A Fine Line Between Art and Entertainment: Music and Humor in the Performances of Victor Borge

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A FINE LINE BETWEEN ART AND ENTERTAINMENT:
MUSIC AND HUMOR IN THE PERFORMANCES OF VICTOR BORGE

By

Hanako S. Henty

A THESIS

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MUSIC AND HUMOR IN THE PERFORMANCES OF VICTOR BORGE

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Described as an “American pianist, musical humorist, and conductor of Danish birth,” Victor Borge (1909-2000) was a multitalented performer who combined musical virtuosity with sharp-witted humor. As welcome on stage at Carnegie Hall as on television with the Ed Sullivan Show, Borge charmed audiences around the world in a well-recognized career that lasted into his nineties. The key to his success lay in his synthesis of humor and music during his performances, often combining the two to create comical renditions of iconic works in the classical repertoire. In this way Borge navigated cultural tensions associated with the venerated status of classical music (or “art”) and created an entertaining experience that attracted both musical as well as non-musical audiences.

In this thesis, I examine the performance practices of Victor Borge and his mediation of “art” and “entertainment” from two perspectives. The first approach contextualizes his career in the United States, examining how he established his career in different types of venues and challenged notions of cultural hierarchy with his unique performances. Drawing from the scholarship of Lawrence Levine and his seminal work, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, I use the terms
“highbrow” and “lowbrow” to discuss Borge’s presence in the American public imagination and the significance of such distinctions. The second approach to the study of Borge’s performances is centered on an analysis of one of his most popular concerts captured on video, *The Best of Victor Borge: Acts One & Two*. Examining various methods for studying humor, I construct a model for the analysis of Borge’s work based on David Huron’s approach to studying humor in the compositions of Peter Schickele and the larger concept of Incongruity Theory as formulated by psychologist Jerry Suls. Through the process of contextualization and analysis, this thesis contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Borge’s performances, ultimately drawing attention to the complex interplay between “art” and “entertainment” and the navigation of these boundaries.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

An elderly gentleman sits at the grand piano wearing a three-piece tuxedo and black bow tie. With a head of grey hair and a distinguished mustache, he is the epitome of propriety, the representative of a long tradition of classical keyboard music. The hall grows quiet as he sits there silently, and when his fingers touch the keys, the somber strains of the Moonlight Sonata reverberate throughout the room. Beethoven’s iconic masterpiece is slow, profound, and repetitive. The gentleman plays with eyes closed in deep reflection, fully immersed in the act. But as he slowly tilts back on his piano bench in a state of enchantment, his hands gradually rise above the piano keys. His fingers continue to move, and his eyes remain closed, but there is no music! Audience members begin to chuckle as they recognize that they have been fooled. The occasion is humorous, not serious. This is the one and only Victor Borge in action: simultaneously the exalted concert pianist and master of the comedic art.

The career of Victor Borge (1909-2000) presents a narrative of music-making and comic relief in the twentieth century. Described as an “American pianist, musical humorist, and conductor of Danish birth,” Borge was a multitalented performer who created a particular style of comedy that combined musical virtuosity with verbal puns and slapstick humor. Born under the name Børge Rosenbaum in Denmark to a Jewish family, he escaped Nazi persecution in 1940 and re-established his career in the United States. As welcome on stage at Carnegie Hall as on television with the Ed Sullivan Show,

Borge charmed audiences around the world in a well-recognized career that lasted into his nineties.

Through the contextualization of his career and the analysis of one of his concerts, this thesis examines the performance practices of Victor Borge and his mediation of “art” and “entertainment.” Despite the extent of his popularity and individual style of performance, Borge has received little critical attention with the exception of an autobiography in Danish, brief discussion in the scholarship of Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and a Danish television documentary with English subtitles released in 2008. The noticeable lack of scholarship is likely due to the complex nature of his performances, which require a multidisciplinary approach that integrates knowledge from various fields.

To organize the multiple approaches to the study of Victor Borge’s performances, this thesis is structured into three additional chapters. Chapter 2, “Career in Context,” explores Borge’s navigation of both “highbrow” and “lowbrow” culture as he established a new career in the United States. Observing his career as he appeared on radio, television, and other venues, the chapter contextualizes his work and examines the ways

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5. David Ake, “Jazz Historiography and the Problem of Louis Jordan,” in Jazz Cultures (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 42-61. Ake proposes a similar challenge when examining the legacy of Louis Jordan. As a musician who utilized humor and was considered a crossover artist, Jordan does not fit into the narrative model used to examine the development of jazz and is also marginalized in musical scholarship despite his successful career.
he constructed his persona as a performer. Chapter 3, “Analyzing Humor in Performance,” is centered on an analysis of one of his most popular concerts captured on video, *The Best of Victor Borge: Acts One & Two,* and examines various theoretical frameworks applicable to the study of humor in musical performance. The final chapter, “Concluding Thoughts,” combines the cultural context and technical analysis of Borge’s performance to consider what we can learn from his use of humor. Together these sections provide a critical analysis of Victor Borge’s work by bringing together multiple disciplines to create a narrative of his career and performance practices.

The theoretical perspectives used in this thesis are primarily drawn from three fields of study: American cultural history, psychological theories of humor, and humor in music. Among the many factors leading to Borge’s success in the United States was his identification foremost as a classical musician. Consistently repeated in interviews and newspaper articles are the details of his upbringing as a child prodigy and his origins as a concert pianist, studying with eminent musicians such as Frederic Lamond and Egon Petri. Borge started performing comedy-infused musical revues in his early twenties, but practiced piano several hours a day and conducted professional orchestras late into his career. These aspects are particularly important to consider when comparing Borge’s performances to those of his peers who also combined humor with music but typically

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lacked the same level of musical training. Donning the attire of a concert pianist, Borge used his identity as a “serious” classical performer as a means to “make fun with the music,” instead of “make fun of the music”—a distinction he felt was essential to his type of humor. In this way, Victor Borge simultaneously assumed the roles of “entertainer” and “performer,” poking fun at the humorous aspects of a musical tradition that he himself appeared to embody.

This distinction between “entertainer” and “performer” is also a critical, if not the central part of understanding Borge’s performances. By taking advantage of cultural tensions and expectations associated with the venerated status of classical music in the United States, Borge created an experience that was accessible, or more accurately, “entertaining,” for musical as well as non-musical audiences. In this way he juxtaposed the aesthetics of popular entertainment, typically relegated to media such as radio, film, television, and Broadway theater, with “art music,” or music for the concert hall. Borge himself described the aesthetic duality in a 1989 interview with Harold Schonberg of the New York Times:

I have always worked for two audiences at the same time. One is sophisticated, the other not musically oriented. I notice that the ones who laugh most are composed of professionals, as when I do my act with the

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8. The most comparable comedian utilizing music is perhaps Anna Russell (1911-2006), who was best known for her parodies of Wagner operas. Other comedians, including Tom Lehrer (1928-) and Dudley Moore (1935-2002), utilized music but did not incorporate standard performance of classical works in their sketches. Peter Schickele (1935-) is also noted for his creation of P. D. Q. Bach, but is more frequently regarded as a composer than a performer. Also not included in this discussion are vaudeville performers, many of whom were classically trained. The overall decline of vaudeville occurred before the rise of television (critical to the careers of the comedians just mentioned) and vaudeville performers are therefore excluded from the scope of this study.

orchestras. But my jokes must be understood by everybody. Nobody must be bored. It is a fine line that I walk.\textsuperscript{10}

Acknowledging the “fine line” between “sophisticated” and “not musically oriented” audiences, Borge highlights a separation that is best examined using a larger framework for discourse on American culture, most famously addressed in James Levine’s \textit{Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America}. Levine presents the terms “highbrow” and “lowbrow” as descriptors of ideas deeply embedded in American culture, separating music, literature, and the arts into two separate categories of differing social and cultural value. He addresses the issue of how certain selected artifacts of culture are identified as “highbrow,” worthy of institutional support and praise, while others, often more popular and profitable, are considered “lowbrow,” lacking in artistic significance but popular among larger audiences.\textsuperscript{11} Levine examines American culture at the end of the nineteenth century and investigates the historical rationale for why Shakespearean plays and orchestral music are today favored as “highbrow” when evidence suggests these works were once part of popular entertainment. Calling for more awareness of how cultural value is determined, Levine encourages a multiplicity of perspectives and a “careful understanding of what culture has been in our past and can become in our future.”\textsuperscript{12}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Lawrence W. Levine, \textit{Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 1988.
\item \textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 256.
\end{itemize}
The work of Victor Borge presents one such example, blending the categories of “art” and “entertainment” to create a particular style of performance.13

As the earlier quote from the New York Times suggests, Borge’s navigation of “highbrow” and ‘lowbrow” distinctions reveals an unusual level of awareness towards the audience in the act of performance itself. By switching between different types of activities, such as standing at a microphone and telling a joke about Mozart, sitting at the piano and struggling to find the correct starting note (middle C), or playing a “serious” piece of music without comedic intent, Borge uses humor as an integral part of his performance. This practice is markedly different from the implementation of humor as a compositional device in a pre-existing work, which has been studied more frequently by musicologists in the past several decades.14 In such instances, scholars scrutinize the

13. An alternative theoretical framework that is in juxtaposition with Lawrence Levine’s discussion of cultural hierarchy is the concept of “middlebrow,” or a cultural middle class that rose to prominence during the twentieth century. Thoroughly investigated by Joan Shelley Rubin in The Making of Middlebrow Culture, “middlebrow” is described as a complex phenomenon shaped by the rise of a predominantly white middle class in the United States and its demand for “culture” as a means of displaying social status as well as “building character” by engaging in prescribed activities such as reading works of “great literature.” Having come across this theory near the end of my thesis-writing experience, I acknowledge that a future study of Victor Borge might benefit from this approach. Nevertheless, I remain convinced that the “highbrow/lowbrow” model reveals more about Borge’s performances for a variety of reasons. One reason why the model is more effective than “middlebrow” theory is because it provides a means to highlight his mediation of disparate cultural values instead of placing him in a single category. “Highbrow/lowbrow” also applies directly to the study of humor itself, which frequently appears in a binary model that distinguishes between “dirty” humor and “sophisticated” wit. Another reason why “middlebrow” is not as practical an approach as “highbrow/lowbrow” in this discussion is due to its origins in American literary history and separation from a musical perspective, calling for a more nuanced interpretation of the theory before its potential application. For further information about the concept of “middlebrow,” see Joan Shelley Rubin’s The Making of Middlebrow Culture (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

14. Of these studies, Gretchen Wheelock’s Haydn’s Ingenious Jesting with Art: Contexts of Musical Wit and Humor is especially thorough, examining several works by Joseph Haydn and contextualizing the musical qualities that he utilized to invoked humor. Following a different vein of analysis, Tunes for Tunes by Daniel Goldmark brilliantly investigates the use of different genres of music in American cartoon animations of the early to mid-1900s, including a lengthy discussion of how studio composers created “funny” music through cultural and musical means.
notes in the musical score rather than the work of the performer, since they view the
presence of humor as the result of a composer’s creative agency.

A welcome change to this analytical approach comes with the scholarship of
Charles Hiroshi Garrett. In addition to studying scores and recordings, Garrett examines
the careers of performers such as the Marx Brothers and Victor Borge by exploring the
larger cultural frameworks in which they operated.¹⁵ By contextualizing their
performances, Garrett focuses on how musical humorists of the past engaged with
classical music and what this engagement reveals about changing cultural hierarchies in
the United States.¹⁶ Not limiting his exploration of humor in music to classical
performers, he also examines the presence of humor in jazz, revealing the complex
intersections between “humor […] and musical aesthetics, genre definition, and jazz
criticism.”¹⁷ Throughout his work, Garrett frequently draws attention to the performer
and his or her significance as a creative force: equally worthy of study as a composer or a
musical piece. Taking his lead, this thesis similarly examines the humor of a specific
performer, Victor Borge, by contextualizing the historical and cultural aspects of his
career.

Other theoretical frameworks also apply to the study of Borge’s performances. As
the earlier examples in this chapter and clips of his concerts reveal, Borge utilized
different methods—both musical and non-musical—to entertain his audience. To
understand the techniques that Borge used to combine humor and music, we first turn to

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¹⁶. Ibid., 246.

Incongruity Theory for an overarching explanation of how humor operates. Originally developed by Jerry Suls in 1972, Incongruity Theory has been utilized by multiple other scholars who have also investigated humor in music. As explored further in Chapter 3, the theory provides insight into how Borge navigated audience expectations by switching from “serious” to “funny” at any given moment. Beyond Suls’ theory, the scholarship of David Huron and his work on Peter Schickele also informs the case study explored later in this thesis. In his investigation, Huron provides a valuable system of categorization that describes Schickele’s specific techniques for incorporating humor into his musical compositions.

These ideas shed light on Victor Borge’s performances, the critical examination of which contributes in multiple ways. The first aim of this thesis is to draw attention to Borge as a performer: as a classical musician who enjoyed substantial success during his lifetime. Despite this success, Victor Borge has noticeably faded in the general public imagination and in the realm of scholarly production. Although people today still claim to have attended and relished his performances, this group is quickly vanishing and younger potential audiences are largely unaware of his work. Scholars have also neglected him, perhaps because he is too recent of a figure or due to the complex nature of his performances. With the study of performance emerging as a new area in the field of musicology, there are still countless musicians who have not received the attention they deserve. Consequently, the second aim of this thesis is to study Borge’s performance practices: to examine humor in music, not as the work of the composer, but as the deliberate activity of the performer. The fleeting nature of humor is particularly suitable in the study of performance, equally transient and dependent on a given moment. The
third and perhaps most ambitious aim of this thesis is to explore Borge’s self-constructed identity as a musical humorist. By using humor to “walk a fine line,” Borge reached audiences in a unique manner that transcended social values and attracted those who may have otherwise stayed away from a performance of “serious music.”18 By presenting a near-irreverent attitude in his performances, he brought all of his audiences closer to a “serious” musical experience by appealing to their basic appreciation for music and entertainment, less complicated by distinctions of genre or class.

