‘serious’ art’ was measured not just by its ‘technical competence’, but also by ‘emotional cleanliness’.⁵⁶

The difficulty, however, was that even the highest of highbrow critics were reluctant to do away with emotion altogether. Bemoaning the absence of ‘really moving musical expressions of emotion’ in contemporary music, Blom asserted that ‘if we do not want sentimentality, we can, goodness knows, do with sentiment to leaven the depressionist art of to-day’.⁵⁷ But quite where sentiment ended and sentimentality began was hard to say. Furthermore, art music lovers would have been hard pressed to maintain that their much-loved repertoire always fell on the right side of the line. Part of the problem was that critics often inferred a link between sentimentality and mass culture, which they saw as mass-producing emotions that amounted to little more than superficial, sensualist escapism; but gramophone and radio had already begun to generate a mass market for ‘classical’ music, which was increasingly consumed by the general public alongside more popular genres. Remarking on the hypocrisy of the BBC’s position, a letter signed by a group of popular music aficionados noted: ‘I suppose that some modern dance tunes are melancholy, but then you will have to admit that this is

⁵⁵ Eric Blom, ‘Of Sentiment and Sentimentality’, in *A Musical Postbag* (London: Dent, 1941), 146.

⁵⁶ Mellers, ‘Musical Culture To-day’, 5.

⁵⁷ Blom, ‘Of Sentiment and Sentimentality’, 147.

also the case in some “highbrow” music, but you would never think of banning that because it is considered “good” music.⁵⁸

Despite such astute observations, Lynn’s detractors maintained that her music exhibited the most negative traits of a sentimental, pacifying mass culture. From the visceral appeal of her repertory, to her apparent absence of vocal technique and growing commercial success, advocates of elite culture found ample grounds for critique. To their minds, she was entertainment at its worst. When the second series of *Sincerely Yours* came to an end on 22 March 1942, the BBC decided to ‘rest’ Lynn until the autumn.

We’ll Meet Again

The BBC was undoubtedly a powerful player in the British music scene, both as an employer of musicians and as a distributor of music. But when it came to popular music in particular, the corporation had a major rival in the film industry. From the early 1900s onwards, motion picture companies had realized that building links with the popular music industry promised lucrative returns. Put simply, featuring hit songs or celebrity vocalists drew in audiences.⁵⁹ Maximizing this potential source of publicity was especially necessary for the British film industry. Whereas Hollywood soon had the money to create stars from scratch, British companies were poorer and more often had to source

⁵⁸ Letter from R. Scripps et al. to the BBC, 22 April 1943, BBC WAC, R41/113/1 PCS: Listeners’ Letters 1931–44.

⁵⁹ Katherine Spring, *Saying it with Songs: Popular Music and the Coming of Sound to Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

their stars from other media.⁶⁰ British producers' reliance on established theatre, music hall and radio celebrities was arguably reflected in the general public's penchant for the film musical, a genre that became popular during the 1930s, especially through the vehicles for Gracie Fields, Jack Buchanan and George Formby.⁶¹ By the end of 1941, on the heels of the huge success of her radio series *Sincerely Yours*, Lynn was well positioned to make her debut as a star of the film musicals.

It would not be her first time on the big screen: in 1936 she had sung in a number of musical shorts with the Joe Loss Orchestra; the year before, she had also made a less auspicious appearance as an extra in Flanagan and Allen's film *A Fire has Been Arranged*. Unlike on these previous occasions, however, Lynn now held huge commercial promise – an opportunity that was spotted by Columbia Pictures, who offered her a contract to 'star in six films for an astronomic figure'.⁶² Columbia was unabashed in its efforts to capitalize on her reputation as a vocal performer: as the poster advertising *We'll Meet Again* proclaimed, 'the wonder voice of the air' would become 'triumphant on the

⁶⁰ For the importance of radio in the 'generation and promotion of [British] stars', see James Nott, *Music for the People: Popular Music and Dance in Interwar Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 85.

⁶¹ Of the 1,500 full-length feature films produced in Britain in the 1930s, more than 220 were musicals. During the war, a number of significant film musicals were made by Formby as well as Lynn. K.J. Donnelly, *British Film Music and Film Musicals* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 105; Stephan Guy, *Calling All Stars: Musical Films in a Musical Decade* (London: Tauris, 1998), 99–100.

⁶² 'Vera Lynn Signs Big Film Contract', *Melody Maker* 18/446 (7 February 1942), 7.

screen!⁶³ Having lined up Ben Henry as producer (the man responsible for George Formby's numerous films), they planned for shooting to begin in early summer.⁶⁴

Of Lynn's film vehicles, *We'll Meet Again* is of particular interest here because it engaged most explicitly with the preoccupations of 1940s musical culture: the high/low conflict is central to the narrative of the film, which is set in wartime Britain.⁶⁵ This might, at first, seem unremarkable: Jane Feuer has persuasively argued that this subject was a recurrent theme in film musicals of the period and reflected a pervasive concern about the potential impact that mass media might have on traditional cultural practices and the associated uncertainty about the value of popular music to society.⁶⁶ But the timing of *We'll Meet Again*, which was produced in the aftermath of the controversy over

⁶³ John Mundy, *The British Musical Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 98.

⁶⁴ The films were produced in Britain: J.M., 'Vera Lynn Swell in Film', *Melody Maker* 18/485 (7 November 1942), 2.

