

Popular Music and the 'People's War'

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

Harking back to a fictitious past when a benevolent aristocracy governed under a 'semi-feudal system', the writer imagined a time when such divisions supposedly did not exist – which is to say, when art and life blended seamlessly, when '*Kunstmusik*' was the preserve of the everyman: when '[t]here was no such thing as "light", "popular" or "classical" music. [...] Handel was not a "highbrow" composer, any more than Mozart was.' While the terminology with which Hughes mapped out the cultural terrain was indeed relatively new to Britain, his sweeping characterization of music making before the nineteenth century leaves much to be desired. Nevertheless, his wording is revealing. The problem, it seemed, was not so much the divisions *per se*, but rather the situation to which they had given rise, whereby the 'common people' were predominantly interested in second-rate popular music. Far from respecting the public's musical preferences, Hughes charged the elite with failing to realize their duty of cultural care: through their

¹ Spike Hughes, 'Popular Taste in Music', in *Pilot Papers: Social Essays and Documents*, ed. Charles Madge (London: Pilot Press, 1945), 88.

‘highfalutin’ rhetoric and ‘unbearable’ superiority, they had overlooked the ‘rights of the Common Man’. The result was a disjuncture between rhetoric and reality – the paradox of a ‘people’s war’ that had, to Hughes’s mind at least, failed to realize a people’s culture.

What the general public listened to was, of course, a subject of long-running debate. At stake was the hegemony of two apparently conflicting cultural value systems that had emerged from the mid-nineteenth century, as the sweeping social changes wrought by urbanisation, educational reforms, and technological advances had combined to transform Britain’s cultural landscape.² In short, the literature, art, and music that had once been the preserve of the bourgeoisie now became available to an increasingly diverse audience. As this happened, a new set of cultural categories emerged to distinguish, or defend, the various genres and styles: high was pitted against low, modernism against mass culture, art against entertainment. Within this dualistic perspective, ‘art’ connoted values such as elitism, gravity, authenticity, and intellectualism, whereas ‘entertainment’ was associated with popular appeal, commercialism, and more passive forms of consumption.

² For example, see John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992). America witnessed a similar trend, for more on which see: Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow / Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1988); Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

As Genevieve Abravanel, among others, has recently observed, the distinction between high and low was more an ideological than a material reality.³ It was perhaps because of this that champions of both sides of the cultural divide remained so deeply invested in rehearsing the grounds for distinction. But the Hughes article suggests another reason for the apparent preoccupation with demarcating cultural boundaries. Framing his argument in relation to the conflict, Hughes suggested that the war put a new perspective on the issue of 'popular taste in music'. Or, to put it in broader terms, the stakes of the highbrow/lowbrow debate appeared to have shifted in response to the recent changes in mid-century Britain's political and social climate.

Taking a cue from Hughes, this article explores how the urgent need to survive and win the Second World War undermined established value systems. While highbrow and lowbrow were equally implicated in the debate about the relative merits of art and popular music, my primary concern here is the latter (i.e., the lowbrow), as I consider how the value of entertainment was re-negotiated in the context of the war. Entertainment is obviously a broad term that encompassed a range of musical styles, from swing and jazz to light music or 'pops'; during the war, it was even on occasion appropriated by the artistic elite to boost the cause of high culture.⁴ To be more specific, then, I focus on how this debate played out in relation to perhaps the most iconic

³ Genevieve Abravanel, *Americanizing Britain: The Rise of Modernism in the Age of the Entertainment Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 17.

⁴ For example, see 'Entertainment and Culture: Aims of New Council', *The Times*, 12 December 1939, 6; Wilfrid Howard Mellers, 'Musical Culture To-day: A Sociological Note', *Tempo* 7 (June 1944), 5.

entertainer of Britain's war years, a singer whose associations with the war remain stronger than any other's to this day, Vera Lynn.

Inspired by film scholar Richard Dyer's suggestion that one of the primary functions of stars is to mediate – or in his terms, “manage” or resolve – the ‘contradictions within and between ideologies’, I explore how, in promoting her individual star persona, Lynn also sent a positive message about the value of popular music in general.⁵ Her celebrity status enabled her to advocate for popular music, to defend lowbrow values in the public sphere, just as the likes of Ignacy Jan Paderewski and Arturo Toscanini did for art music.⁶ I begin with a brief biographical overview documenting her rise to fame during the first years of the conflict and demonstrate how

⁵ Richard Dyer, *Stars*, 2nd ed. (London: British Film Institute, 1998), 34. Traditionally, a star's media identity – the product of all the publicly-available information about her – has been referred to by the phrase ‘star *image*’, coined by Richard Dyer in his seminal text *Stars*. The use of the word ‘image’ betrays the privileging of the visual that has historically characterized star studies – a tendency that probably reflects the discipline's historical emphasis on Hollywood stars, the majority of whom were made famous by the film industry and for whom screen appearances were ‘privileged sites, the primary reason for their stardom’: Bruce Babington, ‘Introduction: British Stars and Stardom’, in *British Stars and Stardom: From Alma Taylor to Sean Connery*, ed. Bruce Babington (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 2. The situation in Britain was somewhat different (see below: 15), and particularly in the case of stars – like Vera Lynn – who were primarily famous for their vocal performances. In the light of this, the phrase ‘star persona’ seems more appropriate here than ‘star image’.

⁶ See pp.22–3 below for a brief discussion of the cultural status of figures such as Paderewski.

her star persona was shaped against the prevalent discourses of wartime Britain. This discussion also provides the contextual backdrop for the central part of this article: a reading of her first film vehicle, *We'll Meet Again* (1943). Produced in the aftermath of a heated controversy over Lynn's vocal style, *We'll Meet Again* sought to project positive values onto Lynn's music by emphasising its exceptional contribution to the war effort. By exploring how Lynn's critics and advocates negotiated the contention between high and low, I hope not only to inspire a fuller understanding of the political and cultural work carried out by her star persona in Britain during the early 1940s, but also to reveal how her performances contributed to a wider debate about the value of entertainment for a country at war.