18. King, 7. In his interview with Ruth King, Borge described his “musical message” in the following way: “I think I have brought in my share of new listeners for serious music. I help to open a window. I bring new listeners to the concert hall, and some of them go back for other concerts without the comedy.”
CHAPTER 2
CAREER IN CONTEXT

When Victor Borge set sail for the United States in 1940, he left with only one suitcase and cash borrowed from a friend, since he could not take his own money out of the Danish bank. Germany had invaded his home country of Denmark earlier that same year and the Nazi party held control over most of Western Europe. Although the suspected expulsion and imprisonment of Danish Jews had not yet begun in 1940, Borge was already marked as a target by local Nazi sympathizers. As early as the 1930s he drew unwanted attention because he was Jewish and told jokes that were politically sensitive. By asking audiences: “What’s the difference between a Nazi and a dog?” and responding to his own question with the rejoinder that: “the Nazi lifts his arm,” he ridiculed the Third Reich by expressing the general sentiments of both Jewish and non-Jewish citizens in Copenhagen. With his face on the cover of Nazi-sympathizer newspapers, Borge was wary of traveling alone and once faced physical confrontation with two men who attempted to break his arm. Fortunately the pianist was performing in Sweden during

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19. “Jewish Survivor Victor Borge Testimony,” interview by Susan Peirez, USC Shoah Foundation Institute, June 16, 1998, accessed September 10, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dgz7L4XGpxQ. In the interview, the 80-year old Borge explained that he borrowed approximately $1,000 from a friend in Sweden since the bank in Denmark would not let him take his money out of the country (and that this was an unfortunate injunction, since he had led a successful career and saved a considerable amount). He also noted that his suitcase was full of scrapbooks that contained newspaper clippings with pictures in order to prove that he was a renowned performer to anyone doubting his credibility in the United States.

20. Ibid. When prompted by the interviewer to discuss his Jewish identity, Borge commented that he did not pay particular attention to his own Jewish heritage until Danish sympathizers of the Nazi party began to disrupt his performances in the 1930s. Borge acknowledged, however, that his mother’s and father’s sides of the family were both Jewish and that his parents received traditional Jewish funerals.

the initial German occupation of his country, and after the invasion of Denmark, he made his escape with his wife, Elsie onboard one of the last American ships to leave Northern Europe until the end of World War II.

Hence fate forced Victor Borge to rebuild his career at the age of 32, and it is here that our account begins. As one of over 1,500 musicians to enter the United States from Europe between the years of 1933 and 1944, Borge recognized that his status as a celebrity and his success as both a pianist and actor in Denmark would have little impact on his chances of finding employment upon arriving in America. As a Danish-Jewish musician, finding work without any knowledge of English was far from ideal. In an ironic twist, his given name of Borge Røsenbaum was deemed “too German sounding,” and he quickly changed it to Victor Borge in order to appeal to American audiences.

In light of the fact that the United States was not involved with World War II until 1941, a full year after Borge’s arrival, the music industry that he first encountered was still recovering from the Great Depression of the 1930s. Unstable employment, protectionist measures instituted by unions, and resulting hiring quotas made steady work for musicians—let alone foreigners—difficult to find. Amidst these economical circumstances and others that followed, Borge nonetheless established a successful

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22. Peter Gay, “‘We miss our Jews’: The Musical Migration from Nazi Germany,” in Driven into Paradise: The Musical Migration from Nazi Germany to the United States, ed. Reinhold Brinkmann and Christoph Wolff (Berkeley: University of California, 1999), 21.

23. Day By Night, “Day by Night: Victor Borge, Danish Comedian, Conductor, and Pianist” interview with James Daily, first aired December 12, 1973, uploaded November 29, 2011, accessed February 9, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= _Rm0Hm3owG4. Borge’s new first name, “Victor” came from one of his childhood piano teachers whom he highly admired. In his later interview with the Shoah Institute, Borge remarks that he had a piano teacher in his youth whose name was Victor Schiøler, and it is likely that Borge took his first name from this individual.

career. By carefully balancing the humorous and the musical aspects of his performances, Borge appeared in a wide variety of venues including concert halls, arenas, radio programs, and television shows.\textsuperscript{25} Borge thus adapted his work to match the changing venues and media that featured him, and this played a significant role in his success.

Also critical to his success was his persona on the stage. Using his foreign identity as a strength instead of a weakness, Borge took advantage of the complex cultural hierarchy in the United States by emphasizing his Danish nationality (as a European) and training as a classical pianist, indicators of “highbrow” culture. While maintaining this perceived status, he made light of the very culture he appeared to be a part of, emphasizing the absurd and amusing aspects of classical music. To understand how Borge successfully adapted himself to different types of venues and navigated “highbrow” and “lowbrow” culture in his performances, this chapter takes a closer look at his career across various types of media in the United States from 1940 to his death in 2000.

\textbf{On the Air Waves…}

The radio industry of the 1940s was without a doubt the most prominent source of news and entertainment in homes throughout the United States. Preceding the commercial success of television, broadcasting companies such as NBC (National Broadcasting Corporation) and CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System) programmed all types of content ranging from serial dramas, live ballroom broadcasts, news from overseas correspondents, radio commentators, to variety shows sponsored by major

\textsuperscript{25} Jim Colias, Consultant for Borge Productions, telephone call with author, February 3, 2016. My most heartfelt thanks goes to Jim Colias for his invaluable insights and help in providing the details about the career of Victor Borge, for whom he served as a personal manager for nearly 25 years.
corporations and hosted by popular celebrities. Block programming divided airtime into five and fifteen-minute segments (for news and soap-operas), thirty and sixty minutes (for dramas and game shows), and multi-hour formats typically reserved for concerts. Among the most popular types of programming at this time were comedy revues, appealing to young and old listeners alike. Providing entertainment to American citizens in the interwar years, many radio comedians rose to prominence such as the Marx Brothers, Edgar Bergen with his puppet Charlie McCarthy, Fred Allen, Jack Benny, Bob Hope, and Eve Arden, to mention only a few notable figures.

Borge’s opportunity to join the ranks of American radio entertainers began not as an invitation from Hollywood producers, but as a request to help a Danish acquaintance move her car from Florida to the West Coast. Earlier that year he had arrived in New York City, only to head south in hopes of finding work at private parties. Borge did not see himself as a concert pianist and struggled to find employment as an entertainer at the piano, similar to his previous work in Danish films and revues. In Palm Beach, he read translations of his jokes and presented several successful performances. Although he gained the interest of local audiences, Borge was attracted to the possibility of working in Hollywood, and when the opportunity arose, he soon headed westward with new aspirations for employment. He had dreamed of appearing in

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27. Foertsch, 71.

American films since his earlier career and this journey brought him closer to the booming American entertainment industry.\textsuperscript{29}

It was just a step, however, and Borge’s financial situation worsened upon reaching the West Coast. New friends and Danish connections greeted him in Hollywood, but sometime in 1941 he applied for a job at a gas station out of desperation for money. Surprisingly, the gas station would not hire him because they claimed that his “English wasn’t good enough.”\textsuperscript{30} Not too long after this incident, Borge befriended Harry Meislich, a producer at the Warner Brothers Radio Station nearby. Meislich made a conscientious effort to help European refugees displaced by the Second World War, and through his help Borge met Rudy Vallée, one of the most popular American radio show hosts of the 1930s and 1940s.\textsuperscript{31} Borge first appeared as a warm-up act for Vallée’s radio show on NBC. Soon after, he made his debut on Bing Crosby’s equally esteemed Kraft Music Hall radio show in December 1941. Borge was an overnight success, and from there he entertained over 30 million listeners every week on the Kraft Music Hall for 56 weeks.\textsuperscript{32} After establishing his own national following, he also began to host his own radio show on NBC, beginning in 1943.

\textsuperscript{29} “Jewish Survivor Victor Borge Testimony.” In a touching anecdote, Borge described his last conversation with his ailing mother in a hospital in Denmark before his departure. He apparently lied to her about his reason for leaving the country, claiming that he had suddenly been called to the United States by Hollywood producers. Her response was: “Don’t let it go to your head!” She passed away soon afterward, untouched by the effects of the war. Borge eventually appeared in several American feature films including \textit{Higher and Higher} in 1944 but did not consider the experience particularly successful, according to his interview on the television show \textit{Day by Night}.

\textsuperscript{30} “Jewish Survivor Victor Borge Testimony.”

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{32} “The Victor Borge Story...” [souvenir program], distributed at a concert by Victor Borge at the Holiday Star Plaza (Indiana, May 7, 1988).
One of Borge’s trademark acts on the radio was his performance of “Phonetic Punctuation,” a non-musical act that involved reading sentences from a selected book. Replacing punctuation symbols in the text with laughter-invoking sounds, Borge thus read sentences while acknowledging the location of punctuation in the text with audible spluttering, emphasizing the humor of interpreting prose out loud. Borge first performed the act at the Bellevue Theater in Denmark in 1937, and used translated versions of the same act throughout his career, including on radio in the 1940s. In an undated appearance on the Command Performance radio show, Borge prefaced his act by explaining how he arrived in the United States approximately 19 months ago and found that Americans struggled to understand each other just as much as he struggled to understand them. As a solution to this problem, he claimed that he invented “Phonetic Punctuation,” a way for people to convey the meaning of their words more clearly. As a radio act, “Phonetic Punctuation” was particularly suitable for audial transmission because it allowed Borge to emphasize his foreign identity and demonstrate his wit away from the piano. It was also novel because he could reuse the same concept with different texts, pleasing audiences by performing the popular act without repeating his material verbatim.

By calling attention to his original nationality, Borge became part of a tradition of actors and comedians who utilized ethnic humor and appeared on the radio in various

33. The Funniest Man in the World (television documentary).


35. Jim Colias, Consultant for Borge Productions, telephone call with author, March 28, 2016. During this phone call, Colias shared an interesting anecdote about the “Phonetic Punctuation” act. Borge was apparently told by Senator Chris Dodd that soon after World War II, the government used a recording of his “Phonetic Punctuation” as way to test whether soldiers claiming to suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome were in fact faking the symptoms or genuinely in need of assistance (based on whether or not they were capable of responding to his humor). Colias noted that this information was only shared with Borge after it was declassified, and that Borge was proud to hear about how the recording was used.
guises. William Bendix was famous for playing the role of the bumbling Irishman in Life of Riley, as was J. Carroll Naish who played the Italian immigrant in Life with Luigi. More controversial but equally popular was the show, Amos 'n' Andy, where Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll portrayed common African American stereotypes of the “deep South” in a form of blackface transmitted vocally over the radio. Eddie Anderson remained an anomaly as one of a few African Americans who appeared on a major radio show at that time, and in the Jack Benny Show he played the role of “Rochester,” the valet. As these examples suggest, race-based humor on the radio did not necessarily call for the authentic vocal styling of any given group of people. In this sense, Borge differed from his predecessors since his accent was genuine and not a deliberate product of performance designed to emphasize a certain ethnicity. Nevertheless, his voice on the radio was distinct, easy to recognize, and useful for developing his presence on the radio.

The content of Borge’s jokes also challenged the conventions of typical ethnic humor. As Christie Davies formulated in her work, Ethnic Humor Around the World: A Comparative Analysis, race-based humor typically attributes some form of stupidity or canniness (i.e. stingy-ness, craftiness) to the source of the joke, emphasizing a given stereotype about a given ethnic group.36 In his performances, Borge occasionally alluded to Danish relatives such as his grandfather, the “Danish inventor,” who allegedly “gave” his pocket-watch to his grandson for “twenty bucks.”37 Yet, Borge never mentioned the popular albeit negative American-Scandinavian stereotype of “Ole and Lena,” or its


derivational form, “Ollie and Sven.” Neither did he make any direct jokes about Jewish culture, although most reviews noted that he was a Jewish survivor of the Second World War. Rather than emphasizing any negative aspects of Danish identity, Borge instead focused on positive attributes of Scandinavian ethnicity such as inventiveness and efficiency, leading one critic to later note that: “His timing and delivery are as precise as a fine Danish watch.” As evidenced in this comment and others like it, the public hence came to associate his performances with positive Scandinavian stereotypes instead of common alternatives typically utilized in ethnic humor.

It is further arguable that Borge’s Scandinavian identity fell outside of the most common ethnic groups stereotyped on the radio, and that this gave him a unique advantage. Despite the large Scandinavian population in the United States and the discrimination that Scandinavian immigrants experienced during World War I, there are no definite accounts of anyone subjecting Borge to discrimination on account of his ethnic identity. It is further arguable that while his Scandinavian identity encouraged his profiling as an ethnic Other worthy of laughter and monikers such as the “Great Dane” and the “Unmelancholy Dane,” he also remained distinctly a “European musician.”

38. Pat Minelli, “The Culture of Ole & Lena,” Shakopee Valley News (May 8, 2008, accessed February 20, 2016), http://www.swnewsmedia.com/shakopee_valley_news/news/entertainment/the-culture-of-ole-lena/article_b3f1b50b-3167-5a84-99ab-4d3da6ab6ea.html. This short article published online by the Minnesota-based Shakopee Valley News describes the tradition of “Ole & Lena” jokes. In most cases, Ole and Lena are portrayed as a Swedish couple that speak with thick accents and are often at the butt of jokes revealing their simple-mindedness.


allotting him the level of prestige associated with “highbrow culture.” Borge retained the value of this status by continuing to identify as a Danish musician long after he became a naturalized citizen of the United States in 1948.

As the popularity of radio began to dwindle at the end of the 1940s, many of the greatest radio performers soon transitioned to other venues. Radio played a critical role in the Second World War, entertaining troops abroad and relaying news back home. But as soldiers returned home and reunited with their families, television and other forms of media found new audiences. Borge had similarly been a part of the war effort, appearing on military broadcasts and boosting public morale with his surefire humor. Yet, as his popularity grew, he began to appear increasingly often on television as well as the concert stage. Eventually Borge also left the world of radio to continue building his reputation as a performer.