⁶⁵ Lynn's other musicals do not deal so explicitly with the conflict between highbrow and lowbrow, with the exception of one scene in *One Exciting Night*, in which Lynn's character, amateur singer and war worker Vera Baker, turns up at the flat of composer Michael Thorne in the hope of an audition. When she arrives, however, Thorne is in the bathroom and she is unable to see him. The housekeeper urges her to sing one of her songs in the room next to the bathroom, in the hope that he might acknowledge her. When she finishes singing, however, it becomes apparent that Thorne has heard none of it because his radio is blaring out a broadcast by opera star Angelo Donizetti.

⁶⁶ Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 49–66. Mundy argues that this debate was particularly current in 1940s Britain: Mundy, *The British Musical Film*, 87.

the BBC's programming of popular music, and its contemporaneous setting suggest the topical nature of its subject. Indeed, it was not unusual for films to respond to incidents in a star's extra-filmic life, particularly when an issue arose that threatened his/her established star identity.⁶⁷ Although little information has survived about the film's production process, the narrative could certainly have been adapted in response to recent events: *Melody Maker* announced the signing of Lynn's 'big film contract' in February 1942, just weeks before the controversy broke out, but filming did not begin until the early summer.⁶⁸

In *We'll Meet Again*, Lynn plays a young music hall dancer called Peggy Brown, who unexpectedly rises to fame after the chance discovery by the BBC of her exceptional singing voice. Peggy's best friend Frank (Ronald Ward), a highbrow composer and pianist, is desperate for her to make use of her singing talent rather than wasting time dancing; Peggy is determined that Frank can and will write popular music and coerces him into composing a song that they record and take to the BBC for consideration. On receiving the record, a hapless secretary promptly loses it under a pile of paperwork, before accidentally handing it over to a broadcasting assistant, who puts it on air. The

⁶⁷ Another example is American artist Kay Kyser's film vehicles *Around the World* (1943) and *Caroline Blues* (1944), both of which were made shortly after *Newsweek* published a controversial article revealing that Kyser had sought exemption from the Office of War Information (OWI). Although the OWI had granted his request on the grounds that he was already making an ample contribution to the war effort, the films go to some lengths to emphasize Kyser's patriotism and contribution to the war effort. See Krin Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 29–32.

⁶⁸ 'Vera Lynn Signs Big Film Contract'.

song is, of course, an instant hit – although thanks to the singer rather than the composer. The BBC tracks down Peggy and she agrees to a broadcasting contract on condition that Frank can continue to compose songs for her. Eventually, she becomes a star with her own radio show; meanwhile Frank, having been liberated from the constraints of art music, finds a better way of contributing to the war effort: as the pianist in Peggy’s band.

Besides dramatizing the high/low conflict through Peggy and Frank’s friendship (a theme to which we will return shortly), the film also suggested a connection to Lynn’s personal predicament through the semi-biographical nature of its plot. While Lynn does not actually play herself in *We’ll Meet Again* (unlike the band leader Geraldo, who appears as ‘Gerry’ in the film), there are numerous references that align Peggy with Lynn. Both start out as ‘normal people’, originating from humble backgrounds yet standing out because of their unique voices;⁶⁹ both have lucky breaks that bring them into the world of the stars; both have a radio show that involves a presentation of songs and letters to the forces; both give concerts to the troops. To enmesh matters further, several real life characters also make brief appearances as themselves in the film: besides Geraldo and vocalist Len Camber, three well-known BBC employees feature: Alvar Liddell, John Watt, and John Sharman.

The film score also complicates the relationship between Peggy and Lynn, combining numbers that were new to Lynn – including **four songs that were composed for the film, ‘Be Like the Kettle and Sing’ (by Tommie Connor, Walter Ridley and Desmond O’Connor), ‘After the Rain’ (by Jack Popplewell and Bert Reisfeld), ‘All the**

⁶⁹ The distinctive timbre of Lynn’s voice was a defining attribute of her act from a young age: she recalls being advertised as ‘the descriptive child vocalist’ and ‘the girl with the different voice’. Lynn, *Some Sunny Day*, 35, 50 and 143.

World Sings a Lullaby' (lyrics by Barbara Gordon and Basil Thomas; music by Harry Parr Davies), and 'I'm Yours Sincerely' (by Tommie O'Connor and Walter Ridley), as well as Schubert's 'Ave Maria', which Peggy sings during her friend's wedding – with one of her established hits, 'We'll Meet Again', a Ross Parker and Hughie Charles song that she made famous in 1939 and that was subsequently used as a signature tune on her radio show.⁷⁰ Once we enter the imaginary world of the film, this last song features only in the orchestral sound track – i.e., Peggy does not sing it, or at least not until the very end of the film. Nevertheless, in an earlier scene that charts Peggy's rise to fame across a number of months in a montage sequence, 'We'll Meet Again' is mixed in a medley with those already sung by Peggy in the film; the visual display includes shots of Peggy broadcasting and her appreciative audience listening.