An Icon for a 'People's War'

One of the most enduring axioms of the Second World War is that it was 'the people's war' – a war, that is, in which the civilian public of the home front played as vital a role as the soldiers serving abroad. Although this phrase predates the 1940s, it acquired a particular significance in this era on several counts. For one thing, the Blitz brought the battlefield closer to home than any recent hostilities. For another, this was the first conflict in which the general public had ready access to radio.⁷ A novel weapon of war, domestic radio provided a means to connect instantly with the nation. Fearing a widespread lack of enthusiasm for another conflict, the government used this medium to

⁷ The Crimean War is often cited as a defining moment in the history of 'media wars': although conflicts had previously been reported in dailies or weeklies, this was the first occasion on which newspapers printed reports and photographs from correspondents writing first-hand from the front line. Stephanie Markovits, *The Crimean War in the British Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

promote the idea of a people's war for their own ends: so much so that this ideology 'shaped the rhetoric of five years of official and unofficial propaganda'.⁸

In many respects, Lynn was well positioned to become representative of such a conflict. A 'plumber's daughter' from the East End, who had started her career at the age of seven touring the local working men's club circuit, she had an obvious link to 'the people'.⁹ What is more, she had already started to make a name for herself through radio during the late 1930s: she had her first big break in 1935 when publisher and friend Walter Ridley arranged an informal audition that won her three broadcasts with Joe Loss's band; the same week, she also sang for Charlie Kunz and was signed a second time. She went on to make her first hit recordings, 'The Little Boy That Santa Clause Forgot' and 'Red Sails in the Sunset', in 1937. By the outbreak of war, then, her star persona was already enmeshed with a medium that would prove vital to the British war effort.¹⁰ It was only a matter of months before Lynn was appropriated as a national icon: her unique association with the Second World War began in April 1940, when she came top in a survey conducted by BBC employee Leslie Perowne to identify the British Expeditionary Force's (BEF) favourite singer – a victory that won her the accolade 'Forces' Sweetheart'.¹¹ Exactly who coined the phrase remains unclear, but the title became Lynn's and has remained hers to this day.

⁸ Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939–45* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969), 138.

⁹ Jonah Barrington, 'British Girl Wins B.E.F Radio Voice', *Daily Express*, 17 April 1940, 11.

¹⁰ John Mundy, *Popular Music on Screen: From the Hollywood Musical to Music Video* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 155.

¹¹ Barrington, 'British Girl Wins B.E.F Radio Voice'.

Lynn's growing popularity was soon reflected in a bout of fan mail requesting that she be given more airtime on the BBC's Forces' Programme.¹² It was in response to these pleas that producer Howard Thomas made plans for Lynn to have her own radio show, *Sincerely Yours*. Thomas's vision was for a weekly half-hour show that would combine popular songs (sung by Lynn), instrumental numbers (performed by the acclaimed Fred Hartley and his orchestra), and brief accounts (read by Lynn) of home front activities. Taking advantage of radio's ubiquitous presence, the show was styled as a site of community gathering – a space in which Lynn could use a modern medium to traverse limitations of time and place, to mediate between battlefield and home front.¹³

¹² Unsigned letter to Mr. Macdonnell, 3 August 1940, notes that Lynn's singing had been specially requested by balloon barrage: BBC Written Archives Centre (hereafter WAC), RCONT 1: Artists: Vera Lynn, 1935–1944 File 1 (hereafter RCONT-1-1). Immediately following the outbreak of war, the BBC streamlined its service into a single programme, to limit the chances of its transmitters being tapped by the enemy. In January 1940 it launched a second programme, specifically aimed at the British Expeditionary Force: Christina Baade, *Victory Through Harmony: The BBC and Popular Music in World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 35–59. However, the Forces' Programme, which tended to give more airtime to popular music, quickly became as popular with civilians as with soldiers. One critic even went so far as to claim that '[t]he Forces nowadays is really the Housewives' programme, and might well be renamed. It is tap listening for the home; many keep it on unbrokenly all day': Tom Harrisson, 'Radio', *The Observer*, 19 July 1942, 2.

¹³ In the words of *The Observer's* Tom Harrisson, '[r]adio's kindest work is the crossing of barriers, barriers of space, barriers of ignorance, doubt, apathy, or contempt': 'Radio', *The Observer*, 6 December 1942, 2.

Or, as her bill matter put it, it was a ‘sort of rendez-vous, where husbands and wives torn apart by war [could] be brought together by music’.¹⁴ At the same time, despite having an audience of millions, *Sincerely Yours* sought to create an intimate, homely atmosphere. Described as a ‘personal letter in words and music’, and with touches such as the announcement of the arrival of a baby to a man in the Forces, the tone was unashamedly sentimental.¹⁵ The initial six-week run began on 9 November 1941 with a prime broadcasting spot: 9.30pm on Sunday evening – i.e., after the News, which invariably attracted large numbers of listeners.¹⁶ Within three weeks, *Sincerely Yours* had ‘soared into the exclusive top rank of radio shows with an audience of more than 20% of the radio public’.¹⁷ Since Lynn’s busy performance schedule prohibited an extension of the initial run, plans were quickly made for another series in February and March the following year.¹⁸ Before the second run of *Sincerely Yours* had come to an end, a variety show opened at the Palace Theatre using the same name.

It was during the radio series’ second run that a fierce debate erupted over the BBC’s programming of popular music, a controversy that has been documented at length

¹⁴ *Sincerely Yours*, Forces’ Programme, 8 March 1942. BBC Sound Archive, LP 24054. □

¹⁵ This news item eventually had to be dropped due to the flood of responses. Baade, *Victory Through Harmony*, 132.

¹⁶ *Radio Times*, ‘Broadcasting Schedule’, 9 November 1941, 7. Apart from its prime time position, a late slot allowed Lynn to get from her evening theatre performance to the studio.

¹⁷ ‘Programme Parade’, 30 November 1941, BBC WAC, R19/683: Entertainment/Vera Lynn Programmes 1941–53 (hereafter R19/638).

¹⁸ The programme makers initially wanted to extend the series from six to nine weeks. Thomas, Memo: Vera Lynn Series, 21 November 1941, RCONT-1-1.

by Christina Baade and in which Lynn took centre stage.¹⁹ In brief, following a run of British military defeats in Northern Africa, detractors claimed that the extensive airtime given to ‘crooners and sloppy sentimental rubbish’ was having an adverse affect on the Forces’ conduct.²⁰ Of the numerous culprits, Lynn’s vocal performances seemed to epitomize more than any other the effeminate sentimentality that was supposedly undermining soldiers’ virility.²¹ Such objections put the BBC in a difficult position: ‘There is no doubt whatever, of course, that the programme is solidly popular with the ordinary rank and file of the Forces’, Basil Nicolls explained, but nevertheless, the BBC did not want ‘a reputation for “flabby amusement”’: something ‘constructive’ had to be done about Lynn’s appearances.²²

In an attempt to resolve matters, a Dance Music Policy Committee, known colloquially as the ‘anti-slush’ committee, was set up to review the popular music programming policy. The verdict was announced in July – dance band programmes would henceforth ‘provide “more virile and robust music”’: “Anaemic or debilitated” vocal performances by male singers, “insincere and over-sentimental” performances by

¹⁹ Baade, ‘*Sincerely Yours*: The Trouble with Sentimentality and the Ban on Crooners’, in *Victory Through Harmony*, 131–52.

²⁰ Lt.-Col. V.C., letter to *The Daily Telegraph*, 7 March 1942, cited in Baade, *Victory Through Harmony*, 131.

²¹ The BBC controller of Programmes Basil Nicholls identified Lynn as the cause of ‘much of the rather wild criticism of the Forces’ Programme’: B.E. Nicolls, Memo: Vera Lynn, 17 March 1942, RCONT-1-1.