On the Television Screen...

Television in the 1950s rapidly overcame the radio as the main source of entertainment. As it found its primary audience in the rising middle class, it became one of the most important mediators of popular American culture. As Leo Bogart observed in his 1958 study of television and its impact on American life, television is generally considered a “popular art,” distinguished from the “elite arts” by the diversity of its

41. Levine, 1-2. In his opening paragraphs, Levine describes the importance of European influences in American highbrow culture. Although he does not discuss music making until later in the book, his initial points nevertheless convey the notion of Euro-centric privilege in American fine arts during the twentieth century.

audience, and commercial over artistic emphasis, to mention only a few key features. Hence Borge came to television as a popular entertainer, building off the reputation he established while on the radio. He appeared as a guest on popular talk shows such as What’s My Line, The Perry Como Show, and the Ed Sullivan Show, and was also a host for numerous broadcasts including a special series for Pontiac.

On television Borge’s performances typically involved interacting with hosts or other guests in some type of musical setting. Whether teaching Perry Como how to play the piano or adding “Phonetic Punctuation” to Dean Martin’s singing, Borge was frequently presented as the musical specialist, or “professional musician” with the last word on any music-related topic. Still other appearances throughout his career included commercials for companies such as Pontiac and Heineken, an appearance on the popular children’s show, Sesame Street, and a public service announcement for the


44. “Lost Episodes of Victor Borge: Volume One,” in *Victor Borge Classic Collection* (Chicago, IL: Questar, 2008), 6 DVDs. This DVD features a full Pontiac television show hosted by Borge and includes his commercial for a Pontiac Grand Prix. In the commercial, Borge demonstrated that when he failed to pay at a toll booth, he could still outdrive the entire American military and arrive at his performance on time, thanks to the sleek sports car.


47. Winston Fletcher, *Powers of Persuasion: The Inside Story of British Advertising* (Oxford, GB: Oxford University Press, 2008), 141-142, accessed online, May 10, 2016, ProQuest elibrary. This book briefly mentions Victor Borge in passing, noting that the use of his voice added a slight level of false advertising to the product since Borge was Danish but Heineken is a Dutch brewing company. For an amusing example, see also “Heineken UK TV Advert 1970s flv” (television commercial), uploaded September 20, 2009, accessed May 11, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mREbgn8QrXg.

The diverse target audiences for these appearances further suggest that Borge was widely well known to the public despite his established persona as a “classical pianist.”

Surprisingly little of Borge’s presentation on television varied from his live theater performances. In most cases, a piano was rarely out of reach, and his self-written jokes with music content from his radio performances were often adapted to fit the medium. This consistency was likely due to the fact that Borge created almost all of his comic content by himself or in collaboration with the other musicians who appeared on stage with him. In a few exceptional cases, mostly for television, he also used scripts from writers such as Alan Jay Lerner, Henry Morgan, Mel Brooks, and Neil Simon. Nevertheless, Borge created a substantial amount of his material during his early career in Denmark and on American radio, prior to his appearances on television and live tours throughout the United States.

Borge’s television appearances are perhaps best exemplified in his appearance on the Hollywood Palace, which ran from 1964 to 1970 on ABC television. As a vaudeville-like revue, the show featured a different guest host every week and purposely programmed contrasting performers. In Season Five, for example, Borge appeared as the guest host for an evening that also featured a Scottish dance corps with bagpipes and drums, the King Family Singers, a tumbling troupe, Steve Allen in a variety of guises,


and Jayne Meadows singing “Hello Dolly” in Chinese escorted by dancers dressed in faux-oriental attire.\textsuperscript{51}

Needless to say, this hour’s worth of diverse programming can hardly be described as “highbrow art.” Borge’s opening remarks cause a near-riot of laughter from the studio audience as he comments:

I am here tonight on behalf of the National Piano Safety Council, to cut down injuries at the piano. Now let me just quote a few statistics on accidents caused by un-safe piano. Last July 4th more people were hurt on Steinway than on Freeway!\textsuperscript{52}

The acts that follow are easily categorized as “family entertainment,” or lowbrow entertainment that purposely eliminates vulgar humor, making it appropriate for audiences of all ages. Yet, the atmosphere of the hour-long program changes in the last ten minutes when an orchestra appears on screen and Victor Borge performs the first movement of Sergei Rachmaninoff’s Piano Concerto No. 1. The performance is prefaced by fellow performer Steve Allen, who comments that there is a “serious dimension to Victor Borge” that audiences rarely get to see. Allen explains that although Borge is a “great entertainer,” he is also a performer of “consummate mastery at the piano.”\textsuperscript{53}

The program concludes with Borge quickly bowing to thunderous applause and announcing the guest host for the following week as the orchestra picks up the cheerful theme song to end the show. In this way, the concerto becomes an extension of the evening’s activities, a moment away from the light-hearted nature of the show. Borge and


\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid.
the orchestra perform the concerto without any deliberate showiness or humorous incident, and through the magic of television the audience is gracefully transported to a “classical” listening experience and then back again. Although it is impossible to confirm whether viewers appreciated this shift or turned off their television sets as soon as Borge started to play, the placement of the concerto at the end of the program suggests that it was the pinnacle of the evening—a cultural celebration as well as affirmation of “high art” as presented by Victor Borge.

Returning to Steve Allen’s thoughtful introduction of Borge’s performance, it is worth noting that Borge’s reception among his contemporaries in the world of comedy, radio, and television is relatively unknown. Despite his near overnight success and frequent appearance on radio and television with other entertainers, there is little mention of him by other comedians or books about entertainers of the past. Part of this phenomenon may have been due to the uncommon nature of his act, placing him in a different category than others who primarily relied on stand-up comedy. From the perspective of the entertainment industry, Borge embodied a specific style of humor that was both accessible to large audiences and unusually refined, maintaining a level of “class” not often found in comedy. In one brief mention, for example, Comedienne Phyllis Diller noted that her original act was “very Victor Borge,” referring to her use of music in the performance. Groucho Marx is similarly known to have applauded Borge


55. Nachman, 223.
as a comedian and noted: “he also plays piano!” Hence on the television screen Borge remained a “highbrow” pianist with humorous tendencies, a cultural “gate-keeper” who was welcomed onto programs as the accomplished guest of the evening.

**On the Stage…**

At the same time that Borge began appearing on television, he also returned to the stage. Television reunited the physical aspects of his performance with his voice and music, and the concert hall restored Borge to the style of live performance he had previously pursued in Denmark. He used the momentum of his success on radio and television to appear on stage at Carnegie Hall in 1943, and there he performed a humor-infused evening of music at the piano, assisted by a 45-piece orchestra. Bolstered by his feat of performing at the prestigious American “temple of high art,” his career continued to grow as he developed a reputation as a performer both on the stage and on the screen. His next challenge, in 1953, was to appear as a solo act in New York City on Broadway at The Golden Theater.

Appearing on Broadway was a dangerous risk. Although the venue was popular and well-suited for Borge’s style of comedic performance, a failure on the Great White Way would have meant the end of his otherwise burgeoning career. Many of Borge’s acquaintances tried to stop him from taking the New York engagement, and Borge himself believed that his first performance, on October 2, 1953, was a complete


disaster.\textsuperscript{59} Be as it may, his one-man show, “Comedy in Music” became so popular that it ran for nearly three years with 849 performances. This unparalleled feat was promptly listed in the Guinness Book of Records as “the longest one-man show in theatrical history.”\textsuperscript{60} There was a rumor that Borge made over two million dollars during his first time on Broadway, and from then on his career took its complete shape as he toured around the world as well as the United States. By this point, his personal life also changed. As his popularity led to more frequent touring, his first wife Elsie desired to remain home with their two children. This conflict of interest led to a divorce and Borge eventually married a second time—this time, to Sanna Roach, with whom he remained the rest of his life and had two children.\textsuperscript{61}

On Broadway, Borge established the key features of his performances that he retained for the rest of his career. Although Broadway was arguably more popular or lowbrow of a venue than Carnegie Hall, the features that he established at The Golden Theater were not entirely unlike a piano recital or orchestra concert as codified by centuries of performance in the Western classical music tradition. The piano recital, in particular, retains specific characteristics that are often attributed to pianists of the nineteenth century such as Clara Schumann and Franz Liszt.\textsuperscript{62} The pianist wears formal

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{59} \textit{The Funniest Man in the World} (television documentary).
\item \textsuperscript{60} Schonberg, “Laughter is Still Music to Victor Borge’s Ear.” As of 2008, \textit{The Funniest Man in the World} documentary also noted that Borge still had the world record for the longest running show with 849 performances over three consecutive years.
\item \textsuperscript{61} \textit{The Funniest Man in the World} (television documentary). The documentary notes, however, that Borge’s two children from his first marriage came to live with him, as did Sanna’s daughter, leading to five children in the Borge household.
\item \textsuperscript{62} Kenneth Hamilton, \textit{After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance}, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Hamilton eloquently describes the many conventions commonly associated with the classical piano recital and then proceeds to examine the historical sources for the conventions, often revealing a disparity between the perceived practices and their actual origin.
\end{itemize}
attire and seats him or herself in a perpendicular position to the audience so that his or her facial expressions can be observed. The audience is expected to remain silent during the performance. There is a level of seriousness in a piano recital—a reverence for the musical work, original composer, and performer—that is transferred to other types of concerts to this day.

Victor Borge’s performances followed many of the same conventions, and his style of performance was largely legitimized by his upbringing as a child prodigy and training as a concert pianist. For all of his performances, Borge wore either a tuxedo or other formal wear from Savile Row, played a piano placed perpendicularly on stage, and engaged with music by the great composers of the past. But unlike most pianists, Borge’s use of humor defied the audience and critics’ expectations of the proper way a performer should act. In addition, it is likely that Borge’s popularity in the United States, predominantly developed on radio and television, set him apart from other classical performers who developed their careers by appearing in competitions and live performances. By bringing humor into the concert hall, Borge did not follow the aesthetics of a highbrow concert, and as a result, even the purely musical aspects of his performances risked being categorized as unworthy of serious attention.

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64. It is worth noting that in early American television, particularly in the 1950s, there were multiple instances of “highbrow” cultural programming including orchestral concerts and dramas by playwrights such as Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Eugene O’Neil. From the musical perspective, conductors Arturo Toscanini, Leopold Stokowski, and Leonard Bernstein were particularly well-known figures to the public. Overall the era was considered the first “Golden Age” of television and remains a largely unexplored topic that begs for future study. For more information about cultural programming on early American television, see Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status (New York, Routledge, 2012).
Borge’s musical integrity was most threatened by those who questioned whether he could actually play the piano at the same level as a concert artist. The question was exacerbated by his humorous digressions away from the act of playing, or in what some have called *musicalis interruptus*.\(^65\) At times, his lack of playing caused substantial controversy among audiences and critics. People developed their own explanations for why such a skilled pianist chose to tell jokes instead of play the piano, and some were less flattering than others. In his book *A Natural History of the Piano*, Stuart Isacoff suggests that it was a type of stage fright that prompted Borge to rely on humor in his performances.\(^66\) Other authorities, such as Frank Cooper imply that Borge did not trust his own musical memory and therefore preferred to improvise.\(^67\) Many newspaper reviewers presented their own views, and one critic for the Washington Post even put forth the reasoning that the piano-playing itself served as a “security blanket” in the scheme of a larger comic routine.\(^68\)

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\(^65\) This term and derivations of it have made scant appearances in popular scholarly discourse with the exception of a listing on tvtropes.org where the term is described as a musical gag where the performance or recording of a musical work is stopped by an unexpected interruption. In the case of Victor Borge, *musicalis interruptus* relates to his deceptive self-interruption as a means to draw the attention of his audience by promising to play a piece and then delaying his fulfillment of the promise, leading to a greater amount of avoidant behavior than actual musical performance during any given concert.


\(^67\) Cooper, “Victor Borge: The Great Dane of Music,” 15. Cooper, who also knew Borge personally, wrote about him in the following way in *Clavier* magazine: “Why, you may ask, does he not play more often? The answer lies buried deep within Borge, who, though blessed with a phenomenal ear, never trusts his memory. He knows many hundreds of pieces in the standard repertoire yet, the moment he gets into one before the audience, he begins to distrust himself and an irrepressible sense of fun takes over—to transform the piece into something hilarious. To feel uncomfortable while making music is an anathema to Borge.”

\(^68\) Kennicott, “The King of Keyboard Comedy.”
Equally worth consideration, however, is how Borge’s earlier experiences on radio and television may have affected his performance style just as much as his inhibitions towards traditional performance. Borge himself noted in an interview from 1999 that “On radio and television, then, they always wanted me not to play, just jokes, jokes, jokes. It was an uphill battle to get to play more.” 69 Borge was also known for his humorous antics throughout his youth, so yet another explanation, closest to Borge’s own statements in numerous interviews, is that he genuinely sought to explore the possibilities of humor in music while defying conventions in classical performance. By deliberately utilizing *musicalis interruptus* he could experiment with both the non-musical aspects and musical aspects of his performances, shaping the way his audiences experienced his concerts.

One example of *musicalis interruptus* is observed in the following scenario. During performances Borge often announced the title of the next piece he would play before seating himself at the piano, the “Mozart Bagatelle” being one such work. 70 As he sat down on the piano bench in preparation to play, he would appear to absent-mindedly trail off into a series of jokes that would eventually lead him to stand for several minutes as he continued speaking. A few jokes later, Borge would then either announce that he was out of time or pretend not to notice the omission of the piece and continue speaking on an entirely different topic. Most audience members would notice that he did not perform the work he promised to play at the start of the concert. A few shrewd listeners might also have recognized that the composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart never

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69. Kennicott, “The King of Keyboard Comedy.”

composed in the genre of “Bagatelles,” and that consequently, Borge never had the intention to play the imaginary work in the first place!