In placing such parallels between the 'real life' Lynn and her filmic representation into the narrative, the scriptwriters – knowingly or otherwise – played on a problematic dualism that underpins star personas. On the one hand, stars exist outside the films they make as people in the real world, where their star personas are constructed by other media, such as magazines, newspapers, etc. As Dyer points out, however, this 'real side' of the stars is fictive, based on the images constructed by the mass media through the selective coverage of their lives.⁷¹ On the other hand, stars are also fictional characters in

⁷⁰ The five numbers new to Lynn were subsequently released on record (Decca F8254, F8255 and F8256): H.S., 'Miscellaneous and Dance', *The Gramophone* 20, 238 (March 1943), 144. In addition, 'Be Like the Kettle and Sing', 'After the Rain', and 'All the World Sings a Lullaby' were published as sheet music: Donald J. Stubblebine, *British Cinema Sheet Music: A Comprehensive Listing of Film Music Published in the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia 1916 through 1964* (Jefferson: McFarland, 1997), 143.

⁷¹ Dyer, *Stars*, 2, 20.

films, and while these characters are distinct from the real people, they nonetheless contribute to a star's persona. Edgar Morin describes this symbiotic relationship as the 'dialectic of the actor and the role', and argues that it is out of such a dialectic that the star is born: 'Once the film is over, the actor becomes an actor again, the character remains a character, but from their union is born a composite creature who participates in both, envelops them both: the star.'⁷² The actor and the role are thus neither identical nor completely distinct, but two entities bound in a dynamic exchange. The star persona emerges from this double mediation of two identities. In other words, films are one of the sites through which stars negotiate their broader position within society – a process that is particularly important if, as in Lynn's case, their status is contested. If in *We'll Meet Again* Peggy's obvious identification with Lynn further muddles the intersection between the two aspects of a star persona, it is precisely through this blurring of fact and fiction that the film seeks to do its cultural and patriotic work.

Despite being typical of the backstage musical genre, the narrative of *We'll Meet Again* held a particular significance for Lynn in the light of her contemporary critical reception. But it was not simply through fortunate timing that the film promoted her star persona. As an examination of how the narrative and generic conventions of the musical were tinged with contemporary concerns in three scenes from the film suggests, the political demands of the moment also put the old high/low debate in a different perspective – one that was distinctly to Lynn's advantage.⁷³

⁷² Edgar Morin, *The Stars*, trans. Richard Howard (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2008), 29.

⁷³ In his critique of Dyer's *Stars*, Andrew Britton argues that film vehicles must be treated not as a genre in and of themselves, but rather in terms of how they relate to 'pre-

First, let us consider a scene from near the start of the film that marks the beginning of Frank's journey of self-discovery, away from the confines of high art and towards the freedom of popular music. The sequence opens with a close-up of a hand scribbling notes onto a piece of manuscript. The camera then pans round to reveal Frank, who – pencil now in mouth – tests out his composition on the grand piano. The music is virtuosic: a rising chromatic sequence gives way to large leaps and a thick chordal texture reminiscent of Rachmaninov. As Frank ends his play-through, traversing the length of the keyboard with an elaborate, arpeggiated flourish, Peggy enters to compliment his work. It quickly becomes apparent, however, that her initial enthusiasm masks an alternative agenda. Rehearsing a standard criticism of highbrow music, she asks: 'What's the point of making your music so dignified that only stuffy old critics can understand it?' Not one to ignore a challenge, Frank begins to experiment.

First, he extracts the melody from the dense chordal passage and gives it a rippling, high-pitch arpeggio accompaniment. Peggy immediately picks up on the tune: 'that melody, you've got something there'. Sitting down on the piano stool next to Frank, she then demonstrates – with one hand and a comparative lack of technical ability – what Frank's melody could sound like if he 'took a holiday from being so deadly serious'. Evidently provoked by Peggy's accusations, Frank then comes up with a jazzy version with chromatic harmonies; finally, experimenting a third time, he plays a more diatonic phrase that will become the introduction to the popular song that subsequently makes Peggy famous – 'After the Rain'.

existent generic conventions': 'Stars and Genre' in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991), 198–206.

If Frank's musical transformation seems to pit low against high in an all-too blatant manner, Peggy's labelling of Frank's music as 'highbrow' nonetheless requires further explanation. In this scene, both his visual framing at the grand piano, and the style of the music he initially plays, recall a broader cultural tradition for romanticizing the virtuoso pianist-composer. This iconic figure had its roots in the nineteenth century, when celebrity piano recitals were made popular by the likes of Franz Liszt and Anton Rubinstein.⁷⁴ Once sound film was viable, cinema quickly became implicated in this trend, in particular through 'concerto films', which often featured virtuoso pianists as characters in the narrative and via the use of piano concertos on the soundtrack – either newly composed in a late-Romantic idiom, or compiled from the emerging repertoire of 'popular classics', in which Rachmaninov, Chopin, and Beethoven, among others, featured prominently.⁷⁵ Such music's appropriation by the film industry at once undermined and consolidated its highbrow pretensions. For certain elite-minded critics, the combination of mass medium and diverse audience degraded the music, reducing it

⁷⁴ Ivan Raykoff traces the emergence of this figure in *Dreams of Love: Playing the Romantic Pianist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁷⁵ Notable examples include: *Moonlight Sonata* (1937), with its extensive footage of Ignacy Jan Paderewski performing the eponymous Beethoven work, along with music by Chopin, Liszt and the pianist himself; *Dangerous Moonlight* (1941), for which Richard Addinsell composed the *Warsaw Concerto*; *While I Live* (1947), which quickly became known by the title of its musical theme, Charles Williams's *Dream of Olwen*; and *Brief Encounter* (1945), which famously features Rachmaninov's Piano Concert No. 2 in C Minor, Op.18.

