

# Chapter 1: What Voices Can Be Heard in British Music Hall Songs of the First World War?

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## **Chapter 1: What Voices Can Be Heard in British Music Hall Songs of the First World War?**

John Mullen

### Abstract

Following on from my book, *'The Show Must Go On': Popular Song in Britain during the First World War* published in 2015 by Routledge, this chapter will look at two aspects of wartime song, both included in the term 'voices'. Firstly, it will look at the interests and priorities defended in the repertoire: can we speak of 'a voice of the people' or 'a voice of the elite' or both? Similarly, the question of gendered priorities expressed in the song repertoire will be examined. The second part of the chapter will look at the sound material of the World War one singers: what different voices did they use on stage (operatic, stage cockney, feminine, regional, working-class and so on), why did they make these choices and what did they mean? The voice is one of the few musical tools in First World War music hall to remain under the comprehensive control of the artiste (since generally the singers were accompanied by a different house orchestra in a different town each week), and its theatrical usage and technological constraints (no microphone in a two or three thousand seat theatre) can tell us much about the meaning of music hall in people's lives during the war.

## **What Voices Can Be Heard in British Music Hall Songs of the First World War?**

Popular music of many genres has been claimed as expressing a particular social voice. For Cecil Sharp and many others, folk music was or is the voice of the people;<sup>1</sup> rap or punk rock have been presented as the voice of marginalized, dominated youth.<sup>2</sup> What can we say about British wartime music hall of a century ago? What voices could be heard? The title of my chapter is deliberately ambiguous. It would normally be taken to mean ‘Whose interests and priorities are expressed in music-hall songs of the war period?’ My (tentative) answers to this question will constitute the first part of my chapter, during which I will look at elite voices, working class voices, and gendered voices in music-hall repertoires and practices. However, in the second part, I will look at the question ‘How was voice used by music-hall singers during the Great War?’ with the help of a few examples of hit songs. Finally, I will try to sketch out some links between the two sets of conclusions.

The question of music hall as the voice of the people or of the elite has been posed by others for earlier periods, notably Victorian Britain, the debate occasionally simplified as ‘class expression versus social control’.<sup>3</sup> Some writers have emphasized the conservative and jingoistic politics often to be heard in music hall lyrics, and have linked this to the social position of theatre owners and managers, newcomers to local elites. Others have underlined the usefulness to the urban working class of songs which put their lived experience at the centre of an evening’s entertainment, and allowed them to laugh and sing along with stars who came from their own milieu and sang in their common language about the hardships, satisfactions and dreams which made up their ordinary life. In this way, they may have validated urban working-class experience in a way that other repertoires – folk or operetta, for example – could not.

Before we examine the wartime repertoire with this debate in mind, it is worth thinking about the context in which the voices were heard: the music hall itself. Who was at home in the music hall? The furnishings – red plush and marble pillars – imitated elite tastes to the point of caricature. The appearance of luxury was essential, and this is suggested by the very names of the theatres: the Empire, the Palace, the Coliseum or the Alhambra. At the Oxford theatre in London one moved among ‘Corinthian columns and bars smothered in flowers and glittering with mirrors’.<sup>4</sup> At the Palace, a ‘grand staircase columned with green marble and gilt capitals’ led up to the royal box.<sup>5</sup> The Nottingham Empire boasted smiling idols representing Krishna on either side of the stage and four giant gilt elephant heads in the four corners of the auditorium.<sup>6</sup>

Yet the mass of the audience was working-class, whether traditional or (more and more) ‘white-collar’: aspirational office clerks, minor civil servants and shop workers. These growing groups had clean hands and often felt themselves a cut above the manual workers, but were frequently poor and over-worked.<sup>7</sup> The music hall was a place where, for once, the luxury was for them. And yet, unlike the also popular municipal concert halls, where classical concerts were presented at very low prices for the masses, the music hall was not obsessed with ‘elevating’. There was no need to sit in silence and worry about clapping in the wrong places. In the music hall the worker felt at home, with singalong and neighbourly bonhomie for a ‘Sweet Saturday night’<sup>8</sup>. The term ‘people’s palace’ was not used without a reason. But within this pretence of a home, what voices were dominant?

### **Elite voices**

The most important way in which wartime music hall might be seen to be acting as an elite voice is that it was a tool building support for the war drive, for the empire’s cause. This role was particularly important in Britain, where conscription was not used during the first

years of the conflict, (whereas Germany and France mobilized millions of men by conscription in the first weeks of the war). In Britain, political leaders, trade union leaders, feminist leaders and church leaders almost unanimously called for men to join up and fight, and music-hall stars joined in the chorus. Certainly, writers such as Siegfried Sassoon<sup>9</sup> or J B Priestley<sup>10</sup> tended to dismiss the wartime music-hall repertoire as mainly jingoistic and wholly subordinate to the establishment. They based their complaints on a number of elements. First and foremost, there was the wave of songs of recruitment and enthusiasm which flooded into the music hall in 1914, with titles such as the following:

We Don't Want to Lose You but We Think You Ought to Go

The Army of Today's All Right.

My Volunteer (he's come from his desk in the city)

Our brave Colonials

Sandy boy, my soldier laddy

Men of England, You Have Got to Go!

Be a Soldier, Be a Man!