As this example demonstrates, Borge strategically used *musicalis interruptus* to build an expectation in his audience. Rather than giving them the promised performance, he teased them by telling joke after joke. By making audiences wait, he ensured that when at last he played a full piece, he would have their rapt attention. While Borge’s overall reason for subverting his own performances may have been a combination of the explanations provided earlier, such as stage fright or issues with his memory, the “Mozart Bagatelle” nevertheless illustrates how *musicalis interruptus* was an integral aspect of his performance.

During any given live performance, Borge typically played two or three full works during an hour to two-hour period. Among the pieces in his repertoire included waltzes by Chopin, the Viennese Dances by Ignaz Friedman, and “Clair de Lune” by Claude Debussy. In these instances, the audience was reminded of his abilities as a pianist, leading critics such as Harold Schonberg of the *New York Times* to describe him in the following way:

> At the piano Mr. Borge is facile and elegant, and he produces a sound that reflects a school of piano playing that is all but extinct. It is a warm, rich, highly nuanced sound. He gets it through pedal mixtures and by the formation of his own hands—large, spatulate hands with cushions on each fingertip.

Praise of this type bolstered Borge’s reputation as a performer and connected his playing style with a legacy of earlier eminent pianists such as Egon Petri and Frederic Lamond, both of whom he studied with while growing up in Europe. Although there are no records proving that he gave any “serious” recitals after arriving in the United States,

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71. Schonberg, “Laughter is Still Music to Victor Borge’s Ear.”
the pianist knew hundreds of pieces in the standard repertoire and was said to have practiced multiple hours a day at his home in Greenwich, Connecticut.72

When Borge first arrived in the United States, he was also supported by the Steinway Company showroom in New York City, which invited him to practice on the pianos in the basement of the store.73 While practicing there for multiple weeks, he was on occasion interrupted by an important guest:

They were very kind and invited me to go down in the basement and practice, which I did every day. I had nothing else to do, except to learn English—to learn how to pronounce Steinway. As I was practicing one day, the big door opened, a little head stuck through, looked at me and nodded, and the door closed again. That happened three or four times during the next week or two. Finally, I asked, ‘Who does that head belong to?’ ‘Oh,’ I was told, ‘That’s Josef Hoffmann’ one of the greatest piano players of the century and the former head of the Curtis Institute of Music. I almost fell off my piano stool. They told me that he had made some wonderful remarks about my touch.74

This type of attention by an esteemed musical institution and musician were a further vote of confidence for Borges capabilities as a performer. Other musicians who publicly admired Borge throughout his career included famous figures such as Dame Myra Hess,75 Benno Moiseiwitsch, Jascha Heiftez, Bruno Walter, Dimitri Mitropoulos,76 and Leonard Bernstein.77

72. The Funniest Man in the World (television documentary).
74. Ibid.
75. Ibid.
77. Colias, March 28, 2016. Colias commented that he had a conversation with Leonard Bernstein’s son, Alexander Bernstein, who told him that his father was an enormous fan of Victor Borge. Borge also performed during Bernstein’s 70th birthday gala.
Borge also performed with other classical musicians. In 1974 he was recorded playing at a benefit concert in London with other notable pianists of the day including Jorge Bolet, Gina Bachauer, Alicia de Larrocha, Radu Lupu, and Garrick Ohlsson. As an accompanist he appeared multiple times with violinists such as Itzhak Perlman and Anton Kontra, and in his humor-infused performances, Borge collaborated with various musicians including pianist Leonid Hambro, soprano Marni Nixon, coloratura soprano Marylyn Mulvey, and Armenian pianist Şahan Arzruni. Borge’s collaboration with all of these musicians and their willingness to work with him suggests that he was a performer of substantial merit. By pairing himself with outstanding musicians, he likewise ensured that musical quality of his performances would not be lacking.

Borge continued to tour and perform at various concert venues until the end of his career. Between the 1950s to 1970s, when his career was the most active, he not only appeared on television and in concert halls, but on stages in Las Vegas for multiple weeks at a time. Although not much is known about his engagements there, an undated postcard from Las Vegas sometime in the 1970s shows Borge’s name on the enormous

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78. Donald E. Manildi, Curator of the International Piano Archives at Maryland (IPAM), email to author, January 22, 2016. The benefit concert was for the International Piano Library, which had recently suffered losses when its headquarters in New York City was destroyed by a fire.

79. Marni Nixon and Stephen Cole, I Could Have Sung All Night: My Story (New York: Billboard Books, 2006), 199-203. Nixon joined Borge starting in 1968 for a number of performances. She is noticeably omitted from multiple accounts of Borge’s career and deserves special attention here. Nixon is perhaps best known for her work as a vocal double for numerous famous Hollywood actresses including Audrey Hepburn, Deborah Kerr, and Natalie Wood. She has also recorded multiple classical works on CD including the cabaret songs of Arnold Schönberg, the “Eight Poems by Emily Dickinson” by Aaron Copland and the complete chamber works of Anton Webern.

billboard for Caesar’s Palace, a world-renown casino resort. Just as he appeared with some of the greatest classical musicians of his time, on occasion Borge also joined forces with other popular entertainers, particularly for a good cause. In one benefit concert, for example, he was commended for raising 1.8 million dollars in a joint effort with Frank Sinatra at the Radio City Music Hall in New York for the Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer institute.

**On the Conductor’s Podium…**

Borge’s appearances at benefit concerts continued throughout the latter half of his career, and often his performances came to include performing with an orchestra. As a child in Denmark he had admired conductors, and as his popularity increased, so did his opportunities to wield the baton. Borge’s debut at Carnegie Hall was one of his earliest performances on the podium, and his first full-length orchestral performance, devoid of humor, occurred in 1969 when he donated his time and conducted at the Festival of Neglected Romantic Music at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Founded by musicologist Frank Cooper in 1968, the Festival of Neglected Romantic Music was a multi-day concert series that presented obscure solo and orchestral works from the Romantic period to the general public, such as Sigismund Thalberg’s

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81. “Caesar’s Palace: Las Vegas, Nevada” (postcard), copyright Ferris H. Scott (date not given), personal collection. The postcard was found for sale on an online antique postcard market and was purchased by the author on February 20, 2016.


83. Frank Cooper, Research Professor Emeritus – University of Miami, conversation with author, October 31, 2015. This discussion of the Festival of Neglected Romantic Music and its significance in Borge’s career is indebted to Professor Frank Cooper, with whom the author met and conversed on October 31, 2015, in Coral Gables, Florida.
Piano Fantasy on The Barber of Seville and Ignacy Paderewski’s Symphony in B minor. Borge’s involvement with the event began when Cooper sent him a letter asking him to participate in the festival as a means to bolster audience interest and support. After Cooper had waited several months and given up on the possibility of a response, one day Borge called his office. Apologizing and explaining that he had lost the unopened letter in his suitcase, Borge declared that he would love to participate if the opportunity were still available.

Aside from his desire to conduct, Borge’s enthusiasm for the relatively unknown event came from the opportunity to collaborate with Gunnar Johansen, a fellow Scandinavian immigrant in the United States. Johansen was a classical pianist who had led a successful career in Europe before moving to the United States in the 1920s. Coincidentally he was also a childhood friend of Borge. Just as Borge had traveled to Berlin to study with the great piano masters, so had Johansen, also a native of Copenhagen. After moving to the United States in 1929, Johansen was the first person to receive the position of “Artist-in-Residence in Music” in the United States at the University of Wisconsin from 1939 to 1976. It was through this affiliation with the university that Johansen became involved with the festival.

When Borge conducted for the first time at the Festival of Neglected Romantic Music in 1969, it was Johansen who was featured as the piano soloist for the Piano Concerto No. 2 by Selim Palmgren. Borge also conducted four other orchestral works

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that same evening: Johann Svendson’s *Festive Polonaise*, Friedrich Kuhlau’s *Eleverhoj Overture*, Ole Bull’s *Solitude on the Mountain* for strings, and a special version of *Finlandia* by Jean Sibelius that included choir and orchestra. The program, an evening of entirely Scandinavian music, was selected by Cooper. With Borge’s generous help, the evening proved to be a terrific financial success that ensured the continuation of the festival for years to follow.

Borge returned to the festival two more times after his debut and also brought his stage partner, Marylyn Mulvey. In addition to their regular humorous act, they also performed a relatively unknown work, Reinhold Glière’s *Concerto for Coloratura Soprano and Orchestra*, which gave the soprano an opportunity to display her full vocal technique. Borge’s involvement with the festival proved to be important for additional reasons. It was during the Festival of Romantic Music that Borge first met Jim Colias, a pianist in Gunnar Johansen’s studio at the University of Wisconsin who would later become Borge’s personal manager in the years to follow.

It was also in Indianapolis that Borge played on a Bösendorfer Imperial piano for the first time in the United States, and through Cooper’s efforts that he became a

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87. Cooper, conversation with the author, October 31, 2015.

88. “Comedy With Music” [playbill], Imperial Theater, November 3, 1977, accessed online, May 10, 2016, http://www.playbill.com/production/comedy-with-music-imperial-theatre-vault-0000006041. A digitalized playbill from Borge’s 1977 season at the Imperial Theater on Broadway provides additional biographical information about Marylyn Mulvey. It notes that she was awarded a contract with the Metropolitan Opera National Company and sung leading roles in operas such as *Rigoletto* and *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

89. Cooper, conversation with the author, October 31, 2015.
spokesperson for Bösendorfer pianos in the country. With this arrangement, the Bösendorfer piano company, one of the oldest and most revered piano companies in the world, subsequently provided Borge with a Bösendorfer piano for many of his performances in the United States until the end of his career. While the company no doubt benefited from Borge’s wide-reaching popularity, his reputation as a pianist and as a conductor was similarly enhanced by their efforts to supply him with the best instruments possible.

After the Festival of Neglected Romantic Music, Borge went on to conduct other orchestras in the United States and abroad, making guest appearances with orchestras such as the Amsterdam Concertgebouw and the New York Philharmonic. Borge’s debut conducting opera occurred in 1979 with the New Cleveland Opera Company production of Mozart’s Die Zauberflöte. In 1984 he premiered a successful production of Carmen, a shortened version of Georges Bizet’s opera by the same name. Performed as a benefit concert for the Connecticut Opera, Carmen featured opera stars Robert Merrill and Mignon Dunn in the cast and filled the 10,000 seat arena. In one unusual instance, Borge also sang and acted in two minor roles with American soprano Beverly Sills in Die Fledermaus, presented by the Opera Company of Boston in 1980.

90. Cooper, conversation with the author, October 31, 2015. Colias also confirmed in a phone call that Borge’s official title was “spokesperson” with the Bösendorfer piano company.

91. Carol Brown, “‘Carmen’ to be ‘extravaganza,’” The Day, May 27, 1984, accessed February 22, 2016, https://news.google.com/newspapers?id=IQsiAAAAIBAJ&sjid=23IFAAAAIBAJ&pg=1730%2C5880656. The same writer reviewed the performance in a later article and criticized it heavily for its poor staging and disjunct simplification of the original opera. She noted, however, that Borge was nonetheless the highlight of the show and redeemed an otherwise unredeemable production.

In an article for the Boston Globe written in the same year, one reviewer noted that Borge and Arthur Fiedler, the conductor for the Boston Pops Orchestra, looked remarkably alike. With white hair and mustaches, both conductors looked strikingly respectable in their old age. In addition to physical appearances, they were also both popularizers of classical music, seeking to reach large audiences with entertaining orchestral concerts. As this observation highlights, Borge’s physical appearance in his older age continued to complement his stage persona as a distinguished arbiter of highbrow culture. In numerous interviews he revealed that conducting had been his childhood dream, and that having conducted the opera *Die Zauberflöte*, he had no unfulfilled ambitions in his career. To those unsure of his forays into conducting, he explained: “Yes, I do conduct. Yes, I am most serious about conducting. Yes, I do conduct so-called “serious” music.”

Despite Borge’s emphasis on his serious approach to conducting, it seems likely that audiences coming to see his performances as a conductor were already familiar with the amusing persona they had seen on television and expecting a similar performance. In many instances Borge obliged them. Even nearing the last decades of his life, Borge created new acts and repertoire that utilized the orchestra as both a “serious” and “humorous” entity, switching from standard repertoire to comical acts. At the conductor’s podium, he could integrate all of the humorous acts he had developed at the piano with

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94. Dyer, “But Seriously, Folks…: First Edition.” It is also worth noting that, as a child, Victor Borge most likely attended many concerts to hear his father, who was a violinist in the Royal Danish Symphony. This experience likely nurtured his love for conducting, and for orchestral music in general.

the full performing forces of an orchestra for maximum effect. Not only could he use the orchestra as another instrument, but he also could use all the members of the orchestra as his “straight-men.” In this way, Borge made the symphonic orchestra—the musical pinnacle of the classical tradition—immediately accessible to his audiences through the use of humor.

**And Everywhere Else!**

As the separate accounts of his appearances on radio, television, and stages suggest, Borge’s career developed as an accumulation of his successes. Just as television and radio helped to popularize his work, his appearances in concert halls with other musicians attributed a level of cultural status to his performances that would not have been present otherwise. Hence his reputation continued to grow, both as a popular entertainer and also as an esteemed musician. Performing approximately 150 concerts a year during the 1980s, Borge showed no signs of stopping. He was given knighthood by all of the Scandinavian countries and in 1999 he was recognized by President Clinton at the Kennedy Center Honors. Borge also made multiple command performances for various heads of state in Europe, and on one occasion Queen Elizabeth of England told him that she grew up listening to his records. Furthermore, Borge’s audiences extended beyond Europe and the United States. One incident revealed that the then-president of Iraq, Saddam Hussein was also an ardent fan of Borge, and that the Iraqi foreign minister


97. Ibid.
asked news correspondent Wolf Blitzer to bring a set of Victor Borge videotapes the next time he returned to the Middle East.  