to ‘mere anodyne entertainment’.⁷⁶ But for the public at large, this repertoire soon became something close to the lingua franca of classical music. In spite of its broad dissemination, such music was marketed to the majority for its elite vestige – or, in the derogatory words of Peggy, its ‘stuffy’, ‘highbrow’ pretensions. What is more, for the popular music industry this branch of the art music world posed the greatest commercial threat on account of its heightened popularity. Labelling it as highbrow, then, was a means of asserting difference. If the contrast between the first and last versions of Frank’s composition was arguably less pronounced than the dialogue suggests, the former represented an alternative cultural tradition against which the merits of Peggy’s music could be affirmed.

In case Peggy’s satisfaction with the transformed composition was not enough to confirm the new music’s appeal, as Frank reaches a perfect cadence the camera cuts to show other characters from the household in which they lodge, who have gathered around the piano to express their approval:

Mrs Crump: Really Frank, I’d no idea you made up nice music like that.

Boy: Well, I never knew you could play. I always thought you were just tuning it. But I like that. Let’s have some more.

Frank: That’s all there is.

⁷⁶ Christina Baade, ‘Radio Symphonies: The BBC, Everyday Listening and the Popular Classics Debate during the People’s War’, in *Ubiquitous Musics: The Everyday Sounds That We Don’t Always Notice*, ed. Elena Boschi, Anahid Kassabian and Marta Garcia Quinones (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 51.

Professor Drake: Well, when it's finished I'd like to hear it. [...] Music like that with heart in it keeps people going, eases nervous tension; psychologically, of course, it's invaluable in these days.

These three characters – housekeeper Mrs Crump, a young boy and an elderly Professor – cover a wide social spectrum, thus making their appreciation of Frank's playing reinforce the broad appeal of popular music and its ability to draw diverse groups together. By dramatizing its cross-class appeal, this scene suggests that popular music could contribute to the erosion of long-standing social divisions that was supposedly a by-product of the blitz – and one that chimed conveniently with the rhetoric of the people's war.⁷⁷ The presence of the Professor is especially telling. In the scene immediately prior to this, his credentials as a publicly-minded highbrow have been established: his life's work has been to collect artworks for the local museum, a venue that allows him to 'share his happiness with others'. He thus provides a bar against which the elitism of Frank's outlook can be measured. Similarly, while the Professor's affirmation offers an intellectual seal of approval, the boy's comments emphasize the *musicality* of this new style – something that was not a given.⁷⁸ It was no secret that the

⁷⁷ Angus Calder, *The Myth of the Blitz* (London: Pimlico, 1991), 34. Historians continue to debate whether the war actually undermined social divisions, or whether this was largely rhetoric exploited by the government. For example, see Philip Ziegler, *London at War 1939 - 1945* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995), 163–78; Robert Mackay, *Half the Battle: Civilian Morale in Britain during the Second World War* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), 248.

⁷⁸ For example, at the BBC, the Variety Department was responsible for programming popular music, while art music fell under the remit of the Music Department. Baade,

tendency to classify popular music as ‘entertainment’ was something of a sore point for certain band leaders. As Hughes explained, this attitude had fostered a widespread ‘musical inferiority complex’ among popular artists.⁷⁹ The boy’s claim that he previously mistook Frank’s playing for piano-tuning might be read as a challenge, albeit a naive one, to the highbrow attitude that the designation ‘music’ was the preserve of elite culture.

The complete song is not heard until a few scenes later, when Peggy performs it in Geraldo’s nightclub, backed by a big band-style orchestration that was becoming typical of the bandleader’s style.⁸⁰ Against the closely scored wind and sliding chromatic harmonies, Lynn’s delivery is characteristically straightforward: she deviates little from the melody, clearly enunciates the lyrics, and, while fairly free in her use of rubato, is comparatively sparing with portamenti. The title of the song (‘After the Rain’), we have learnt in the meantime, was inspired by Frank’s memory of the sun coming out over England after a storm, while he was returning from an air force mission in Germany. His recollection establishes the patriotic overtones of the song, whose sentimental words promise England blue skies, an obvious metaphor for peace, when the war against Germany is over.

Victory through Harmony, 18–9. In a similar spirit, critics also tended to distinguish classical singing from its popular counterparts, which they described using alternative words such as ‘whining’ and ‘bleating’: Jonathan Ross Greenberg, ‘Singing Up Close: Voice, Language, and Race in American Popular Music, 1925-1935’ (PhD thesis, University of California, 2008), 59–62, 103.

⁷⁹ Hughes, ‘Popular Taste in Music’, 81.

⁸⁰ Baade, *Victory Through Harmony*, 7.

Performed as a solo number in the film, 'After the Rain' is used to emphasize Peggy's individual contribution to the war effort, as she offers the war-weary public a soothing reassurance of future peace. Elsewhere – most notably in its opening and closing scenes – *We'll Meet Again* dramatizes an alternative ground on which popular music was co-opted to the people's war: as a means of fostering a democratic musical culture in which the wartime public could actively participate.

