



Sunday, 9 June 2019

The Million-Dollar Fiddling

I suspect you never got a chance to hear Jack Benny give his violin concerts for charity. The various newspaper clippings that have been posted here give the impression his act didn't change in format. But he did tweak it as the years went by. After all, most performers wouldn't want to do the same routine word-for-word (or note-for-note) for several decades.

Here's a story from the Herald Tribune News Service. It's dated April 7, 1959. The writer was the syndicate's music critic. When the *Herald Tribune* folded, he went to work for Columbia Records as director of editorial services.



Jack Benny Fiddles to the Tune of \$1,600,000

By JAY S. HARRISON

NEW YORK (HTNS)—The picture of Jack Benny the violinist is funny to everybody except Jack Benny. Not that he fancies himself a Heifetz or a Stern—he knows well where his fiddle limitations begin and end. But he really loves his instrument, loves music too, and everywhere he is doing what he can to prove it.

In the past several years this proof has taken the form of a series of concert orchestras in which Mr. Benny as violinist soloist, occupies the entire second half of the program. In this exalted capacity he has already been heard in New York, and on Wednesday he has his first return engagement: he is to perform with Leonard Bernstein at the Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall in a benefit concert for the orchestra's pension fund.

Thus far, Mr. Benny has had similar engagements with the orchestras of Philadelphia, Chicago, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Kansas City, Washington and Toronto—in other words, many of the world's leading ensembles. And if you think there's anything hilarious about that, consider that in less than a dozen appearances Mr. Benny's ticket sales have exceeded \$1,600,000, every dime of it having gone to charity or into one of the orchestral pension banks.

For his part, Mr. Benny is as happy as a bird-dog about the whole thing, since it allows him to play for people who are willing to pay for the privilege of listening. He was very serious when he spoke about it last week. "If I had one wish," he said, "If I had an Aladdin's lamp, I would ask for a year as a great concert artist—no kidding. One year of glory, that's all. You know, it's gotten to the point where I enjoy my concert schedule even more than my TV schedule. Every orchestra in America has asked for me and I hope to get around to them all. The thing that I like about my performances is that what I do fits me and wouldn't fit anyone else. It makes me sort of musically unique.

A New Number

"Sure, my act is always the same. I get out there and play and I'm lousy and that's funny. The humor of the act—except for a few new bits I've inserted—is basically what it was when I first started a few years ago. But I've just broken in a new fiddle number in Washington. I've thrown out the Mendelssohn Concerto; I got sick of it after three years; I couldn't stand it any more. So now my 'big' piece is Saint-Saens 'Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso.' You see, I've got to find works that allow me to do comedy routines and that's not so easy. I'd like to find a replacement for Sarasate's Gypsy Airs,' too—I'm tired of it. But I can't get one.

"Oh, yes, I've also added a new gimmick for my encores. First I do Schubert's 'The Bee,' the number that was supposed to have started the feud between Fred Allen and me. Then I do an imitation of three famous violinists. The orchestra breaks up."

Critics Love Him

According to Mr. Benny, he has discovered in his short career as a virtuoso that the best audiences are those with the highest degree of musical literacy. At first, when he gave concerts for charity, he often dealt with

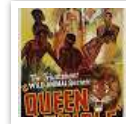
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audiences that had never before attended a symphony event; later, when he switched to performing for the benefit of orchestra pension funds, the response of the regular subscribers was far greater.

"But actually," he said, "the laughs are pretty much the same, and they generally come in the same places. I expect that. What I didn't expect is that the critics would all love me. I thought surely one of them would say 'It's funny, but who needs it.' That's never happened.

Lest there be any be any misunderstanding about the nature of Mr. Benny's concerts, it should be mentioned that they are by no means haphazard or improvised. The day before they take place the violinist meets with all key men who will share comedy sequences with him and they are briefed on exactly what they are to do. On the morning of the performance the whole orchestra is assembled, and the act, from beginning to end is scrupulously rehearsed. Before all of this, Mr. Benny has been busy practicing.

A Real Strad

"I do practice, you know," he said earnestly. "I've got a real Strad and work on it. The trouble is that I began practicing when I was sixty-two, after forty years of not having touched the violin. It's hard to get your fingers going after a lapse like that. In the beginning, Mary made me practice in the bathroom —well, anyway, the acoustics are good there. But now that I've improved. I've been let out."

Has he improved? Has he learned from his guest-shots something new about the violin? These questions were addressed to Mr. Benny; his press agent answered them. "He has, was the firm reply. "He plays sweeter now. And his tone sounds better." "In that case," asked Mr. Benny, "why do they say it stinks?" The subject was dropped. There was a moment of silence.

Pathos

Then: "After my last concert here I returned to the coast on a plane with Mike Todd. He was reading my reviews and laughing. He asked me, 'Why do you think you're such a success?' I said, 'The joke that gets people is that I've got enough guys to play big numbers in front of a great orchestra. That's what's funny; that I'm so bad and so assured.' 'No,' Todd said, 'it's the damned pathos of the thing that gets them. What fractures the audience is that you think you're good enough to play a concert and the conductor and orchestra are going along with you not to hurt your feelings.'" To me," Mr. Benny conceded, "that's a pretty a shrewd analysis. "


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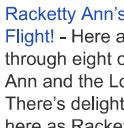
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