Outside of his responsibilities as a performer, Borge undertook other professional endeavors throughout his life. In the 1950s he briefly owned a successful business selling Cornish Hens as a culinary delicacy to supermarkets, restaurants, and hotels throughout the United States. In 1971 and 1980, Borge joined forces with radio broadcaster and author Robert Sherman to publish two books consisting of humorous music-related “historical” anecdotes, entitled My Favorite Intermissions and My Favorite Comedies in Music respectively. The following paragraph provides a sample of the amusing writing style from the chapter on Hector Berlioz in “My Favorite Intermissions”:

The Life of Hector Berlioz is recommended for mature adults only, although no one would dare make a movie out of it. Berlioz lived right in the middle of the Romantic era, and he didn’t forget it for a minute. “My arteries quiver violently,” he wrote in his Memoirs, “my muscles contract spasmodically, my limbs tremble, my feet and hands go numb.” That was from listening to music. Wait till you hear what happened when he found out about girls.

The combined wit of Borge and Sherman made the two books bestsellers that complemented Borge’s performances, utilizing humor that gently poked fun at the absurd

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102. Borge, My Favorite Intermissions, 73.

aspects of music-making and musicians themselves. In a deeply philanthropic gesture, Borge also co-founded the Thanks to Scandinavia Foundation along with New York Attorney Richard Netter in 1963. An organization that exists to this day, the Thanks to Scandinavia Foundation honors the heroic deeds of Scandinavians and Bulgarians who rescued Jews during World War II by awarding scholarships to students from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland, and Bulgaria who are studying in the United States.\(^\text{104}\)

As Borge continued to perform in his old age, audiences increasingly complained that his jokes were always the same. Many newspapers noted this fact and some critics went as far as to make comments such as: “Mr. Borge’s show is a parade of old standbys—routines that anyone who has seen Mr. Borge before, or even read about him, will know.”\(^\text{105}\) Another more generous article described the phenomena in the following way: “If you’ve seen one Victor Borge concert, you’ve seen them all. Then again, no two of his concerts have ever been the same. That paradox has made Borge one of the most popular entertainers in theater history.”\(^\text{106}\)

Borge himself was aware of this fact and responded to it in a variety of ways. In his interview with Ruth King in 1977, he noted that he first developed his famous “Mozart Opera” act when he was sixteen years old, and that audiences often asked him to perform that very same act, placing him in a difficult position. Although he was happy to repeat the act as years passed, he remarked that: “If I do it all the time, then they will say there is nothing new in the show. I travel so much

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and I go back every year to the same places and even if the audience is different, the critics are usually the same. I’m between the devil and the deep blue sea.” In the same interview he further elaborated that comedy as an art form requires an element of surprise. Unlike a song or composition that can be repeated and enjoyed each time, there must always be something new in a comedic performance.

Yet in a similar interview several years later with Harold Schonberg, Borge addressed the same charge with almost the reverse rhetoric as what he previously claimed. Instead of acknowledging the need for spontaneity in comedy and his dilemma when facing the same critics year after year, Borge remarked that “those critics miss the whole point. [...] When you go to ‘Aida,’ do you complain that the arias are the same as they have always been?” With this question Borge emphasized the “classic” nature of his performances. By comparing his acts to the arias in Giuseppe Verdi’s famous opera, Borge drew a direct correlation between the nature of his comedic acts with a set repertoire, or pre-determined text, of which he had become the interpreter. As reviews and interviews with Borge became increasingly nostalgic, even referring to him with nicknames such as “Vintage Borge,” and “grand old man of piano buffoonery,” Borge’s status as a performer subtly shifted from that of a popular entertainer to a popular entertainer of a past age. His acts such as “Phonetic Punctuation” and the “Mozart Opera”


were further memorialized in video tapes of his live performances and labeled as “classic,”

in many ways raising his acts to the same status as the very “highbrow” musical works and conventions on which he built his career.

Reviews also increasingly noted that his performances were “clean and timeless,” differencing in content from other popular comedians in the United States in the later half of the twentieth century, whom, as Borge described, were more likely to “stand up and talk about sex, dirt, bad manners. They don’t even dress up to do it—they come on in their underwear, nightshirts, or whatever.”

The closest Borge veered towards bawdy humor was his discussion of Mozart, whom he described as “a bust—from here up,” and how he was happily married (although Mrs. Mozart was not), and when, at the start of a concert, the pianist asked whether there were any children in the audience. Receiving an affirmation, Borge would then gesture towards the door and declare “out!” before turning his back to the audience and announcing to an invisible stage manager that “We do have some children here. That means I can’t do the second half in the nude. I’ll wear the tie. The long one!”

It seems unlikely that the surprised laughter from the audience captured in video clips were in response to the lewd image of Borge in the nude with only a tie so much as the unlikelihood of him donning anything except a tuxedo in

111. See also Paul Somers, “What Makes Classics Classic in Music?,” Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science 18, no. 3 (February/March 1992), 11, accessed online, March 3, 2016, ProQuest. In the article Somer notes that an act, or performance of an act can only achieve “classic” status when it is recorded in some way so that it has the potential to be repeated and re-examined.


115. Ibid.
their presence. This expectation was bound once again to his stage presence as both a distinguished pianist and comic entertainer.

After a final tour of Denmark to promote a picture book by photographer Tine Harden, Victor Borge suddenly passed away at the age of 91 on December 23, 2000, at his home in Greenwich, Connecticut, merely hours after returning home from the trip. His wife Sanna had died earlier that same year, and at the time of his passing he was survived by five children and nine grandchildren.

During his long life, Borge experienced many changes first-hand. He was familiar with a long-past world when the horrors of World War II had yet to take place, just as he was later active in technological innovations as American radio rose and fell in significance. A prominent performer on early television, he eased the anxieties of audience members during the Cold War and Vietnam War while also witnessing the emergence of computers, cellular phones, and the turn of a new millennium: Borge did it all, helping to shape American culture while also reacting to the substantial changes that occurred throughout his life.

Yet, there remains a one-of-a-kind aspect of Borge that cannot be ignored. For the pianist created a distinctive style of performance that reached enormous audiences during his lifetime and created a standard for future entertainers. Rarely deviating from his tuxedo and the safety of his piano bench, he navigated people’s expectations and

116. Tine Harden, *Victor Borge* (Oslo, NO: Aschehoug, 2000). This book is unavailable for purchase in the United States and does not appear to be for sale from any Scandinavian online sources. The book features photographs of Victor Borge, both on and off the stage.


maintained both his personal momentum and popularity up to the last days of his life, a rare feat for any performer. The next chapter examines the specific ways that Borge explored the possibilities of humor in musical performance—a rare, and as this chapter has revealed, powerful combination in the hands of one Danish pianist.
CHAPTER 3

ANALYZING HUMOR IN PERFORMANCE

Examining the legacy of any performer is a complex process. As the previous chapter demonstrates, one approach to studying Victor Borge is to contextualize his career and observe how he navigates cultural distinctions between “highbrow” and “lowbrow.” Yet, such an approach does not examine the actual mechanics of his performance. It does not explain how he made audiences laugh or examine how his witticisms and physical humor combined with his piano-playing. Consequently, this chapter examines one of Victor Borge’s concerts preserved on video as a means to explore how he brought humor and music together in the act of performance itself.

Humor in Theory

Humor is an immense topic, and great minds throughout history—Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, Emanuel Kant, and Sigmund Freud, to name a few—have tackled it and provided potential explanations of its function and purpose. As hinted earlier in the Introduction to this thesis, there is no unified or all-inclusive theory for humor recognized by all disciplines, and the study of humor is not the task of any one field. Instead, this subject is a co-disciplinary endeavor that combines the work of philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, and more recently, cognitive scientists. In his Primer on Humor Research, Victor Raskin noted that, as of 2006, there were no researchers who dedicated all their work to humor. This exclusion is likely due to the fact


that those who choose to study humor run the risk of not being taken seriously for their scholarship, particularly by university administrators and financial supporters who do not recognize the significance of their work.\textsuperscript{121}

As a result of this struggle for academic legitimacy and the lack of a unified theory of humor, it is necessary to identify the theory that is most relevant to the following analysis. Three theories of humor—Superiority Theory, Relief Theory, and Incongruity Theory—are broadly accepted today, and of the three, Incongruity Theory is the most popular explanation among scholars who study humor in music.\textsuperscript{122} Incongruity Theory originates in the work of the psychologist Jerry Suls, who first describes his ideas in the article, “A Two-Stage Model for the Appreciation for Jokes and Cartoons: An Information Processing Analysis,” in 1972.\textsuperscript{123} Centered on the idea of expectation, Suls’ theory ultimately suggests that humor occurs when a listener’s expectation for the punch line of a joke is subverted by an incongruent, but nonetheless plausible solution. When listeners hear a joke, they form an expectation for its conclusion based on the narrative story that the beginning lines of the joke establish. Upon hearing the punch line, they must assess whether the punch line is “congruent” or “incongruent” with how they expected the story to end. Figure 3.1 presents this theory in more detail.

\textsuperscript{121} Victor Raskin, Primer of Humor Research (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008), 3, Adobe Digital Editions. Raskin notes that sometime in the 1970s to 1980s (a date is not specified) a certain professor could not receive tenure at a major American institution because he wrote “joke books.”


Figure 3.1: Simplified version of Suls’ Incongruity Model

If the punch line is “congruent,” providing a logical conclusion to the story, then the punch line fails. If the expectation of the joke is challenged, making the punch line “incongruent,” the listener further assesses whether there is a logical explanation for how the start of the joke ends with the “incongruent” punch line. If a logical explanation is possible, the punch line is successful and the joke is complete. If the “incongruent” punch line cannot be explained, however, it is considered nonsensical, and the joke is
unsuccessful. Suls himself summarizes the model in the following way: “Humor derives from experiencing a sudden incongruity which is then made congruous.”

We can apply this model to a joke that Borge often offered to his audiences. He begins by sitting at the piano and announcing: “Mozart wrote this piece in four flats.” With this statement Borge establishes the expectation that he is referring to the piece he is about to play and follows the typical courtesy of introducing the title of the work and its salient features (in this case, that the key signature of the piece has four flats). Yet, the punch line, “because he had to move three times!” is incongruent to this expectation because it surprises the audience with sudden information about the composer’s residential status, seemingly unrelated to the piece of music. The incongruence is logically resolved by recognizing that Borge is playing with the meaning of the word “flats”—using it as a synonym for “apartment”—while also referring to the composer’s residential status when composing the music about to be played. Thus with this punch line he fulfills the model and the joke is successful (see Figure 3.2).

As the example demonstrates, Incongruity Theory is a powerful explanation for humor. Applicable to a wide variety of contexts, it can explain humorous moments in everyday life as well as performances by entertainers. Still, the study of Incongruity Theory does not serve as an all-encompassing explanation for Borge’s performances. It

124. Earleywine, 19-23. In other humor theories, nonsense is also developed as form of humor with its own model for operation. Earleywine notes, for example, that fart jokes often lack substance in actual content (to be assessed in the Incongruity Theory model) but may still invoke laughter.

11. Suls, 82.

126. Saying “Knock knock” at the start of a “knock knock joke” and the opening phrase, “two men walked into a bar” are two other classic examples of preparing the punch line of the joke with a narrative story.
fails to account for the different types of humor that he used during his concerts, and the way he created “musical humor”—the most critical question at hand. In a matter of minutes, for example, Borge could tell a joke about the piano, sit down at the instrument and play funny-sounding music, and also play (or not play!) the instrument in a humorously affected manner. In these instances, Incongruity Theory does not provide a nuanced enough explanation.

Figure 3.2 Application of Suls’ Incongruity Theory to a popular joke by Victor Borge.
The research of cognitive scientist and composer David Huron presents some promising analytical alternatives. In his book, *Sweet Anticipation: Music and the Psychology of Expectation*,127 Huron examines the compositions of Peter Schickele, known for his creation of the fictional classical composer, P.D.Q. Bach.128 Using recordings from live performances of Schickele’s works, Huron analyzes the level of laughter emanating from the audience and categorizes the techniques that Schickele utilizes to combine humor and music. In addition to visual prompts and lyrics, Huron identifies nine other categories including “drifting tonalities,” “implausible delays,” “excessive repetition,” “misquotation,” and “mixed-genres.”129 In this process, he reveals that there are many different types of “musical humor,” and that the source of humor is at times “a-musical,” appearing, for example, from an outside source such as a song title or amusing set of lyrics.

Drawing upon Huron’s approach, this thesis uses four conceptual categories in the analysis of Borge’s performance: non-musical humor, topical humor, audial humor, physical humor. With the exception of non-musical humor, the other three categories account for different types of musical humor. In topical humor, music is the object of the joke, while in physical humor, it is the body in the act of performance that attracts attention. Audial humor, in contrast, involves the sonic effect of the performance in some way, whether the source of amusement is from Borge’s strange vocalizations, creative


129. Huron, 284-287.
renditions of popular pieces, or other perceptible means. Combining Huron’s approach with elements of Incongruity Theory makes it possible to identify Borge’s techniques for combining humor and music in a successful performance—the task for the remainder of this chapter.

**The Best of Victor Borge, Acts One & Two**

The video footage for *The Best of Victor Borge: Acts One & Two* was first released to stores in 1990. Selling over 1.4 million copies within three years of its release, it has since been repackaged as part of a 6-disc DVD set. There is no specific date for the original performance, nor its filming location, but in the video Borge welcomes the audience to the city of Minneapolis. The camera pans over an audience of at least five hundred people in a beautiful hall, and a Bösendorfer grand piano awaits him on the center of the stage. Although *The Best of Victor Borge* was lightly edited to present the highlights of a particular performance, it nonetheless preserves the atmosphere of a live “Borge show.” It was recorded in one evening, presents footage from a live concert as opposed to a television special, and does not alternate between

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132. Jim Colias, Consultant for Borge Productions, conversation with author, March 8, 2016. Colias confirmed in a telephone call that the performance that was issued as *The Best of Victor Borge, Act One & Two* was taped during one performance in 1986 and edited to condense the two-and-a-half-hour show (which included intermission) into a one-and-a-half-hour video containing the highlights of the evening. The concert took place in Northrup Hall, located on the University of Minnesota campus.
shorter clips from different performances as is the case for most other video releases of Borge’s performances.¹³³

Table 3.1 illustrates the sequence of events within the concert. In its entirety, The Best of Victor Borge is one-and-a-half hours long. Sections are tentatively established by audience applause and stage black-outs at critical moments. The concert begins with Borge’s introductory remarks to the audience, continues with a series of acts and “serious” pieces at the piano, and concludes with a “postlude,”¹³⁴ in which Borge accompanies himself at the piano while bidding the audience farewell. The audience’s standing ovation also encourages him to present an encore.