The film begins with a brief (barely 20 seconds long) montage of images and sound effects evoking the blitz: firing canons are superimposed onto footage of the Houses of Parliament and St. Paul's; the sound of gun shots collides with that of the famous chimes of Big Ben. Having quickly but unequivocally established the context as wartime London, the camera cuts to a theatre, where the evening's official performance is coming to an end. The close-up of a poster, which advertises it as 'The only musical running in London', immediately suggests that there is something special about this event. Since the blitz continues, performers volunteer (as had become customary) to provide further entertainment until the all-clear; Peggy, a dancer in the chorus line, is among those who stay behind to perform their civic duty. The show's host tries to engage the audience in a communal rendition of 'Be Like The Kettle and Sing'; but when the band begins to play, no one joins in. Suddenly a voice pipes up from the wings, as Peggy starts singing in an attempt to help the struggling host. With visible relief, he rushes to the wings and drags her on-stage. Her singing instantly regains the waning attention of the audience, as is suggested by a rather crude clip in which those present shuffle around and sit up in their seats. By the second chorus, the audience have joined in with the song, while Peggy's colleagues watch proudly from the wings; on the final chord she receives a standing ovation. The film's final scene similarly features a sing-along, although this time at a barracks, where the soldiers, seemingly less reticent than

the theatre audience, join in with a gutsy rendition of Lynn's signature tune, 'We'll Meet Again'.

A common feature of backstage musicals, such scenes demonstrate the participatory potential of popular music – a process that Jane Feuer has suggested constitutes an attempt to compensate for the shortcomings of an 'alienating', urbanized mass cultural form by fostering positive associations with an idealized rural 'folk' art tradition.⁸¹ In this particular instance, popular music's ability to draw people together

⁸¹ Feuer argues that the ideology of folk art is important to the genre of the musical more broadly. She suggests that film musicals at once demystify entertainment, for example by showing what goes on behind the scenes, and also 'remystify' it through the propagation of myths that reinforce entertainment's 'aura' – an aura that she claims is eliminated by the mass nature of the medium. The idea of entertainment's 'aura' comes from Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. Hannah Arendt (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970). However, where Benjamin views the possibilities created by mechanical reproduction and the resulting loss of aura as largely positive, Feuer emphasizes its 'devastating' effects, arguing that the Hollywood musical 'perceives the gap between producer and consumer, the breakdown of community designated by the very distinction between performer and audience, as a form of *cinematic original sin*' (the emphasis is mine). She goes on to suggest that film musicals seek to 'cancel-out' the 'alienating' effects of mass art by promoting values associated with 'folk art creation', such as spontaneity and community, a process that transforms performance, such that it 'is no longer defined as something professionals do on a stage; instead it permeates the lives of professional and nonprofessional singers and dancers. Entertainment, the myth implies, can break down the barriers between art and life.' *The Hollywood Musical*, 2–3. See

takes on added significance, as a means by which entertainment might contribute to the people's war. I have already noted how the opening montage invites the narrative, albeit fictional, to be read as a representation of life on the home front. The theatre scene that follows depicts a scenario that would equally have been familiar to wartime audiences, whether through first-hand experience or indirectly through media coverage. Seemingly heightening the sense of (temporary) community within the theatre, the air raid inspires a spontaneous performance by an amateur singer (notably, by the time Peggy is thrust onto the stage, she has changed out of her theatrical attire into her home clothes, emphasising that she is just like any other member of the audience); and the distinction between stage and auditorium is undermined, as the performers watch from the wings while the audience joins in with the song. The topical lyrics, which advise those facing adversity to 'Be Like the Kettle and Sing', further reinforce the relevance of Peggy's music to the conflict. As the entertainment transforms a potentially alienating silence into a communal sing-along, Peggy becomes the author of community.⁸²

The biographical overtones of this scene also heighten its appeal to values associated with folk traditions. For one thing, it rehearses Lynn's lack of formal training: as she explains in her biography, she was never taught how to sing; nor could she read music.⁸³ Her advocates argued that this enabled her to remain true to her working-class roots: she continued to perform the songs she sang aged seven, just to bigger audiences,

also Feuer, 'The Self-reflective Musical and the Myth of Entertainment', in *Genre: The Musical*, ed. Rick Altman (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1991), 159–74.

⁸² For many audience members, this filmic staging of community would likely also have resonated with the sense of 'togetherness' fostered by the communal experience of cinema attendance. Stacey, *Star Gazing*, 101–2.

⁸³ Lynn, *Some Sunny Day*, 41.

in better venues and ‘with the true feeling the lyricists intended’.⁸⁴ (Lynn managed to retain this image even after success brought her a large salary and a house in Barking.) Presenting Lynn as a natural, uncultivated British talent, commentators drew attention to her accessibility. From rank and file soldier to factory girl or housewife, anyone – this narrative implied – might have what it took to become a ‘Forces’ Sweetheart’. Or, as one of her detractors put it, while ranting about ‘crooning’ (a derogatory term used of singers like Lynn):

The capital outlay needed for success was nil; one needed neither instrument nor training; the microphone not only carried one’s voice to an audience of millions over an entire continent, but enabled one to project that voice without effort to oneself or any of the tedious business of having to learn to sing. [...] She makes the kind of noise that the average working girl would like to make, and nearly can.⁸⁵

Lynn’s claim to ordinariness was also strengthened by her stage manner, which allegedly lacked the theatrical pretence of other stars: one critic described her as ‘the least stagy performer of her kind’; another reported that ‘audiences frighten her [...] She is quite unsophisticated’.⁸⁶ Meanwhile, a third claimed that, on first meeting Lynn, he failed to

⁸⁴ Paul Holt, ‘East Ham Girl Singer Sells More Records than Crosby’, *Daily Express*, 15 January 1940, 11.