²² B.E. Nicolls, Memo: Vera Lynn.

women singers, and songs “slushy in sentiment” are to be prohibited.²³ Such music, the committee concluded, was unsuitable for a nation at war.²⁴ But as critics observed, the marching genre of war song that the BBC now sought to promote had already proved unpopular: at the start of the war, Charing Cross Road – home of the popular music industry – had produced ‘a spate of war songs, each advertised as the “Tipperary” of World War II’; the Forces had ‘ignored them’. This might have reflected a continuation of the interwar trend, described by Alison Light, to reject ‘formerly heroic and officially masculine public rhetorics of national destiny’ in favour of a Britishness ‘at once less imperial and more inward-looking, more domestic and more private – and, in terms of pre-war standards, more “feminine”’.²⁵ When war broke out, this recently re-imagined Britishness converged with the popular music of the day to project a new type of

²³ ‘B.B.C. Order to Dance Bands: “More Virile Music”’, *The Manchester Guardian*, 22 July 1942, 5.

²⁴ Somewhat ironically, prior to this outburst, Lynn’s sentimental style had served the BBC as a useful propaganda tool, by playing into her image as an icon of domestic and dutiful femininity. If she embodied ‘the eternal appeal of the feminine’, it was that expressed in the ‘mother’, ‘big sister or the girl-friend who seems to know all your troubles’ – figures that implicitly combatted claims made by German propaganda that British women liked to sleep around. ‘If They Were All Like Her!: An Appreciation By A Middle-aged Listener’, *Radio Times*, 30 May 1941, 6.

²⁵ Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars* (London: Routledge, 1991), 8–9. The reception of Lynn’s music challenges the historic assumption that, during the Second World War ‘patriotism, manhood, and virility became virtually indistinguishable’. Karen Eliot, ‘Marking Time: The British Danseur and the Second World War’, *Dance Research Journal* 37, 1 (Summer 2005), 65.

sentimental soldier. But the explanation usually offered by contemporary critics focused instead on the changing nature of warfare. Reginald Jacques, for example, argued that it was ‘no wonder’ that the Second World War had not had its own ‘Tipperary’: ‘it [Tipperary] was born in a war of marching tunes [but] you can’t sing in a tank’.²⁶ Hughes similarly observed that ‘Today’s tunes, being sickly sentimental, are unsingable at any but funeral march tempo and the modern army does comparatively little marching of any kind.’²⁷ These critics implied that the popularity of sentimental songs reflected the highly mechanized nature of modern warfare, while at the same time condemning such music as over-emotional, soporific ‘slush’.²⁸ If Lynn’s music seemed to resonate with contemporary soldiers’ experiences, this did not alter the fact that it was ‘too sedative for seriousness’.²⁹

In other words, although this discussion was couched in terms of masculine and feminine popular musical styles, the gendered language rehearsed an issue that resonated more broadly: a pervasive discomfort among intellectuals about the effect of music’s emotional appeal on listeners’ capacity for intelligent engagement.³⁰ This was a central

²⁶ Reginald Jacques, *What’s the Point of Music?*, Home Service, 11 June 1945, BBC WAC, Radio Talk Scripts Pre 1970: JAB-JAM, T258.

²⁷ Hughes, ‘Popular Taste in Music’, 82.

²⁸ Hughes, ‘Popular Taste in Music’, 79 and 82.

²⁹ Harrison, ‘Radio’, 19 July 1942.

³⁰ The messy rhetorical relationship between gender, art, and emotion has a long history. By the early twentieth century, anything that critics deemed to have too much emotion tended to be associated with the negative stereotype of the histrionic woman – or, in the most extreme cases, the hysteric. The more divisive expressions of modernist ideology have tended to position such cultural products firmly outside of the canon. Suzanne

concern in the debate about the relative merits and limitations of entertainment and art. For many highbrow critics, ‘sentimentality’ seemed to be incompatible with art: it described cultural products that had been ‘reduced to decoration’ on account of their visceral appeal. One such was Michael Tippett, who argued that sentimentality was a product of the eighteenth-century division of the world into ‘technical’ and ‘imaginative’ – a division whose negative outcomes were epitomized by the culture industry. It was only, he argued, ‘once the values of a spiritual order are re-admitted as valid in their own right for the full life natural to human beings’ that culture could ‘cease[] to be mere decoration, sentimentality and “dope” and come[] to be the creation and enjoyment of the products of the spiritual imagination’.³¹ At the same time, this word also evoked a lack of good judgement or, as Eric Blom explained, ‘an indulgence of feeling over a book, a picture or a play, in complete disregard of its qualities as a work of art’ (or lack of them).³² To counterbalance these undesirable tendencies, elite culture had developed a high regard for objectivity and abstraction, often expressed through a focus on ‘a composer’s purely aesthetic preoccupations’. Or, as Wilfrid Howard Mellers put it, ““serious” art’ was measured not just by its ‘technical competence’, but also by ‘emotional cleanliness’.³³

Clark expounds and complicates this narrative in *Sentimental Modernism: Women Writers and the Revolution of the Word* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

³¹ Michael Tippett, *Abundance of Creation: An Artist’s Vision of Creative Peace* (London: Peace News, 1944), Morley College Archive.

³² Eric Blom, ‘Of Sentiment and Sentimentality’, in *A Musical Postbag* (London: Dent, 1941), 146.

³³ Mellers, ‘Musical Culture To-day’, 5.

The difficulty, however, was that even the highest of highbrow critics were reluctant to do away with emotion altogether. Bemoaning the absence of ‘really moving musical expressions of emotion’ in contemporary music, Blom asserted that ‘if we do not want sentimentality, we can, goodness knows, do with sentiment to leaven the depressionist art of to-day’; but quite where sentiment ended and sentimentality began was hard to say. Furthermore, art music lovers would have been hard pressed to maintain that their much-loved repertoire always fell on the right side of the line. Part of the problem was that critics often inferred a link between sentimentality and mass culture, which they saw as mass-producing emotions that amounted to little more than superficial, sensualist escapism; but gramophone and radio had already begun to generate a mass market for ‘classical’ music, which was increasingly consumed by the general public alongside more popular genres. Remarking on the hypocrisy of the BBC’s position, a letter signed by a group of popular music aficionados noted: ‘I suppose that some modern dance tunes are melancholy, but then you will have to admit that this is also the case in some “highbrow” music, but you would never think of banning that because it is considered “good” music.’³⁴

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

³⁴ Letter from R. Scripps et al. to the BBC, 22 April 1943, BBC WAC, R41/113/1 PCS: Listeners’ Letters 1931–44.