Each of the humorous acts is listed in the table in bold letters while other critical moments are underlined. The numbers listed in the far left column represent the starting time of each section, and the column on the far right describes the action taking place on stage and any additional performing forces. In addition to Borge, there are three other performers: his personal manager Ronald Borge, mezzo-soprano Marylyn Mulvey, and pianist Şahan Arzruni. All appear on stage in separate acts during the concert and return to take bows with Borge at the conclusion of the performance.

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¹³³. In the 6-DVD set, for example, each of the DVDs features either a tribute to Borge that combines clips from various stages of his career, or presents lesser-known footage from his early television performances. Even Victor Borge: Then and Now, which features a full concert with Borge on stage, is a tribute to his career and records his responses to videos of past performances shown on a large screen above the piano in the large hall.

¹³⁴. The term “postlude” is used here as the opposite of “preluding,” or music played at the start of the performance of a larger work, often in an improvisatory manner.
Table 3.1: Sequence of Events in *The Best of Victor Borge: Acts One & Two*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Performing Forces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0:38</td>
<td><em>Introduction</em></td>
<td>Borge at the microphone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3:51</td>
<td><em>Mozart Bagatelle</em> applause</td>
<td>Borge at the microphone and at the piano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22:04</td>
<td><em>Timid Page-Turner</em> applause</td>
<td>Borge at the piano with Ronald Borge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31:27</td>
<td><em>Caro nome</em> applause</td>
<td>Borge at the piano with Marylyn Mulvey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44:52</td>
<td><em>Inflationary Language</em> applause</td>
<td>Borge at the microphone with Şahan Arzruni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50:07</td>
<td><em>2nd Hungarian Rhapsody</em> applause</td>
<td>Borge at the microphone with Şahan Arzruni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57:03</td>
<td><em>Mozart Opera</em> applause</td>
<td>Borge at the microphone and at the piano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:05:14</td>
<td><em>Waltz</em> applause</td>
<td>Borge at the piano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:10:36</td>
<td><em>A Song in Disguise</em> applause</td>
<td>Borge at the piano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:11:54</td>
<td><em>Danish Lullaby</em> applause</td>
<td>Borge at the piano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:14:20</td>
<td><em>Postlude</em> applause/bowsstage blackout</td>
<td>Borge at the piano</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:21:00</td>
<td><em>Phonetic Punctuation</em> stage blackout/applause</td>
<td>Borge at the microphone with a book</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before progressing further in the analysis, it is necessary to discuss the use of the term “act.” For the purpose of this case study, an act is a recognizable set of gestures and speech that appears as a complete unit. In many instances, Borge begins an act by acknowledging the audience and announcing the title of what he is about to perform. Acts themselves consist of individual instances of humor, and it is in the process of examining specific jokes, physical cues, and other features that we develop a better

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135. It should be noted, however, that with the exception of “Inflationary Language” and “Phonetic Punctuation,” Borge’s acts do not have unified titles. The titles for the acts in this case study are a combination of chapter divisions listed in DVD menus, descriptions created by concert reviewers, and the author’s rationale.
understanding how Borge combines music and humor in his concerts. The applause at the conclusion of an act creates a natural cadence, or completion of a unit within a larger framework, and this type of delineation identifies separate sections for study. The remainder of this analysis separates the acts in *The Best of Victor Borge: Acts One & Two* into two categories—non-musical humor and musical humor—and examines the intricacies of each act as it appears in the concert.

**Non-Musical Humor**

During the course of *The Best of Victor Borge*, there are three clear instances in the concert where Borge does not attempt to combine music with humor. Circled in Table 3.2, they are separated evenly in the course of the concert. The first instance of non-musical humor occurs during the introduction, when Borge walks onto the stage in an elegant gray tuxedo, welcomes the audience, and proceeds to tell a series of short jokes. The jokes are simple and play with the expectations of his audience:

Good evening and welcome to, a… [Borge pulls a cue card out of his pocket and checks for the correct answer] Minneapolis! I have been looking forward to this evening’s performance ever since… [he pauses for effect] 7:30… Two weeks ago!

In this three-part joke he strategically uses pauses to gain the attention of his audience. He promptly announces that “we’re going to have an intermission pretty soon” and invites late-comers in the theater to take their seats. Asking the late members of the audience where they are from, he then declares: “I come from Copenhagen, and I was here before you!” Although these jokes and those that follow do not specifically refer to
music, they toy with the notion of a concert and allow Borge to assess the mood of his audience. 136

In addition to the Introduction, Borge utilizes non-musical humor in two of his well-known acts: “Inflationary Language” and “Phonetic Punctuation.” In both instances, Borge stands at the microphone, explains what he is about to do, and then reads excerpts from a well-worn book. The jokes revolve around some form of modification to the English language, and the humor is derived more from the cleverness of the act than from incongruent expectations. In “Inflationary Language,” for example, all numbers are inflated by one digit, including numbers heard within words. As Borge demonstrates, “I ate a tenderloin with my fork” becomes “I nine-d an eleven-derloin with my five-k,” and a “second lieutenant in the air force” transforms into a “third lieut-eleven-ant in the air five-s.” The amusing experience of hearing common conversation mutilated with hidden numbers grabs the attention of the audience, forcing them to reconstruct the original meaning of the words obstructed in Borge’s rapid and convoluted delivery.

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136. *The Funniest Man in the World* (television documentary). In an anecdote near the end of the documentary, Ronald Borge mentions that Victor Borge often walked onto stage at the start of a concert with smoke in his mouth. After the applause died down, he would puff out the smoke and make a comment such as: “Mexican food.” By judging the location and level of laughter emanating from his audience, Borge would assess the type of people in the hall and determine whether they would be more inclined to laugh at his non-musical jokes (such as the smoke appearing from his mouth) or if they were more interested to hear him play.
“Phonetic Punctuation,” which has been discussed earlier, similarly transforms the English language by inserting vocal utterances such as “fssst” and “pbbbt” to represent otherwise silent punctuation during regular speech. Borge’s use of these vocalizations not only acknowledges the otherwise silent punctuation, but also adds a suspicious level of innuendo when he reads a passage from a romantic story. Although equally effective on the radio as on the screen or stage, Borge’s performance of “Phonetic Punctuation” in *The Best of Victor Borge* is enhanced by his facial expressions and hand

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137. A more complete explanation of this act is given in Chapter 1 on page 14.
gestures as he draws various punctuation symbols in the air in front of himself as he speaks.

Of the three instances of non-musical humor, “Phonetic Punctuation” is arguably the most sonically engaging because it utilizes unusual sounds for comic effect. It is worth noting that Borge begins and ends his concert with this type of non-musical humor, thus book-ending his concert at the start and finish (see Table 2). The placement of “Inflationary Punctuation” in between two acts involving additional musicians further suggests that non-musical humor is used as a form of respite, or break from the musical-based humor that dominates the majority of the concert. In this way, non-musical humor is the exception and not the standard in the course of the performance.

Musical Humor

The remaining five acts in the concert utilize musical humor in multiple ways and include the contribution of other performers. The first musical act, the “Mozart Bagatelle,” is the most improvisatory of the five and revolves around Borge engaged in *musicalis interruptus*, announcing but never fulfilling the promise to perform a Bagatelle in the key of C by “Hans Christian Mozart.” Under the premise of preparing to perform a piece at the piano, Borge separates this act from the introduction by approaching the instrument and walking around it. Instead of playing, however, he launches into a long

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138. Compared to the other acts in this performance, the “Mozart Bagatelle” is not featured in other tribute videos and one can argue that it is less of a complete act than a collection of well-known jokes. Nevertheless, an article from as early as 1979 in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* mentions an act by Borge that includes the discussion of a Mozart Bagatelle.

139. Borge begins this act by announcing that he will play a piece by a “Danish composer” and then pauses before presenting: “Hans Christian Mozart.” This name is most likely a hybrid combination between Mozart and Hans Christian Anderson, a Danish author best known for his collection of fairy tales.
series of jokes. As Table 3.3 illustrates, Borge uses multiple types of musical humor in this act, and frequently veers into non-musical humor.

After seating himself at the piano bench, Borge squirms with discomfort. He diverts from his original promise to play a work by Mozart by pretending to tune the piano, peering through the microphone as a telescope to view the audience, using the polished music rack as a mirror to check his tie, commenting that there is one pedal too many on the piano since he has only two feet, and explaining that it is very difficult to play a piece of music “straight,” before leaning backwards on the bench and attempting to play the piano with his body parallel to the floor. In this roundabout approach to playing the piano, Borge uses physical humor to emphasize the features of the instrument and his reluctance to play. After many more jokes, he looks at his pocket watch, declares that he is out of time, and leaves the piano to tell a story about how he received the watch from his Danish grandfather. The jokes that follow veer from the three things Borge cannot remember (concluding that there are actually four since he cannot list what the three things are), his ability to speak Japanese in his sleep, and his concertizing in his youth.

140. Borge explains that he goes to sleep while listening to educational tapes placed under his pillow. The result of the process is that he can speak Japanese fluently, but only when he is asleep!
He further teases the audience by asking if they would “care for some music,”
before handing out his sheet music to audience members sitting in the front row. He
eventually returns to the piano and plays a few notes before flipping his music upside
down to reveal that what sounded like a Chinese pentatonic melody is in fact a popular
circus theme.\footnote{He resumes playing only to find a few seconds later that he must retrieve
the missing pages from the score which he so enthusiastically gave away a few minutes
before. The audience applauds at this moment, and it is evident that the act has
concluded. The work by Hans Christian Mozart never makes an appearance, but within
this twenty-minute string of diversions Borge has already fulfilled the audience’s need for amusemen.}

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
 & Non-Musical & Musical & Audial \\
\hline
Topical & • Uses the mic as a telescope  \\
 & • Describes the watch from his grandfather  \\
 & • Lists the three things he can’t remember  \\
 & • Mentions he can speak Japanese in his sleep  \\
\hline
Physical & • Introduces the composer as “Hans Christian Mozart”  \\
 & • Comments that there are too many pedals on the instrument  \\
 & • Describes his concerts in his youth  \\
 & • Gives away music  \\
\hline
Audial & • Uses the music rack as mirror  \\
 & • Pretends to tune the piano  \\
 & • Plays the piano “straight”  \\
 & • Flips the music upside down and plays two different versions of the same music  \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Examples of Humor in “Mozart Bagatelle”}
\end{table}

\footnote{The exact piece he performs is “Entry of the Gladiators,” by Julius Fučík.}
In this act, there is a sense that Borge is still “warming up,” or engaging the audience with a sure-fire line of jokes that are relatively simple and do not over-emphasize the musical aspect of his performance. Most of the topic-based musical humor is focused on observations about the instrument on stage and word play, i.e. “playing straight,” and musical knowledge is not required. One of the exceptions to this practice occurs when Borge plays the sheet music upside down and then flips it to reveal the true nature of what he is playing. The humor of the gesture in this moment depends upon the audience’s familiarity with the second piece of music. Although the novelty of hearing a piece played “upside down” may elicit some laughter, it is the incongruent transformations from the pentatonic melody to the circus theme that is the most amusing. Similarly, when Borge cannot finish playing a melody because he has distributed the missing piece of music to the audience, he is utilizing both physical humor (the inability to finish playing a piece) with audial humor (the notes that he plays are left reverberating as he seeks to resolve them with notes on the missing page).

The next act, the “Page Turner,” introduces a straight man to the stage when Borge asks for the help of a page turner. Here the additional performer is in reality Borge’s son and personal manager, Ronald Borge. In the performance, however, the page turner is an unusually tall light technician who cannot read music and misunderstands Borge’s instructions about how and when the pages should be turned. As Table 3.4 shows, this act primarily uses physical humor at the piano.

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142. Jim Colias, conversation with author, March 8, 2016. During the telephone call, Colias noted that the page-turner role was typically played by whoever was Borge’s personal manager at the time. Borge traveled lightly when he toured, and his manager was responsible for many details related to his performances including travel plans, arrangements at the venue, attire, etc. On one occasion when the personal manager at the time was unavailable, Colias was required to fill the role himself.
The humor in the act develops as Borge becomes familiar with the page-turner, asking him about his work at the theater and noting to the audience that “they must have fertilized him.” Borge struggles to collaborate with his diligent but uninformed assistant who fails to turn the page at the correct moment. In desperation Borge winds up sitting on his knees on the floor and his face at the keys of the piano while the page turner looms above him, poised to turn the page when the order is given.

In this position Borge realizes that he cannot press the pedals on the piano, and asks the page turner to place his foot on pedal instead. When the appropriate moment arrives, Borge pulls the page turner’s long tie as a signal to press the pedal, and in this arrangement the two men work their way through several measures of *Liebesträum* by “Fliszt.” Although the page turner interrupts Borge to remind him that the work is by “F. Liszt” and not “Fliszt,” Borge responds by noting that no one refers to Mozart as “M.
Ozart.” The act reaches its climax when the page turner successfully turns the page at the correct time and Borge continues playing, only to find that *Liebestraum* has morphed into “Turkey in the Straw” because two pages have been turned instead of one!