⁸⁵ Hughes, ‘Popular Taste in Music’, 78–9. That crooners did not rely on classical singing technique to project their voices was a source of widespread consternation in America, as well as in Britain: Greenberg, ‘Singing Up Close’, 97–137.

⁸⁶ F.A., ‘Palace’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 24 March 1942; Holt, ‘East Ham Girl Singer’.

recognize her even as a singer because of her unglamorous appearance – ‘a girl in flat brown shoes with a two-inch crepe sole, and a great brown teddy bear coat. She had rather big, white teeth, and dull brown hair, and no mascara.’⁸⁷ The opening scene of *We’ll Meet Again* taps into this image: Peggy is dragged into the centre of an empty stage, from where she delivers the entire song, with little movement other than the occasional arm gesture. If Peggy was able to facilitate the audience’s musical participation – a value with which the folk tradition was strongly associated – it was because she, like them, was an amateur, albeit an exceptional one.⁸⁸

One admirer even went so far as to claim that Lynn’s performances evoked a folk past. ‘The words of her songs’, he wrote in the *Radio Times*, ‘may have been so much sentimental twaddle. But she treated them with as much tenderness as though they were precious old folk songs’ whose ‘peculiar delights’ had ‘only just [been] discovered’.⁸⁹ While the music’s style was that of contemporary popular culture, the way Lynn sang nonetheless provoked nostalgia that conjured-up images of an idealized ‘folk’ way of life, in which music-making was a natural outgrowth of local community. Elsewhere, popular music advocates also presented such music’s folk heritage as a precedent for its importance to war. In a *Melody*

⁸⁷ Hilde Marchant, ‘Mum Says “Our Vera Won’t Sing Blues”’, *Daily Express*, 16 January 1940, 3.

⁸⁸ At the same time, commentators sought to present Lynn as extraordinary, for example by asserting the uniqueness of her voice (see above: fn.62). Morin argues that this tension between the ‘ideal’, that super-human state to which the average person supposedly aspires, and the ‘typical’ has been a common feature of star identities since the 1930s. Morin, *The Stars*, 1–23.

⁸⁹ ‘If They Were All Like Her!’

Maker article published shortly after the conflict broke out, for example, journalist Dan Ingman argued that: ‘Hundreds of years ago the only music was that of the wandering bands of minstrels. They sang the current folk songs and made up new ones to commemorate great local events’ – music that, he continued, ‘served its purpose of cheering the troops before, during and after the fighting’.⁹⁰ Contemporary popular music, he implied, had its roots in the age-old music of war.

While the scenes that bookend the film do not feature such blatant critiques of art music as occur elsewhere in the film, the perceived shortcomings of elite expression are not completely absent. In the opening scene, the camera shows Frank arriving at Peggy’s theatre, having left his own highbrow concert as soon as the official performance finished in spite of the air raid. His alterity is emphasized by the doorman’s greeting: ‘I’ll look after your symphonies for you, Mr Beethoven’, he says, as Frank leaves his briefcase at the cloakroom; Frank replies, ‘thanks maestro! Remind me to play them to you some time’. This short exchange none-too-subtly implies that art musicians’ reliance on a written score made them less adaptable to wartime performance conditions than popular musicians, who were more used to improvising. The contrast between the film’s opening and closing scenes is also important here: by the end of the film, Frank, in supposedly discovering his true musical voice, has also found his means of contributing to the war effort, and now joins the band.⁹¹ If his change of heart helps promote Peggy’s

⁹⁰ Dan S. Ingman, ‘Your Job Now: Musicians in Civilian Defence Worth Their Weight in Gold’, *Melody Maker* 15/329 (9 September 1939), 1.

⁹¹ An alternative reading, however, could be that the conflict between Frank’s and Peggy’s music is never satisfactorily resolved: although by the end of the film we are

music, it does so by undermining more highbrow cultural forms. Only popular music, the narrative implies, can truly foster community.

For Lynn's detractors, on the other hand, the very things that helped her music to foster a sense of community were precisely a cause for concern. Its accessibility, simplicity and emotionality exemplified the 'levelling down' that they perceived as a by-product of American mass culture.⁹² More uncomfortable still was the way that the musical style represented by Lynn seemed to be encroaching on elite territory. In July 1943, Edwin Evans wrote an article for *The Musical Times* arguing that 'the art of singing' was 'in decline'. Although crooning was a phenomenon of 'another world than that of music', it had begun to impact singers more broadly: 'The lachrymose tone and sentimental slither are spreading', he warned:

One hears them nowadays in the most unlikely music – in the virile light music of the past century when it is revived, in popular drawing-room ballads of the same period, but also in modern songs if their sentiment offers the slightest excuse for it, and occasionally even in a classic. This again appears to be a habit which, once acquired, is difficult to cure.⁹³

given the impression that Frank is content with composing songs for Peggy, his success depends entirely on her: the BBC are interested in Peggy, not Frank, and it is only on account of her commitment to him that he benefits from the broadcast of his song. Even in the final scene, when they give a concert together for the troops, Frank's piano accompaniment is subsumed by a thick orchestral sound, such that his visual presence is not matched by an audible presence.