***We'll Meet Again* (1942): Vera Lynn on Screen**

The BBC was undoubtedly a powerful player in the British music scene, both as an employer of musicians and as a distributor of music. However, when it came to popular music in particular, the BBC had a major rival in the film industry. From the early 1900s, motion picture companies had realized that building links with the popular music industry promised lucrative returns. Put simply, featuring hit songs or celebrity vocalists drew in audiences.³⁵ Maximising this potential source of publicity was especially necessary for the British film industry. For whereas Hollywood soon had the money to create stars from scratch, British companies were poorer and therefore more often had to source their stars from other media.³⁶ British producers' reliance on established theatre, music hall and radio celebrities was arguably reflected in the general public's penchant for the film musical, a genre that became popular during the 1930s, especially through the films of Gracie Fields, Jack Buchanan and George Formby.³⁷ By the end of 1941, on the heels of the huge success of her radio series *Sincerely Yours*, Lynn was well positioned to make her debut as a star of the film musicals.

³⁵ Katherine Spring, *Saying it with Songs: Popular Music and the Coming of Sound to Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³⁶ For the importance of radio in the 'generation and promotion of [British] stars', see James Nott, *Music for the People: Popular Music and Dance in Interwar Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 85.

³⁷ Of the 1,500 full-length feature films produced in Britain in the 1930s, more than 220 were musicals. During the 1940s, a number of significant film musicals were made during the war by Formby as well as Lynn. K.J. Donnelly, *British Film Music and Film Musicals* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 105; Stephan Guy, *Calling All Stars: Musical Films in a Musical Decade* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), 99–100.

It would not be her first time on the big screen: in 1936 she had sung in a number of musical shorts with the Joe Loss Orchestra; the year before, she had also made a less auspicious appearance as an extra in Flanagan and Allen's film *A Fire has Been Arranged*. Unlike on these previous occasions, however, Lynn now held huge commercial promise – an opportunity that was spotted by Columbia Pictures, who offered her a contract to 'star in six films for an astronomic figure'.³⁸ Columbia were unabashed in their efforts to capitalize on her reputation as a vocal performer: as the poster advertising *We'll Meet Again* proclaimed, 'the wonder voice of the air' would become 'triumphant on the screen!'³⁹ Having lined up Ben Henry as producer (the man responsible for George Formby's numerous film), they planned for shooting to begin in early summer.⁴⁰

Of Lynn's film vehicles, the first – *We'll Meet Again* – is of particular interest here, because it engaged with the preoccupations of 1940s musical culture the most explicitly, making the high/low conflict central to the narrative.⁴¹ This might, at first, seem

³⁸ 'Vera Lynn Signs Big Film Contract', *Melody Maker* 18/446 (7 February 1942), 7.

³⁹ John Mundy, *The British Musical Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 98.

⁴⁰ The films were produced in Britain: J.M., 'Vera Lynn Swell in Film', *Melody Maker* 18/485 (7 November 1942), 2.

⁴¹ Lynn's other musicals do not deal so explicitly with the conflict between highbrow and lowbrow, with the exception of one scene in *One Exciting Night*, in which Lynn's character, amateur singer and war worker Vera Baker, turns up at the flat of composer Michael Thorne in the hope of an audition. When she arrives, however, Thorne is in the bathroom and she is unable to see him. The housekeeper urges her to sing one of her songs in the room next to the bathroom, in the hope that he might acknowledge her.

unremarkable: Jane Feuer has persuasively argued that this subject was a recurrent theme in film musicals of the period and reflected a pervasive concern about the potential impact that mass media might have on traditional cultural practices and the associated uncertainty about the value of popular music to society.⁴² But the timing of *We'll Meet Again*, which was produced in the aftermath of the controversy over the BBC's programming of popular music, suggests the topical nature of the film's subject. Indeed, it was not unusual for films to respond to incidents in a star's extra-filmic life, particularly when an issue arose that threatened his/her established star identity.⁴³ Although little information has survived about this film's production process, the narrative could certainly have been adapted in response to recent events: *Melody Maker* announced the

When she finishes singing, however, it becomes apparent that Thorne has heard none of it because his radio is blaring out a broadcast by opera star Angelo Donizetti.

⁴² Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 49–66. Mundy argues that this debate was particularly current in 1940s Britain: Mundy, *The British Musical Film*, 87.

⁴³ Another example is American artist Kay Kyser's film vehicles *Around the World* (1943) and *Caroline Blues* (1944), both of which were made shortly after *Newsweek* published a controversial article revealing that Kyser had sought exemption from the Office of War Information (OWI). Although the OWI had granted his request on the grounds that he was already making an ample contribution to the war effort, the films go to some lengths to emphasize Kyser's patriotism and contribution to the war effort. See Krin Gabbard, *Jammin' at the Margins: Jazz and the American Cinema* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 29–32.

signing of Lynn's 'big film contract' in February 1942, just weeks before the controversy broke out, but filming did not begin until the early summer.⁴⁴

In *We'll Meet Again*, Lynn plays a young music hall dancer called Peggy Brown, who unexpectedly rises to fame after the chance discovery by the BBC of her exceptional singing voice. Peggy's best friend Frank (Ronald Ward), a highbrow composer and pianist, is desperate for her to make use of her singing talent rather than wasting her time dancing; Peggy is determined that Frank can and will write popular music and coerces him into composing a song that they record and take to the BBC for consideration. On receiving the record, a hapless secretary promptly loses it under a pile of paperwork, before accidentally handing it over to a broadcasting assistant, who puts it on air. The song is, predictably, an instant hit – although thanks to the singer rather than the composer. The BBC tracks down Peggy and she agrees to a broadcasting contract on condition that Frank can continue to compose songs for her. Eventually, she becomes a star with her own radio show; meanwhile Frank, having been liberated from the constraints of art music, finds a better way of contributing to the war effort: as the pianist in Peggy's band.

Besides dramatizing the high/low conflict through Peggy and Frank's friendship (a theme to which we will return shortly), the film also suggested its relevance to Lynn's personal predicament through the semi-biographical nature of its storyline. While Lynn does not actually play herself in *We'll Meet Again* (unlike the band leader Geraldo, who remains 'Gerry' in the film), there are numerous references that align Peggy with Lynn. Both start out as 'normal people', originating from humble backgrounds, yet stand out

⁴⁴ 'Vera Lynn Signs Big Film Contract'.

because of their unique voices;⁴⁵ both have lucky breaks that bring them into the world of the stars; both have a radio show that involves a presentation of songs and letters to the forces; both give concerts to the troops. To confuse matters further, several real life characters also make brief appearances as themselves in the film: besides Gerry and vocalist Len Camber, three well-known BBC employees feature: Alvar Liddell, John Watt and John Sharman.

The film score similarly complicates the relationship between Peggy and Lynn, combining numbers that were new to Lynn with two of her established hits, 'We'll Meet Again', a Ross Parker and Hughie Charles song that she made famous in 1939, and 'Yours', which she recorded in 1941. Once we enter the imaginary world of the film, these two songs feature only in the orchestral sound track – i.e., Peggy does not sing them, or at least not until the very end of the film. Nevertheless, in an earlier scene that charts Peggy's rise to fame across a number of months in a montage sequence, these songs from outside the film's world are mixed in a medley with those already sung by Peggy in the film; the visual display includes shots of Peggy broadcasting and her appreciative audience listening.