Through the use of overt physical humor, Borge brings out the absurd aspects of the page-turner-tradition and all the possible instances of miscommunication between two individuals in a musical interaction. Although most audiences might not notice the role of a page-turner in a concert of classical music, most musicians are aware of the process and its actual difficulty, which is often more than what others might expect. Borge’s matter-of-fact attitude towards the page-turner and his omission of obvious details in his explanation of what is needed brings attention to the absurd nature of page-turning to those unfamiliar with the process. As his instructions increase in detail, the humor becomes increasingly outrageous as the page-turner continues to struggle to meet Borge’s demands.

Amidst the battle between page-turner and pianist, Borge also breaks the act by turning to the audience and asking a woman with a pronounced laugh: “excuse me, but are you laying eggs?” In this way Borge alternates between three different roles, that of the performer attempting to complete the piece, a teacher explaining the conventions of page-turning to his unhelpful assistant, and as an observer of the entire experience unfolding in the concert hall. Operating in all three roles and rapidly switching between them, he weaves the different types of humor together (non-musical, topical, physical, audial) to assure that everyone in the audience has something to laugh about. The page-turner is only needed in a musical situation, but his plight, as well as the plight of the performer he is turning for, can be understood by anyone.
Before introducing his second accomplice to the stage, Borge entertains the audience at the piano with a series of jokes including a repeat of his upside-music routine as it appeared earlier in the “Mozart Bagatelle” This time he uses the melody of the William Tell overture, first playing it descending motion before realizing his mistake. He then introduces mezzo-soprano Marylyn Mulvey to the audience and begins the act, “Caro nome” (see Table 3.5).

Table 3.5: Examples of Humor in “Caro nome”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-Musical</th>
<th>Musical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Topical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Claims that the folk song was was found in a “monkey.”</td>
<td>• Asks Mulvey what she wants to sing, then announces that he will play what he wants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Creates the title: “Caca nomi” from the opera <em>Rigor Mortis</em> by Joe Green</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Explains that he doesn’t touch her “coloratura”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mulvey appears in a beautiful gown and elbow-length gloves. Unlike the page-turner, who is a stage manager in disguise, Mulvey is a genuine opera singer and soon demonstrates her vocal prowess. The interaction between Mulvey and Borge is deliberately tense. Although the two collaborate during the performance, Borge’s frequent interjections and false starts place him in opposition to the singer. Mulvey plays the role of a “straight-man” in this act, and no matter how Borge attempts to subvert the
performance, she maintains her stature as a “classical performer,” at times glancing desperately at the audience but never commenting on his outrageous behavior.

During the act Mulvey and Borge present two “pieces” to the audience. Borge first asks Mulvey what she would like to sing, and while she is deciding, he gently comments: “Sing what you want to sing… Because I’m going to play what I want to play!” This statement sets the tone for the remainder of their interactions. The first piece does not have a title, although Borge identifies it as a “Croatian Folk Song” that was found by an archeologist in an old “monk-ery” (the male version of a nunnery). As Borge plays the piece, his pauses are too short for Mulvey to join him. When at last she enters during a period of silence, he shouts “Too late!” and the piece is over. Mulvey then selects the next piece: “Caro nome” from the opera Rigoletto by Giuseppe Verdi, or, as Borge introduces it, the “‘Caca nomi’ aria from the opera, Rigor Mortis, by Joe Green.”

At the start of “Caro nome,” Borge asks Mulvey to take her hand off of the piano, against which she had been resting. He repeats this request multiple times throughout the act, and he eventually explains to the audience that: “We do have an agreement. She doesn't touch my piano and I don’t lay hands on her coloratura!” Borge clearly expresses through groans and mutters that he does not want to play “Caro nome,” but grants the singer’s request to perform the iconic aria. The result is rich with humor. Borge forgets where he is in the musical score while he is playing, falls off the piano bench in surprise when Mulvey starts to sing, syncopates the accompaniment to make it more playful, hides his head under his tuxedo jacket when the singing becomes too loud, hums out of tune with the melody, and quotes popular melodies in the accompaniment, among other deviations from the piano score. The performance of the piece concludes when Borge
procures straps from inside his piano bench and buckles himself into position before Mulvey sings the final high B above the staff. In both senses of the term, the sudden appearance of seat belt straps shocks the audience and ends the act on an undeniably “high note.”

Arguably one of Borge’s most popular musical acts, “Caro nome” with Marylyn Mulvey is also among the most musically sophisticated sections of his performance. Despite all of Borge’s interjections during the performance, Mulvey sings with unmistakable skill and beauty. When the act concludes, there is a sense that the audience is applauding her patience and ability to overcome Borge’s distractions almost as much as the act itself. In the process of responding to her singing, however, Borge highlights musical details that audiences may otherwise have missed. He mouths words in imitation, sways on the piano bench, and imitates the motion of the music with matching head gestures. When Mulvey sings the same phrase in succession, Borge remarks, “you just said that,” before they continue. Using these types of gestures and interjections, Borge draws the attention of the audience to every phrase that Mulvey sings. While he is making fun of Verdi’s aria, he is also using the music as a backdrop for his humor.

The act that follows “Caro Nome” is “Inflationary Language,” one of the acts in the concert that does not utilize musical humor. Considering the strong impact of the previous act, it is likely that something different is needed before the next musical act, the “Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2.” Like “Caro nome,” Borge is joined by another musician, pianist Şahan Arzruni for this performance (see Table 3.6).

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143. Note the inclusion of the act in numerous other video releases including “The Legendary Victor Borge” and “Victor Borge’s Funniest Moments,” both in the same DVD collection as “The Best of Victor Borge: Acts One & Two.”
As in “Caro nome,” this act begins with Borge introducing his friend to the audience, this time a Turkish pianist who “does not speak English.” Fortunately, Borge reveals that he speaks “Turkey,” and proceeds to make turkey-gobbling noises towards a smiling Arzruni. Arzruni nods in response, and the two continue a conversation of head nods and gobbles. At some point a soft “fine” is heard, presumably from Arzruni, and the two proceed to the piano where they are forced to sit on one bench and share the instrument as they play a four-hand version of the Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2 by Franz Liszt, or, “Fliszt,” as established earlier during the concert.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-Musical</th>
<th>Musical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Topical</td>
<td>Physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Speaks “Turkey” by gobbling</td>
<td>• Sit on one bench together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Borge and Arzruni reach around each other in order to play the needed notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• They switch places</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The humor that follows falls almost entirely in the physical and audial categories of humor. No more words are spoken as the two men struggle to reach over and around each other as they play the piano. At one moment Arzruni yells in surprise when Borge reaches too far around him, and as the piece progresses, each musician progressively one-
ups the other with dramatic flourishes on the keyboard. Positions are changed on the bench, and at one point Borge closes the piano key lid on Arzruni’s hands. Despite this hostile gesture, the two pianists smile at each other. The effort of finishing the piece remains a collaborative process up to the last note where Borge once again closes the lid and sits on the piano before Arzruni can add any finishing touches.

The overall effect is an unusually lively performance of musical highlights from the *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2*. The physical nature of the performance exaggerates the struggle of playing the piece, and in the case of Borge and Arzruni’s collaboration, the struggle is genuine as they work around, against, and with each other. In some respect this act is more similar to the “Page-Turner” than “Caro nome” because it emphasizes the instrument more than the music being performed. The music is predominantly left unaltered except for the unintentional but audible effects of the performer’s struggle. The particularly dramatic qualities of the popular *Rhapsody* also influence the audience’s appreciation of the effort as they hear the familiar strains of the piece. Aside from the turkey-gobbling, Borge makes a deliberate shift from the unmusical and topic-based musical humor that have dominated his performance at this point in the concert. In the *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2*, the audience at last hears a longer musical work in relative completion, although the musical effect is diminished somewhat by the understandably raucous laughter emanating from the audience.

As the last humorous section of the concert prior to the encore, the “Mozart Opera” is one of Borge’s most well-known acts. In this performance, he first describes

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144. Goldmark, 110-113. Goldmark reveals that Liszt’s *Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2* has a long history of appropriation in cartoon music, largely due to its dramatic musical gestures and general popularity, making it suitable for expressing important plot developments in a cartoon.
the opera while standing at the microphone, and then performs it by himself at the piano. As noted in Table 3.7, he uses non-musical as well as musical humor of all types in this tour de force. The opera, he announces, is actually by Mozart, but the composer wrote Antonio Salieri’s name on it, letting you wonder “what kind of opera it actually is.” Borge proceeds to outline the plot of the one-act opera, beginning with a 45-minute intermission and ending with a “death aria.” When he concludes his explanation of the opera, he sits down at the piano and begins to perform the work in its entirety. Figure 3.3 illustrates the unusual progression of the opera plot.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-Musical</th>
<th>Musical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Topical</strong></td>
<td><strong>Physical</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The tenor walks in a “single file”</td>
<td>• Mozart wrote Salieri’s name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The soprano “completely surrounds” the tree she is hiding behind</td>
<td>• Opera starts with a 45 min. intermission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• The soprano stabs herself ‘between the two trees”</td>
<td>• The soprano “overflows-es” in her role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Chorus enters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Baritone is fired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Soprano agrees to die</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• She sings her “die-aria”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Borge changes head positions for singing different characters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Gestures towards his chest but says “trees” instead</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The performance of the “Mozart Opera” begins with Borge demonstrating the sound of the conductor’s footsteps in the orchestra pit as he walks sideways past the performers squeezed inside. Borge plays the main theme of the overture and sings the melody on a high-pitched “bloop,” emphasizing the major tonality and light-hearted
character of the scene. He then sings the part of the tenor, one of two male roles in the opera. The tenor aria is sung in a loud and strained voice, and his slurred barrage of nonsense syllables sounds vaguely Italian. The audience applauds Borge’s effort and he continues to describe how the tenor walks on to stage in a “single file” and hides behind a tree as his love interest, a soprano, soon arrives to sing a similar aria.

Borge notes that the singer in the role of the soprano not only fills the role, but “overflows-es in it.” He sings her aria with a high, forced voice and comments that she then hides behind the other tree and “completely surrounds it.” As the audience laughs, Borge points out that a chorus enters and leaves the stage for unknown reasons. A baritone similarly appears on stage and sings the first phrase of “Toreador,” only to
realize that he is in the wrong opera. Soon the baritone is fired, and the opera continues with the father of the soprano appearing on stage, the “il buffo.” In a comically low voice, Borge sings a dark and suspiciously German sounding aria. The father demands the soprano’s death and she obliges the request without hesitation. After singing her “die-aria,” or “death aria” written in a major key, Borge gestures towards his own chest and narrates her actions as she “stabbed herself between the two big… trees!” Hence his rendition of the opera draws to a close and his performance is met with tumultuous applause. No further explanation is given about the tenor, chorus, nor reason for why the father demanded the soprano to die.

Although this brief description of the act only begins to capture the mastery of Borge’s performance, several critical observations about his use of humor can still be discussed. First, there is his use of opera stereotypes. Opera has a long history of appropriation in comedy, and Borge’s performance utilizes many popular tropes such as the nonsensical plot line, lovers’ tryst in a forest, angry father, overweight soprano, and death aria, sung with surprising vitality. In this act, Borge’s comedic material is similar to his contemporary, Anna Russell, who similarly performed parodies of operas by Richard Wagner. Unlike Russell’s parodies, however, Borge’s act requires little to no knowledge of opera for the audience to enjoy it. Only in brief moments when he mentions details such as Salieri, Mozart’s supposed rival in real life, or the father figure

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145. When Borge refers to the “il buffo,” he is most likely referring to the tradition of the *Basso buffo*, or comic character typically found in 18th century opera. His choice to sing this role in an exceptionally low voice also matches the convention of the *basso buffo*, which was typically sung by a bass or baritone.

146. Goldmark. 133-136.

as being the “il buffo,” does he delve into musical knowledge of any significance. Moreover, the audiences that are familiar with these facts benefit from being “inside” a more obscure joke.

Borge’s method of describing the plot of the opera before attempting to perform it further shows a strategic reinforcement of the material he presents. Since the audience members hear the plot prior to his performance, they are able to focus on his use of different voices and facial expressions as they follow the now-familiar story. They also stand a larger chance of noticing the amusing aspects of his performance such as the “death aria” played in a major key. By allowing for this familiarity, Borge is able to take on the roles of both narrator and performer, similar to what he does in the “Page Turner.” In some sense, the “Mozart Opera” is thus a parody of itself. It is not only humorous because of how Borge tells it, but also because he is commenting on a performance of it—by himself!

Perhaps one of the most striking features about this act is the way in which Borge uses audial humor. In his imitation of specific voice types, he creates successfully similar yet undeniably funny results. The warbling high-pitches voice of the soprano and growling bass voice are instantly recognizable as the two characters, but Borge’s performance is sonically amusing because it is purposely rough in execution. The rough sounds of his voice also contrast with his piano accompaniment, which maintains the stereotypically refined style of Mozart’s keyboard music. Returning briefly to Huron’s list of musical humor techniques, Borge’s performance of the “Mozart Opera” fits within the category of “incompetence cues,” in which a performance is amusing because it
sounds “crude or unrefined.”\textsuperscript{148} This technique is particularly powerful when used by Borge, since his stage persona is the furthest away from “crude and unrefined” with his elegant and distinguished appearance. This notion of a contrast between appearance and sound can be further extended to discuss Borge’s overall performance aesthetic, which predominantly relied on his persona as a refined, “classical” performer.

In contrast to the “Mozart Opera,” the last instance of musical humor in the concert appears not in an act, but hidden between two “serious” pieces near the end of the performance. Disguised as a Danish waltz by an unidentified composer, Borge begins to play a piece of music with the same type of attention as he gave the work previous to it. The audience is hence lead to believe that this is serious piece. Another familiar melody soon weaves its way into the music, however, and the audience quickly realizes that Borge is playing an embellished version of the “Happy Birthday” song. In this part of the performance, Borge does not raise an eyebrow nor incorporate any additional form of humor to bring attention to this intrusion. It is also unclear whether Borge inserted the “Happy Birthday” song into a pre-existing work or if the piece is an entirely original improvisation.\textsuperscript{149} Nevertheless, this instance of audial-based musical humor presents a distinct contrast to other uses of the same type of humor in the concert such as Borge’s amusing vocalizations during the “Opera by Mozart/Salieri” and his playful interruptions during “Caro nome” with Marylyn Mulvey. Demanding the audience’s attention to the

\textsuperscript{148} Huron, 286.