⁹² Abravanel, *Americanizing Britain*, 3–4.

⁹³ Edwin Evans, 'The Art of Singing in Decline', *Musical Times* 84 (July 1943), 202.

It was one thing for critics to belittle the standards that popular music set for itself; but when popular tastes started to impact on the performance of art music, the power balance threatened to shift. Public opinion, it seemed, was beginning to pose a real challenge to elitist criticism's claim to being the bar by which taste was measured.⁹⁴

In moments like the opening and closing scenes of *We'll Meet Again*, then, the mediation of Lynn's star persona becomes intertwined with a larger narrative about the value of entertainment for wartime society. Implicitly revoking the charges of crassness and crudeness often levied at entertainers, the film presents their industry in a positive light: not only are their performances seen as making a direct contribution to the war effort by raising morale, they also appear to dissolve class boundaries on account of their accessibility and ubiquitous appeal. What is more, they allow audience participation in a way that was inconceivable in a concert of art music. As the film reenacts the sites of communal performance that, by all accounts, were a regular occurrence during the blitz, it reveals how Lynn's alignment with the values and ethos of the people's war gave her a heightened momentary significance.

In the end, Lynn's film career was not as long-lived as anticipated: after *We'll Meet Again*, she only made two more films (*Rhythm Serenade* and *One Exciting Night*), rather than the

⁹⁴ Another way in which the rise of mass culture threatened to upset social hierarchies was by homogenizing accents: Abravanel, *Americanizing Britain*, 94–5; Baade, “Sincerely Yours”, 44; David Cardiff, “The Serious and the Popular: Aspects of the Evolution of Style in the Radio Talk, 1928-1939”, *Media, Culture and Society* 2, 1 (1980), 29–47.

six originally announced by *Melody Maker*. Why the remaining three films were dropped is unclear. The few reviews suggest that critical reception was mixed. On the one hand, praise for Lynn's vocal performances was near unanimous: comments such as 'Lynn is certainly at her best in the film', or 'her voice and personality are even more delightful on the screen than on the air!' were typical.⁹⁵ On the other hand, however, reviewers seemed less convinced by the storyline, which is surprising given a plot so clearly based on Lynn's life. In an extreme case, one critic appeared to miss altogether the semi-biographical inspiration behind the film. Running with the headline 'Vera Lynn Swell in Film – But Film Itself Not So Hot', he complained that the narrative was 'a trite, improbable story, that creaks its way along in a jerky and thoroughly unconvincing manner'.⁹⁶ There were also murmurs of discontent about her acting ability: in her autobiography, she admitted that – despite the producers' best efforts – she struggled to play any part other than herself.⁹⁷ John Mundy's assessment suggests that the problem was more fundamental: she simply lacked 'screen charisma'.⁹⁸ Her decision to take an extended break from performing following the birth of her daughter in March 1946 perhaps brought her film career to its inevitable end.

But the change of plan might also have reflected broader shifts in the political and cultural climate, as, with the end of war in sight, Britain began to plan for peace.

⁹⁵ 'Screen Topics', *Morpeth Herald*, 20 August 1943, 4; Film Fan, 'Next Week At The Cinemas', *Gloucester Citizen*, 1 May 1943, 3.

⁹⁶ He hastened to add, though, that neither Geraldo nor Lynn 'could have sounded any better' in spite of this. J.M. 'Vera Lynn Swell in Film'. For *Rhythm Serenade*, see 'New Vera Lynn Flick is Good Homely Stuff', *Melody Maker* 19/529 (11 September 1943), 2.

⁹⁷ Lynn, *Some Sunny Day*, 154.

⁹⁸ Mundy, *The British Musical Film*, 97.

High on the authorities' agenda was the need to elevate the musical preferences of the general public, which remained a cause for concern among the elite. As *Observer* critic Tom Harrisson had explained in 1942: 'The stream of almost undiluted light entertainment each day on the Forces programme is an ever-with-us reminder that there are a lot of people in this country who are still living at a slightly retarded level of cultural awareness. This is an uncomfortable thought for the more comfortable sections of the community.'⁹⁹ Perhaps surprisingly given its connotations as a mass medium, cinema was increasingly appropriated in the mission to improve public taste – a trend that was reflected in what Kevin Donnelly describes as a new 'impetus to produce "high art musicals"'.¹⁰⁰ The industry's waning interest in the popular film musical genre probably also reflected the financial constraints that prevented British firms from keeping pace with the increasingly elaborate productions coming out of Hollywood.¹⁰¹

As peace approached, it was also unclear how Lynn's star persona, which to date had been closely entwined with the Second World War, might be adapted for the postwar world. Perhaps because she had not previously established a name for herself in America, the transition to peacetime proved easier there: she had her all-time biggest hit when her recording of 'Auf wiederseh'n Sweetheart' topped the US charts in 1952. But in Britain, her association with the War continued to influence her reception. When, for example, in December 1950 an altercation between the BBC and Lynn's agent broke out after the Corporation billed young upstart Petula Clark as the 'Sweetheart of the Forces', the BBC's Michael Standing retorted: 'I do not think that by any stretch of the imagination any artist can lay an exclusive claim to this sort of title, more particularly as I

⁹⁹ Harrisson, 'Radio', 19 July 1942.