In putting such parallels between the 'real life' Lynn and her filmic representation into the narrative, the scriptwriters – knowingly or otherwise – played on a problematic dualism that underpins star personas. On the one hand, stars exist outside the films they make as people in the real world, where their star personas are constructed by other media, such as magazines, newspapers, etc. As Dyer points out, however, this 'real side'

⁴⁵ The distinctive timbre of Lynn's voice was a defining attribute of her act from a young age: she recalls being advertised as 'the descriptive child vocalist' and 'the girl with the different voice'. Vera Lynn, *Some Sunny Day* (London: HarperCollins, 2009), 35, 50 and 143.

of the stars is fictive, based on the images constructed by the mass media through the selective coverage of their lives.⁴⁶ On the other hand, stars are also fictional characters in films, and while these characters are distinct from the real people, they nonetheless contribute to a star's persona. Edgar Morin describes this symbiotic relationship as the 'dialectic of the actor and the role', and argues that it is out of this that the star is born: 'Once the film is over, the actor becomes an actor again, the character remains a character, but from their union is born a composite creature who participates in both, envelops them both: the star.'⁴⁷ The actor and the role are thus neither identical nor completely distinct, but two entities bound in a dynamic exchange. The star persona emerges from this double mediation of two identities. In other words, films are one of the sites through which stars negotiate their broader position within society – a process that is particularly important if, as in Lynn's case, their status is contested. If in *We'll Meet Again* Peggy's obvious identification with Lynn further muddles the intersection between the two aspects of a star persona, it is precisely through this blurring of fact and fiction that the film seeks to do its cultural work. For the semi-biographical narrative emphasizes that, although the film world is imaginary, it nonetheless echoes 'real' life.

Despite being typical of the backstage musical genre, then, the narrative of *We'll Meet Again* held a particular significance for Lynn in the light of her contemporary critical reception. But it was not simply through its fortuitous timing that the film promoted her star persona. As an examination of how the narrative and generic conventions of the musical were tinged with contemporary concerns in three scenes from the film might suggest, the political demands of the moment

⁴⁶ Dyer, *Stars*, 2, 20.

⁴⁷ Edgar Morin, *The Stars*, trans. Richard Howard (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2008), 29.

also put the old high/low debate in a different perspective – one that was distinctly to Lynn’s advantage.⁴⁸

The first scene, which occurs near the start of the film, marks the beginning of Frank’s journey of self-discovery, away from the confines of high art and towards the freedom of popular music. The sequence opens with a close-up of a hand, scribbling notes onto a piece of manuscript. The camera then pans round to reveal Frank, who – pencil now in mouth – tests out his composition on the grand piano. The music is virtuosic: a rising chromatic sequence gives way to dramatic leaps and a thick chordal texture reminiscent of Rachmaninov. As Frank ends his play-through, traversing the length of the keyboard with an elaborate, arpeggiated flourish, Peggy enters to compliment his work. It quickly becomes apparent, however, that her initial enthusiasm masks an alternative agenda. Rehearsing a standard criticism of highbrow music, she asks: ‘What’s the point of making your music so dignified that only stuffy old critics can understand it?’. Not one to ignore a challenge, Frank begins to experiment. First, he extracts the melody from the dense chordal passage and gives it a rippling, high-pitch arpeggio accompaniment. Peggy immediately picks up on the tune: ‘that melody, you’ve got something there’. Sitting down on the piano stool next to Frank, she then demonstrates – with one hand and a comparative lack of technical ability – what Frank’s melody could sound like if he ‘took a holiday from being so deadly serious’. Evidently provoked by Peggy’s accusations, Frank then comes up with a

⁴⁸ In his critique of Dyer’s *Stars*, Andrew Britton argues that vehicles must be treated not as a genre in and of themselves, but rather in terms of how they relate to ‘pre-existent generic conventions’: ‘Stars and Genre’ in *Stardom: Industry of Desire*, ed. Christine Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991), 198–206.

jazzy version with rich chromatic harmonies; finally, a third, more diatonic rendition completes the transformation of his ‘stuffy’ composition into the popular song that will subsequently make Peggy famous.

If this scene seems to pit low against high in an all-too blatant manner, Peggy’s labelling of Frank’s music as ‘highbrow’ nonetheless requires further unpacking. Both the visual framing of Frank at the grand piano, and the style of the music he initially plays, recall a broader cultural tradition for romanticising the virtuoso pianist-composer. This iconic figure had its roots in the nineteenth-century, when celebrity piano recitals were made popular by the likes of Liszt, Anton Rubinstein and Ferruccio Busoni.⁴⁹ Once sound film was viable, cinema quickly became implicated in this trend, in particular through ‘concerto films’, which featured virtuoso pianists as characters in the narrative and via the use of pianos concertos on the soundtrack – either newly composed in a late-nineteenth-century idiom, or compiled from the emerging repertoire of ‘popular classics’, in which Rachmaninov, Chopin and Beethoven, among others, featured prominently.⁵⁰ Such music’s appropriation by the film industry at once undermined and consolidated its highbrow pretensions. For certain elite-minded

⁴⁹ Ivan Raykoff traces the emergence of this figure in *Dreams of Love: Playing the Romantic Pianist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁵⁰ Notable examples include: *Moonlight Sonata* (1937), with its extensive footage of Paderewski performing the eponymous Beethoven work, along with music by Chopin, Liszt and the pianist himself; *Dangerous Moonlight* (1941), for which Richard Addinsell composed the *Warsaw Concerto*; *While I Live* (1947), which quickly became known by the title of its musical theme, Charles Williams’s *Dream of Olwen*; and *Brief Encounter* (1945), which famously features Rachmaninov’s Piano Concert No. 2 in C Minor, Op.18.

critics, the combination of mass medium and diverse audience degraded the music, reducing it to ‘mere anodyne entertainment’.⁵¹ But for the public at large, this repertoire soon accrued the status of the lingua franca of classical music. Moreover, in spite of its broad dissemination, such music was marketed to the majority in terms that reinforced its elite vestige – or, in the derogatory words of Peggy, its ‘stuffy’, ‘highbrow’ pretensions. What is more, for the popular music industry this branch of the art music world posed the greatest commercial threat on account of its heightened popularity. Labelling it as highbrow, then, was a means of asserting distinction.⁵² If the differences between the first and last versions of Frank’s composition were arguably less pronounced than the dialogue suggests, the former represented an alternative cultural tradition against which the merits of Peggy’s music could be affirmed.

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

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

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

⁵² This is perhaps a lowbrow equivalent of modernist’s ‘anxiety of contamination’. Andreas Huyssen, *After The Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), vii.

Boy: Well, I never knew you could play. I always thought you were just tuning it.

But I like that. Let's have some more.