\textsuperscript{149} Borge has another popular act where he plays the birthday song in the styles of various composers. Considering that the original act revolves around the identity of specific composers, it seems unlikely that his hidden version of “Happy Birthday” by an unknown performer is the same act. For an example of the original act, see the following: Victor Borge, Robert Merrill, Stephanie Conte, Marilyn Mulvey, Anna Moffò, and Martin Bookspan, \textit{Victor Borge Birthday Gala}, [United States]: Wolf Trap Home Video, 2002.
music being played, the disguised song is humorous only because the audience is familiar with the melody. Unlike the earlier acts, it is theoretically possible that if someone was unfamiliar with the birthday song and heard Borge’s performance, they would not laugh unless the joke was explained to him or her. This scenario in effect reveals the general complexity of humor and the implications of hearing music as “funny” or “playful.”

Other Types of Performance

In addition to the instances of non-musical and musical humor throughout the concert, there are three moments in the latter half of Borge’s performance that deserve particular attention. This is when he turns to play several pieces at the piano without *musicalis interruptus*. Transitioning from the “Opera by Mozart/Salieri” with several jokes about a “Portugoose” pianist named “Giuseppe Bravo,” he then settles down to the work at hand. In a more serious tone of voice he begins by playing a short passage on the piano and remarking: “when you hear this, this is the introduction to the waltz.” He next plays a few more measures of the waltz and comments: “When you hear this, that is the main theme of the waltz. Then when you hear this…[he proceeds to play another theme for approximately 20 seconds] then there is definitely something wrong, because that’s Chopin!”

After the laughter subsides, he plays the now-familiar introduction with some difficulty, slapping the side of the piano and missing the correct note in the bass of the

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150. This particularly clever string of jokes deserves direct quotation: “I’m going to play one of the waltzes I was trying to remember before [earlier in the concert]. This is a very lovely waltz. You know, whenever I announced them from the stages in Europe where I played concerts, the whole audience would go ‘Bravo, bravo,’ because Bravo plays them much better than I do! Yes, he is Giuseppe Bravo—Great pianist. He is, er, Portugoose. Oh yes, he and his wife are Portuguese, but you can’t have one geese… [he pauses as the audience laughs] Well, I told you it’s your language. I’m just trying to use it! And they have three Portu-goslings. One of each.”
piano. What appears to be a humorous moment then becomes serious as he plays through the remainder of the waltz without incident, charming the audience with the graceful sounds of his piano-playing. Borge does not announce the name of the composer or exact piece, but the waltz he plays is the second waltz of a six-piece set entitled, *Six Viennese Waltzes on Motives by Eduard Gärtner*, by the Polish pianist and composer Ignaz Friedman.\(^\text{151}\) Although his compositions are not frequently performed by pianists today, Friedman published over 100 works and was himself compared to the greatest virtuosos of his time.\(^\text{152}\) By performing Friedman’s waltz, Borge reconnects himself to the European piano tradition. His decision to play a lesser-known work in its entirety for the audience is also interesting, since most of Borge’s humor uses only small portions of standard works in the piano repertoire.

Following the waltz is the disguised rendition of the “Happy Birthday” song, as described in the previous section on musical humor. After this stealthy intrusion, it is unclear whether Borge will continue with a humorous act or play another piece at the piano. He chooses the latter as he announces in a reflective voice:

> Here’s a little Danish lullaby. My mother used to play it for me when I was about—a few years ago. As a matter of fact, I never heard her play it because I always fell asleep the moment she started it. But I think it goes like this

> The lullaby is under two minutes long, and like the waltz, the resulting music is unusually intimate and separate from the rest of the concert. Once again Borge does not

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\(^{151}\) This waltz is not attributed to Ignaz Friedman on any of the materials related to release of this video, but the correct composer was suggested during a conversation with Professor Frank Cooper who noted that Borge often played waltzes by Friedman during his performances. After finding the score and listening to Borge’s performance, it is apparent that he plays the second waltz from the set, “Six Viennese Waltzes on Motives by Eduard Gärtner” by Friedman, as suspected. It is also worth noting that Eduard Gärtner was an Austrian composer best known for writing waltz melodies that were later used in arrangements by other composers, not only by Friedman but also by Fritz Kreisler.

\(^{152}\) See also Allan Evans, *Ignaz Friedman: Romantic Master Pianist* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).
identify the name of the composer and the audience is left to listen without any frame of reference. Those originally familiar with the melody, however, might recognize that it is the “Wiegenlied,” or “Lullaby” by the Danish composer and violinist Fini Henriques. Relatively unknown outside of Denmark, the melody of this lullaby from the Romantic period evokes an earlier time and place, as does Borge’s performance of it. The placement of this lullaby at the second to last section of the concert allows for a moment of respite, perhaps even solemnity after a long evening of laughter.

After the lullaby, Borge improvises at the piano without any further explanation. There is a split second of uncertainty, and it is unclear what will happen next. Then he starts to play a familiar excerpt from the third movement of Sergei Rachmaninov’s second piano concerto. As the music naturally ebbs and swells, Borge begins his “postlude,” speaking into the microphone while accompanying himself at the piano.

Turning to the audience he remarks:

Everything comes to an end. … But this is it. This is what we have to offer. Some laughter and smiles, coughs and hiccups. And when once in a while a handkerchief come out to wipe away a tear from laughter, that is my reward. The rest goes to the government!

The concerto gradually transitions to the famous strains of Träumerei by Robert Schumann, and Borge continues his farewells with acknowledgements to his parents, “who made this evening possible,” and to his children “for having made it necessary.” He continues to talk about his family, and as he reaches the end of the piece he tells a final

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153. As the case with Friedman waltz, the title of this work has not been listed anywhere in association with Victor Borge. The correct title of this piece was found on an online discussion forum post by an unnamed user who claimed that the lullaby played by Borge was in fact “Vuggesand” by Henriques. After locating a recording of the piece and comparing it to Borge’s performance, it is confirmed that Borge is playing the same melody. To see the insightful forum post: “Victor Borge Tribute Forum,” Bravenet.com (posted April 3, 2002), accessed online, March 11, 2016, http://pub14.bravenet.com/forum/static/show.php?usernum=1201412327&frmid=426&msgid=241729&cmd=show.
joke. He warns the audience: “When you drive home tonight, please drive extremely carefully. Extremely carefully… [music continues] Because I walk in my sleep!” The stage lights go to blackout and the main concert is over. In this conclusion to the evening, Borge layers his humor and music to end in a manner that is both humorous and reflective. His lighthearted speech is followed by the last few notes of Träumerei, and the overall effect is not unlike the popular radio shows of the past where radio hosts similarly bid their listeners good night with words and music.154 It is also worth noting that Träumerei is a popular encore for classical pianists, and that Borge’s performance of the piece at the end of his concert evokes this tradition.155

The overall effect of the “Postlude” and the three pieces before it is very different from that of the earlier acts. Although Borge uses humor throughout the concert in multiple ways, it is the music, and not the humor, that drives the motion of the performance in the latter half. He uses a few jokes to transition between the Friedman waltz, “Happy Birthday” song in disguise, and the Danish lullaby, but these pieces themselves do not require humor in order to be appreciated. They are not needed to entertain the audience, which has already expressed its delight from his very first joke of the evening.

Rather, the placement of these pieces at the end of the concert and Borge’s decision to remain seated at the piano for its conclusion suggests at the importance he placed on these works. In some sense, this can be interpreted as a larger-scale resolution.

154. This phenomenon has not been examined in detail, but the following source provides documentation of various radio show ending with music and “good night” wishes from the host. For more details see Vincent Terrace, “Radio Program Openings and Closings: 1931-1972” (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2003).

155. Vladimir Horowitz, for example, was famous for playing Träumerei as his encore. For a full description of one of his legendary performances of the piece, see Richard Dyer’s “A legendary recital; pianist Vladimir Horowitz returns to Moscow after 61 years,” Boston Globe, April 21, 1986.
of musicalis interruptus, where the desired part of the performance is only presented after
the audience has been subjected to many diversions. When the music is presented, the
audience is thus ready to listen and full-heartedly accept Borge’s offering.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In all of Victor Borge’s witticisms and memorable moments on stage, there is one quote that perhaps best describes his legacy. Frequently printed on greeting cards, posters, and books featuring famous quotes, it is often left unattributed despite its popularity: “A smile is the shortest distance between two people.”¹⁵⁶ As noted by Jim Colias, Borge’s longtime personal manager, Borge began using this phrase at the conclusion of his performances sometime in the 1980s as part of his farewell to the audience. The wording of the quote was deliberately designed to refer to the familiar mathematical theorem, which similarly states that: “the shortest distance between two points is a straight line.”¹⁵⁷ Easy to remember and flexible for use in a variety of contexts, Borge’s quote remains open to multiple interpretations.

In one sense, the quote is a positive message that reaffirms human connections through a simple gesture. It implies closeness, and the ability to overcome differences through non-verbal means. On the other hand, the quote also suggests an inevitable separation between two individuals. If one interprets the “closest distance” as equal to the “nearest proximity,” the quote describes a particular interpretation of the human condition that implies an innate separation, or sense of boundary. A smile becomes the only way to cross the boundary, albeit briefly, and achieve connection.

In the case of Victor Borge, both interpretations of the quote are equally relevant. As a foreigner and a performer, he no doubt encountered moments when a smile was the


most effective means of communication—a tool in difficult situations when he struggled with the English language. On the stage, too, a well-timed smile from the pianist moved entire audiences to laughter. Nevertheless, in a sense Borge was also isolated. Although he maintained a stage persona that allowed others to categorize him as a comedian as well as musician, he was essentially an outsider to both categories. As a pianist his performances included too much humor to be regarded as serious concerts, but as a comedian he was set apart from others due to his musical skill. The fact that countless reviewers used the term “musical humorist” to describe him also demonstrates their discomfort with labeling his work. By distinguishing him as a “humorist,” and therefore different from a “lowbrow comedian,” they granted him a granted a potentially higher cultural status without labeling him as a “highbrow performer.”

As Chapter One demonstrates, however, Borge deliberately navigated between highbrow and lowbrow culture by appearing at venues that differed in cultural status (from variety shows on radio to Carnegie Hall) and by varying the types of humor he used in his appearances so that audiences could appreciate his performances whether or not they were musically inclined. While maintaining his dual personas as a European pianist and as a humorist, he not only walked the “fine line” that he saw separating his two types of audiences,¹⁵⁸ but he also drew a new line that connected them through the shortest distance possible. By combining music and humor, Borge created a unique style of performance that merged the “highbrow” with the “lowbrow”; it entertained audiences and also aspired to something higher, treating humor as something worthy of respect.

The study of humor itself has a long history, and as explored in Chapter 2, the combination of music and humor is a complex task. For a performer to combine the two elements, he or she must not only have the necessary sense of wit or appreciation of the absurd, but also musical knowledge and skill. Then there is the challenge of making music, an abstract form of expression, communicate humor in tangible ways. Performers from the past and present have attempted this combination with varying degrees of success. There are accounts of several concert pianists before Borge using humor in their performances, and multiple others such as Rainer Hersch and the violin and piano duo, Igudesman and Joo, have followed suit. Outside of classical music, too, there are countless musicians who have and continue to use humor as an integral part of their performances, whether in lyrics of popular songs or other creative means.

Borge’s performance legacy lies in this act: the process of combining music and humor, and making it accessible to widespread audiences. It lives on his performances captured on videotapes, cassettes, CDs, DVDs, clips on the internet posted by fans, comedians and musicians who similarly attempt to utilize humor in music, and in the

159. A glance through Harold Schonberg’s *The Great Pianists* and other similar books hint at other pianists born before the turn of the twentieth century who were known for their use of humor. Among them, Vladimir de Pachman (1848-1933) is perhaps the best known. Additionally, jazz, cabaret, and vaudeville pianists provided the foundations for a career such as Borge’s to succeed, although many of these performers remain largely forgotten today. One such pianist who preceded Borge and led a comparable career is Alec Templeton (1910-1963), a blind Scottish-born pianist who played both jazz and classical piano and is mentioned in the *Baker’s Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*.


memories of those who still remember seeing him perform live. It remains thought
provokingly fresh and provides the source of a good laugh as well as a model to those
who seek to imitate his style of performance.

Yet, there is also another lesson, or larger perspective that his legacy provides to
viewers today. In a surprisingly candid interview with Jim Daily on the television show,
Day By Night, Borge expressed how he viewed humor as a tool, much in the same way
that a paintbrush is a tool for the painter. Commenting that “there is nothing funny about
humor,” he went on to describe the significance of humor in the following way:

[Earlier] You talked about the Nazis. You cannot fight a situation like that
with words. You must have more than just words, because you cannot do it
scientifically. You have to have something that goes deeper than words. And
that is, I think, humor. Humor is one of the things that can create things in a
man or a woman, in a person that nothing else [can do] It’s like tickling
somebody. [...] When I play the piano I would touch some muscles in you
or some feelings in you that would make you either cry, or feel good or feel
bad, you know, or resent it. And when I talked, I would do the same
thing, but probably activating other muscles or other things in your body.162

These words signal Borge’s cognizance for the greater implications of his work.
Instead of separating humor and music as two different modes of communication, he
viewed both as equally effective and compatible means of expression. In doing so, his
work contains a deeper message: that music and humor are powerful forms of expression,
capable of reaffirming human connections as well as redefining what it means to be
human in the face of adversity. Borge’s performance legacy stands as one example of this
idea, making light of the serious and revealing the gravity of what is labeled as trivial—a
fine line between art and entertainment.

WORKS CITED