¹⁰⁰ Donnelly, *British Film Music and Film Musicals*, 105–10.

¹⁰¹ Donnelly, *British Film Music and Film Musicals*, 105–6.

should point out that this, alas, is a different war.¹⁰² (Despite Standing's strong words, the BBC appears to have stopped using this title in reference to Clark shortly after this dispute.) At the same time, the music hall tradition was struggling to keep pace. Already by 1949, a BBC producer predicted that Lynn's 'kind of music was finished'. His conviction drastically curtailed her BBC appearances once again, this time for nearly a decade.¹⁰³

If Lynn's iconic status was closely bound-up in wartime Britain, her prominent position in the cultural controversies of her day illuminates more than just her shifting fortunes as a star. The tensions surrounding her representation and reception in this period also raise bigger questions about the role of popular music in the War – or, to be more specific, how its cultural value was negotiated in response to the political concerns of the period. Put simply, popular music's perceived capacity to distract listeners became newly valuable at a time when morale needed sustaining against the odds. The fall-out from the First World War surely contributed to the military's apparent lack of interest in marching songs: blind patriotism was no longer an option.¹⁰⁴ Lynn's music, on the other hand, provided a vehicle for men to express the challenges of life in the Forces, as an 'appreciative middle-aged listener' explained to the *Radio Times*:

¹⁰² Letter from Leslie Macdonnell to Michael Standing, 5 December 1950, and reply from Standing to Macdonnell, 6 December 1950, BBC WAC, RCONT 1: Artists: Vera Lynn, 1944–1950 File 2.

¹⁰³ Lynn, *Some Sunny Day*, 231.

¹⁰⁴ Already in August 1939, for example, Bishop Henson noted 'The conventional patriotic tub-thumping is out of the question. We have got past that phase': cited in Calder, *The People's War*, 487.

if twenty-five years ago that young soldier of an earlier generation could have switched on the radio and heard a Vera Lynn singing to him [...] simply and sincerely, all the silly, insincere songs about home and the little steeple pointing to a star and the brighter world over the hill, that old war would have been made so much the less unhappy for him.¹⁰⁵

That her music was ‘not [...] great art’ was irrelevant: ‘who cares?’ asked the writer. Lynn’s singing promised to alleviate the ‘stress of war and of waiting’ and that was what mattered. Indeed, for Lynn’s fans, the grounds on which her performances were often denigrated – its accessibility, its emotive appeal, its simple, memorable tunes – were precisely the things that justified her importance to the conflict: these qualities enabled her music to address the needs of the moment in a direct way. So while the elite harped on about the perceived negative impact of sentimental mass culture, for many more people, Lynn’s music provided not only a vital morale-boost but also a sense of solidarity rooted in an image of Britishness to which they could easily relate.

In other words, the demands of war added a new layer to the long-running debate over highbrow and lowbrow, elite and popular. As critics sought to redefine the importance of musical culture in terms that were meaningful for a nation at war, the arguments for continuing to invest in art and entertainment often proved to be contradictory. On the one hand, presenting art as emblematic of the higher values for which Britain was fighting, critics argued that it should be preserved for the future. As ballet commentator Arnold Haskell explained, for example, ‘Art is the highest form of self-expression, art implies the triumph of the individual.

¹⁰⁵ ‘If They Were All Like Her!’

These are the things for which we and our cultured allies are fighting.¹⁰⁶ In contrast, popular music's contribution to the war effort was more often framed in terms of its ability to engage with the concerns of the moment: to 'stir [mankind] up', to 'cheer the troops before, during and after the fighting', as Ingram put it.¹⁰⁷ This writer even went so far as to quantify the value of popular music in relation to weapons: '2 mouthorgans = one rifle, 2 pianos = one machine gun, 2 concert parties = one big gun, and so on.'¹⁰⁸ And while both art and entertainment were promoted as pleasant distractions from the conflict, the rhetoric was markedly different. Popular music – an 'essential anodyne' – offered narcotized escapism, whereas high art held the promise of sublime transcendence.¹⁰⁹ For those musicians who classed their work as 'entertainment', accepting their role as 'the main prop of any country's morale' required only a small ideological step; but for those who viewed themselves as artists, seemingly more was at stake.¹¹⁰

If war created a new polemical space in which the merits of popular and art music could be contested and redefined, then, the socio-political concerns of the moment reconfigured the debate in ways that often seemed more favourable for the former than the latter. So as soldiers and civilians fought for survival, a concurrent battle played out over which of the various musical styles might best

¹⁰⁶ Arnold Haskell, 'War, Ballet and National Culture', in *Ballet – To Poland (in aid of the Polish Relief Fund)*, ed. Arnold Haskell (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1940), 45.

¹⁰⁷ Ingram, 'Your Job Now'.

¹⁰⁸ Ingram, 'Your Job Now'.

¹⁰⁹ Ingram, 'Your Job Now'.

¹¹⁰ 'Crisis Consequences: A Jazz Accompaniment to the March of Time', *Melody Maker* 15/328 (2 September 1939), 1.

represent a nation at war. Contrary to the image of an undivided nation that was promoted by the rhetoric of the people's war, musical culture in [Britain during the 1940s](#) was less a site of national unity than of contradiction – perhaps more so than ever before.