Frank: That's all there is.

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

These three characters – housekeeper Mrs. Crump, a young boy and an elderly Professor – cover a wide social spectrum and so their appreciation of Frank's playing reinforces the broad appeal of popular music and its ability to draw diverse groups together. The presence of the Professor is especially telling. In the scene immediately prior to this, his credentials as a publicly-minded highbrow have been established: his life's work has been to collect artworks for the local museum, a venue that allows him to 'share his happiness with others'. He thus provides a bar against which the elitism of Frank's outlook can be measured. While the Professor's affirmation offers an intellectual seal of approval, the boy's comments emphasize the *musicality* of this new style – something that was not a given; although, broadly speaking, popular music drew on the same pool of resources as art music, it was frequently categorized as 'entertainment' rather than 'music'.⁵³ The

⁵³ For example, at the BBC, the Variety Department was responsible for programming popular music, while art music fell under the remit of the Music Department. Baade, *Victory through Harmony*, 18–9. In a similar spirit, critics also tended to distinguish classical singing from its popular counterparts, which they described using alternative words such as 'whining' and 'bleating': Jonathan Ross Greenberg, 'Singing Up Close: Voice, Language, and Race in American Popular Music, 1925-1935' (PhD thesis, University of California, 2008), 59–62, 103.

boy's claim that he previously mistook Frank's playing for piano-tuning might be read as a challenge, albeit a naive one, to the highbrow attitude that the designation 'music' was the preserve of elite culture.

That the tendency to classify popular music as 'entertainment' was something of a sore point for certain band leaders was no secret. As music critic Spike Hughes explained, this attitude had fostered a widespread 'musical inferiority complex' among popular artists.⁵⁴ However, its overtones were not entirely negative: 'entertainment' spoke of a democratic musical culture – one in which the general public could actively participate, as the scenes that open and close *We'll Meet Again* demonstrate. The film begins with footage and sound effects evoking the blitz, after which the camera cuts to a theatre, where the evening's official performance is coming to an end. That there is something special about this event is immediately suggested by the close-up of a poster, which advertises it as 'The only musical running in London'. Since the blitz continues, performers volunteer (as had become customary) to provide further entertainment until the all-clear; Peggy, a dancer in the chorus line, is among those who stay behind to perform their civic duty. The show's host tries to engage the audience in a communal rendition of 'Be Like The Kettle and Sing'; but when the band begins to play, no one joins in. Suddenly a voice pipes up from the wings, as Peggy starts singing in an attempt to help the struggling host. With palpable relief, he rushes to the wings and drags her on-stage. Her singing instantly regains the waning attention of the audience, as is suggested by a rather crude clip in which those present shuffle around and sit up in their seats. By the second chorus, the audience have joined in with the song, while Peggy's colleagues watch proudly from the wings; on the final chord she receives a standing ovation. The film's final scene similarly features a sing-along, although this time at a barracks, where

⁵⁴ Hughes, 'Popular Taste in Music', 81.

the soldiers, seemingly less reticent than the theatre audience, join in with a gusty rendition of Lynn's signature tune, 'We'll Meet Again'.

A common feature of backstage musicals, such scenes demonstrate the participatory potential of popular music – a process that Jane Feuer has suggested constitutes an attempt to compensate for the shortcomings of an 'alienating', urbanized mass cultural form by fostering positive associations with an idealized rural 'folk' art tradition.⁵⁵ In this particular instance, popular music's ability to draw people together

⁵⁵ Feuer argues that the ideology of folk art is important to the musical genre more broadly. She suggests that film musicals at once demystify entertainment, for example by showing what goes on behind the scenes, and also 'remystify' it through the propagation of myths that reinforce entertainment's 'aura' – an aura that she claims is eliminated by the mass nature of the medium. The idea of entertainment's 'aura' obviously comes from Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, trans. Hannah Arendt (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970). However, where Benjamin views the possibilities created by mechanical reproduction and the resulting loss of aura as largely positive, Feuer emphasizes its 'devastating' effects, arguing that the Hollywood musical 'perceives the gap between producer and consumer, the breakdown of community designated by the very distinction between performer and audience, as a form of *cinematic original sin*' (the emphasis is mine). She goes on to suggest that film musicals seek to 'cancel-out' the 'alienating' effects of mass art by promoting values associated with 'folk art creation', such as spontaneity and community, a process that transforms performance, such that it 'is no longer defined as something professionals do on a stage; instead it permeates the lives of professional and nonprofessional singers and dancers. Entertainment, the myth implies, can break down the barriers between art and life'. *The Hollywood Musical*, 2–3. See

takes on an added significance, as a means by which entertainment might contribute to the people's war. In the first of the two scenes, the air raid creates a temporary community; a spontaneous performance is given by an amateur singer (notably, by the time Peggy is thrust onto the stage, she has changed out of her theatrical attire into her home clothes, emphasising that she is just like any other member of the audience); the distinction between stage and auditorium is undermined, as the performers watch from the wings while the audience joins in with the song. The topical lyrics, which advise those facing adversity to 'Be Like the Kettle and Sing', further reinforce the relevance of Peggy's music to the conflict. As the entertainment transforms a potentially alienating silence into a communal sing-along, Peggy becomes the author of community.

The biographical overtones of this scene also heighten its appeal to values associated with folk traditions. For one thing, it rehearses Lynn's lack of formal training: as she explains in her biography, she was never taught how to sing; nor could she read music.⁵⁶ Her advocates argued that this enabled her to remain true to her roots: she continued to perform the songs she sang aged seven, just to bigger audiences, in better venues and 'with the true feeling the lyricists intended'.⁵⁷ By presenting Lynn's voice as a natural, uncultivated British talent, commentators enhanced her accessibility. From rank and file soldier to factory girl or housewife, anyone – this narrative implied – might have what it took to become a 'Forces' Sweetheart'. Or, as one of her detractors put it, while ranting about 'crooning' (a derogatory term used of singers like Lynn):

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

⁵⁶ Lynn, *Some Sunny Day*, 41.

⁵⁷ Paul Holt, 'East Ham Girl Singer Sells More Records than Crosby', *Daily Express*, 15 January 1940, 11.

The capital outlay needed for success was nil; one needed neither instrument nor training; the microphone not only carried one's voice to an audience of millions over an entire continent, but enabled one to project that voice without effort to oneself or any of the tedious business of having to learn to sing. [...] She makes the kind of noise that the average working girl would like to make, and nearly can.⁵⁸

Lynn's claim to ordinariness was also strengthened by her stage manner, which allegedly lacked the theatrical pretence of other stars: one critic described her as 'the least stagy performer of her kind'; another reported that 'audiences frighten her [...] She is quite unsophisticated'.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, a third claimed that, on first meeting Lynn, he failed to recognize her even as a singer because of her unglamorous appearance – 'a girl in flat brown shoes with a two-inch crepe sole, and a great brown teddy bear coat. She had rather big, white teeth, and dull brown hair, and no mascara'.⁶⁰ The opening scene of *We'll Meet Again* tapped into this image: Peggy is dragged into the centre of an empty stage, from where she delivers the entire song, with little movement other than the occasional arm gesture. If Peggy was able to facilitate the audience's musical participation

⁵⁸ Hughes, 'Popular Taste in Music', 78–9. That crooners did not rely on classical singing technique to project their voices was a source of widespread consternation in America, as well as in Britain: Greenberg, "Singing Up Close," 97–137.

⁵⁹ F.A., 'Palace', *The Manchester Guardian*, 24 March 1942; Holt, 'East Ham Girl Singer'.

⁶⁰ Hilde Marchant, 'Mum Says "Our Vera Won't Sing Blues"', *Daily Express*, 16 January 1940, 3.

– a value with which the folk tradition was strongly associated – it was because she, like them, was an amateur, albeit an exceptional one.⁶¹

One admirer even went so far as to claim that Lynn's performances evoked a folk past: 'The words of her songs', he wrote in the *Radio Times*, 'may have been so much sentimental twaddle. But she treated them with as much tenderness as though they were precious old folk songs' whose 'peculiar delights' had 'only just [been] discovered'.⁶² While the music's style was that of contemporary popular culture, the way Lynn sang nonetheless provoked nostalgia that conjured-up images of an idealized 'folk' way of life, in which music-making was a natural outgrowth of local community. Elsewhere, popular music advocates also presented such music's folk heritage as a precedent for its importance to war. In a *Melody Maker* article published shortly after the conflict broke out, for example, journalist Dan Ingman argued that: 'Hundreds of years ago the only music was that of the wandering bands of minstrels. They sang the current folk songs and made up new ones to commemorate great local events' – music that, he continued, 'served its purpose of cheering the troops before, during and after the fighting'.⁶³

⁶¹ Commentators simultaneously sought to present Lynn as extraordinary, for example by asserting the uniqueness of her voice (see above: fn.49). Morin argues that this tension between the 'ideal', that super-human state to which the average person supposedly aspires, and the 'typical' has been a common feature of star identities since the 1930s. Morin, *The Stars*, 1–23.

⁶² 'If They Were All Like Her!'

⁶³ Dan S. Ingman, 'Your Job Now: Musicians in Civilian Defence Worth Their Weight in Gold', *Melody Maker* 15/329 (9 September 1939), 1.

Contemporary popular music, he implied, had its roots in the age-old music of war.

While the scenes that bookend the film do not feature such blatant critique of art music as occurs elsewhere in the film, its perceived shortcomings are not completely absent. In the opening scene, the camera shows Frank arriving at Peggy's theatre, having left his own highbrow concert as soon as the official performance finished in spite of the air raid. His alterity is emphasized by the doorman's greeting: 'I'll look after your symphonies for you, Mr. Beethoven', he says, as Frank leaves his briefcase at the cloakroom. This short exchange none-too-subtly implies that art musicians' reliance on a written score made them less adaptable to wartime performance conditions than popular musicians, who were more used to improvising. The contrast between the film's opening and closing scenes is also important here: by the end of the film, Frank, in supposedly discovering his true musical voice, has also found his means of contributing to the war effort, and now joins the band.⁶⁴ If his change of heart helps promote Peggy's music, it does so by undermining more highbrow cultural forms: only popular music, the narrative implies, can truly foster community.

⁶⁴ An alternative reading, however, could be that the conflict between Frank's and Peggy's music is never satisfactorily resolved: although by the end of the film we are given the impression that Frank is content with composing songs for Peggy, his success depends entirely on her: the BBC are interested in Peggy, not Frank, and it is only on account of her commitment to him that he benefits from the broadcast of his song. Even in the final scene, when they give a concert together for the troops, Frank's piano accompaniment is subsumed by a thick orchestral sound, such that his visual presence is not matched by an audible presence.

For Lynn's detractors, on the other hand, the very things that helped Lynn's music to foster a sense of community were precisely the reasons for concern. Its accessibility, simplicity and emotionality exemplified the 'levelling down' that they perceived as a by-product of American mass culture.⁶⁵ More uncomfortable still was the way that the musical style represented by Lynn seemed to be encroaching on elite culture. In July 1943, Edwin Evans wrote an article for *The Musical Times*, warning that 'the art of singing' was 'in decline'. Although crooning was a phenomenon of 'another world than that of music', it had begun to impact singers more broadly: 'The lachrymose tone and sentimental slither are spreading', he warned:

One hears them nowadays in the most unlikely music – in the virile light music of the past century when it is revived, in popular drawing-room ballads of the same period, but also in modern songs if their sentiment offers the slightest excuse for it, and occasionally even in a classic. This again appears to be a habit which, once acquired, is difficult to cure.⁶⁶

It was one thing for critics to belittle the standards that popular music set for itself; but when popular tastes started to impact on the performance of art music, the power balance threatened to shift. Public opinion, it seemed, was beginning to pose a real challenge to elitist criticism's claim to being the bar by which taste was measured.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Abravanel, *Americanizing Britain*, 3–4.

⁶⁶ Evans, 'The Art of Singing in Decline', 202.

⁶⁷ Another way in which the rise of mass culture threatened to upset social hierarchies was by homogenizing accents: Abravanel, *Americanizing Britain*, 94–5; Baade, "Sincerely

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

In the end, Lynn's film career was not as long-lived as initially anticipated: after *We'll Meet Again*, she only made two more films, *Rhythm Serenade* (1943) and *One Exciting Night* (1944), rather than the six originally announced by *Melody Maker*. Why plans for the remaining three films were dropped is unclear. The few surviving reviews suggest that the critical reception of her films was mixed. On the one hand, praise for Lynn's vocal performances was near unanimous: comments such as 'Lynn is certainly at her best in the film', or 'her voice and personality are even more delightful on the screen than on the

Yours"', 44; David Cardiff, 'The Serious and the Popular: Aspects of the Evolution of Style in the Radio Talk, 1928-1939', *Media, Culture and Society* 2, 1 (1980), 29-47.

air!’ were typical.⁶⁸ On the other hand, however, reviewers seemed less convinced by the storyline, which is somewhat surprising given that the plot was so clearly based on Lynn’s life. In an extreme case, one critic appeared to miss altogether the semi-biographical inspiration behind the film: running with the headline ‘Vera Lynn Swell in Film – But Film Itself Not So Hot’, he complained that the narrative was ‘a trite, improbable story, that creaks its way along in a jerky and thoroughly unconvincing manner’.⁶⁹ There were also murmurs of discontent about her acting ability: in her autobiography, she admitted that – despite the producers’ best efforts – she struggled to play any part other than herself.⁷⁰ John Mundy’s frank assessment suggests that the problem was more fundamental: she simply lacked ‘screen charisma’.⁷¹ Her decision to take an extended break from performing following the birth of her daughter in March 1946 perhaps brought her film career to its inevitable end.

But the change of plan might also have reflected broader shifts in the political and cultural climate, as – with the end of war in sight – Britain began to plan for peace. High on the authorities’ agenda was the need to elevate the musical preferences of the general public, which remained a cause for concern among the elite. As *Observer* critic Tom Harrisson had explained in 1942: ‘The stream of almost undiluted light entertainment each day on the Forces programme is an ever-with-us reminder that there

⁶⁸ ‘Screen Topics’, *Morpeth Herald*, 20 August 1943, 4; Film Fan, ‘Next Week At The Cinemas’, *Gloucester Citizen*, 1 May 1943, 3.

⁶⁹ He hastened to add, though, that neither Geraldo nor Lynn ‘could have sounded any better’ in spite of this. J.M. ‘Vera Lynn Swell in Film’. For *Rhythm Serenade*, see ‘New Vera Lynn Flick is Good Homely Stuff’, *Melody Maker* 19/529 (11 September 1943), 2.

⁷⁰ Lynn, *Some Sunny Day*, 154.

⁷¹ Mundy, *The British Musical Film*, 97.

are a lot of people in this country who are still living at a slightly retarded level of cultural awareness. This is an uncomfortable thought for the more comfortable sections of the community.⁷² Perhaps surprisingly given its connotations as a mass medium, cinema was increasingly appropriated in the mission to improve public taste – a trend that was reflected in what Kevin Donnelly describes as a new ‘impetus to produce “high art musicals”’.⁷³ The industry’s waning interest in the popular film musical genre probably also reflected the financial constraints that prevented British firms from keeping pace with the increasingly elaborate productions coming out of Hollywood.⁷⁴

As peace approached, it was also unclear how Lynn’s star persona, which to date had been closely entwined with the Second World War, might be adapted for the postwar world. Perhaps because she had not previously established a name for herself in America, the transition to peacetime proved easier there: she had her all-time biggest hit when her recording of ‘Auf wiederseh’n Sweetheart’ topped the US charts in 1952. But in Britain, her association with the War continued to influence her reception. When, for example, in December 1950 an altercation between the BBC and Lynn’s agent broke out after the Corporation billed young upstart Petula Clark as the ‘Sweetheart of the Forces’, the BBC’s Michael Standing retorted: ‘I do not think that by any stretch of the imagination any artist can lay an exclusive claim to this sort of title, more particularly as I should point out that this, alas, is a different war.’⁷⁵ (Despite Standing’s strong words,

⁷² Harrison, ‘Radio’, 19 July 1942.

⁷³ Donnelly, *British Film Music and Film Musicals*, 105–10.

⁷⁴ Donnelly, *British Film Music and Film Musicals*, 105–6.

⁷⁵ Letter from Leslie Macdonnell to Michael Standing, 5 December 1950, and reply from Standing to Macdonnell, 6 December 1950, BBC WAC, RCONT 1: Artists: Vera Lynn, 1944–1950 File 2.

the BBC appears to have stopped using this title in reference to Clark shortly after this dispute.) At the same time, the music hall tradition was increasingly struggling to keep pace. Already by 1949, a BBC producer predicted that Lynn's 'kind of music was finished'. His conviction drastically curtailed her BBC appearances once again, this time for nearly a decade.⁷⁶

If Lynn's iconic status was closely bound-up in wartime Britain, her prominent position in the cultural controversies of her day illuminates more than just her shifting fortunes as a star. The tensions surrounding her representation and reception in this period also raise bigger questions about the role of popular music in the War – or, more to be more specific, how its cultural value was negotiated in response to the political concerns of the period. Put simply, popular music's perceived capacity to distract listeners became newly valuable at a time when morale needed sustaining against the odds. The fall-out from the First World War surely contributed to the military's apparent lack of interest in bellicose songs: blind patriotism was no longer an option.⁷⁷ Lynn's music, on the other hand, provided a vehicle for men to express the challenges of life in the Forces, as an 'appreciative middle-aged listener' explained to the *Radio Times*:

if twenty-five years ago that young soldier of an earlier generation could have switched on the radio and heard a Vera Lynn singing to him [...] simply and sincerely, all the silly, insincere songs about home and the little steeple pointing

⁷⁶ Lynn, *Some Sunny Day*, 231.

⁷⁷ Already in August 1939, for example, Bishop Henson noted 'The conventional patriotic tub-thumping is out of the question. We have got past that phase': cited in Calder, *The People's War*, 487.

to a star and the brighter world over the hill, that old war would have been made so much the less unhappy for him.⁷⁸

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

In other words, the demands of war added a new layer to the long-running debate over highbrow and lowbrow, elite and popular. As critics sought to redefine the importance of musical culture in terms that were meaningful for a nation at war, the arguments for continuing to invest in art and entertainment often proved to be contradictory. On the one hand, presenting art as emblematic of the higher values for which Britain was fighting, critics argued that it should be preserved for the future. As ballet commentator Arnold Haskell explained, for example, ‘Art is the highest form of self-expression, art implies the triumph of the individual. These are the things for which we and our cultured allies are fighting.’⁷⁹ In

⁷⁸ ‘If They Were All Like Her!’

⁷⁹ Arnold Haskell, ‘War, Ballet and National Culture’, in *Ballet – To Poland (in aid of the Polish Relief Fund)*, ed. Arnold Haskell (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1940), 45.

contrast, popular music's contribution to the war effort was more often framed in terms of its ability to engage with the concerns of the moment: to 'stir [mankind] up', to 'cheer the troops before, during and after the fighting'.⁸⁰ One writer even went so far as to quantify the value of popular music in relation to weapons: '2 mouthorgans = one rifle, 2 pianos = one machine gun, 2 concert parties = one big gun, and so on.'⁸¹ And while both art and entertainment were promoted as pleasant distractions from the conflict, the rhetoric was markedly different: popular music – an 'essential anodyne' – offered narcotized escapism, whereas high art held the promise of sublime transcendence.⁸² For those musicians who classed their work as 'entertainment', accepting their role as 'the main prop of any country's morale' required only a small ideological step; but for those who viewed themselves as artists, seemingly more was at stake.⁸³

If war created a new polemical space in which the merits of popular and art music could be contested and redefined, then, it often seemed to do so on terms that were more favourable for the former than the latter. So as soldiers and civilians fought for survival, a concurrent battle played out over which of the various musical styles might best represent a nation at war. Contrary to the image of an undivided nation that was promoted by the rhetoric of the people's war, musical culture in 1940s Britain was less a site of national unity than of contradiction – perhaps more so than ever before.

⁸⁰ Ingram, 'Your Job Now'.

⁸¹ Ingram, 'Your Job Now'.

⁸² Ingram, 'Your Job Now'.

⁸³ 'Crisis Consequences: A Jazz Accompaniment to the March of Time', *Melody Maker* 15/328 (2 September 1939), 1.