For the Honour of Dear Old England

I'd Like to Be a Hero, Too!

March on to Berlin!

It's a Grand Sight to See Them Going Away!

Tommy is as Good a Man as Any Knight of Old

And other, later songs showing a light hearted and enthusiastic view of the war:

Cheer Up Little Soldier Man 1915

God Give Us Victory! 1915

Our Whistling Tommies 1915

We'll Never Let the Old Flag Fall 1915

The Tanks that Broke the Ranks Out in Picardy 1916

The Baby Tank 1916

These songs, along with the reports of rousing speeches on the stage of the music hall (sometimes in the tone 'Two shillings for the first man to join the army here tonight!'), and the leading role of a small number of music-hall stars (such as Harry Lauder and Vesta Tilley) in the recruitment campaigns, have led to conclusions which echo the words of Lawrence Senelick, who wrote, of an earlier period:

Much of the energy the working man might have directed to ameliorating his own situation was rechannelled by the music hall to the advancement of [the British] empire.<sup>11</sup>

There are, however, grave problems with this conception. If the music hall artistes and music hall songs which campaigned for the empire may have been particularly effective (working-class singers in the workers' favourite place for a Saturday night out are more convincing than 'posh' politicians or bishops), they were by no means exceptional. Almost all religious leaders, feminist leaders, union leaders, politicians and intellectuals went at least as far.

More importantly, there has been, until recently, no attempt to judge how representative the enthusiastic war songs were in the song repertoire. The same dozen songs are always quoted, among the thousands produced at the time which lie forgotten in the archives of the

British Library. When I was able to analyse a full corpus of over a thousand wartime music hall songs, the conclusions were somewhat different.<sup>12</sup> Firstly, recruitment songs, and heroic songs about the war, all but disappeared after only a few months of the conflict. The recruiting campaign was at its fiercest in the second half of 1915, but the collection of 'Greatest Hits of 1915' published by the biggest of the sheet music companies, Francis and Day,<sup>13</sup> contains no recruitment songs at all.

Secondly, only a third of wartime songs speak of the war or the changes in life because of the war, and enthusiastic songs make up a small minority of this third. Songs dreaming of the end of the war rapidly take over from heroic songs. Indeed 'home' is the word most frequently encountered in song titles. The seven most common words in titles (in a corpus of 1143 song titles 1914-1918) were

Home 69 occurrences

Girl 68

Boy 57

Love 44

Soldier 42

Song 41

Ireland 36

Hardly a glossary of jingoism. For every 1918 song with the word 'victory' in the title there are ten with the word 'home', and the same is true the following year.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, even at the start of the war there are no songs about hating Germans. In contrast with the French repertoire, which benefitted from an already established stock of anti-German songs (written in the period after France lost Alsace and Lorraine to the new

German Empire in 1871), British songs about hating Germans are completely absent. There are a number of reasons for this: the German people were close to the British before 1914, and particularly in the music industry. The 'German band' was an important feature of entertainment, and the best pianos were imported from Germany<sup>15</sup>. The music-hall song experience depends on the audience singing in unison, and it seems likely that artistes understood that singing about hating Germans was not going to be possible. In addition, songs of hatred sat uneasily with the almost obligatory jauntiness which was part of the music hall ethos.

In other domains of public discourse, such limitations did not exist. The Bishop of London, Arthur Winnington-Ingram, became known as a fiery orator for the cause, declaring:

[Let us] band in a great crusade... to kill Germans. To kill them, not for the sake of killing, but to save the world; to kill the good as well as the bad; to kill the young men as well as the old, to kill those who have shown kindness to our wounded as well as those fiends who crucified the Canadian sergeant...to kill them lest the civilization of the world should itself be killed.<sup>16</sup>

Winnington-Ingram liked to repeat that the war was a combat 'between nailed hand and mailed fist', that is, between the suffering Jesus, dying for man's sins, and brute violence. Such excesses were entirely absent from the music hall song repertoire.

We may conclude, from these diverse elements, that the music hall cannot be considered in any straightforward way a jingoistic channel by which elite priorities concerning the war were imposed on working class audiences.

If jingoistic warmongering was generally absent, so too was opposition to war. The tone was very much of acceptance, even after the enthusiastic recruitment songs had disappeared after the first few months. Songs such as 'Lloyd George's Beer' which humorously



complained about government policy of reducing the alcohol content in beer, and which could stand in for more general discontent with inequality in wartime, felt obliged to begin by underlining faith in victory:

We shall win the war, we shall win the war

As I've said before, we shall win the war

Before going on with the theme of the song

Oh, they say it's a terrible war, oh law,

And there never was a war like this before,

But the worst thing that ever happened in this war

Is Lloyd George's Beer.

Buy a lot of it, all they've got of it.

Dip your bread in it, shove your head in it

From January to October,

And I'll bet a penny that you'll still be sober.<sup>17</sup>

The war was, though, not the only priority of the elite. One long term priority which continued to be pushed throughout the conflict was the campaign against 'vulgarity' and in favour of 'respectability', this last being a tremendously powerful cement of conservative social consensus.<sup>18</sup> For the elite in general, this helped mobilize large sections of the working class behind ideological priorities of the elite. For if being 'respectable' included respecting yourself and your family (no excessive drunkenness, no interpersonal violence between adults

within the family), it also includes respecting 'one's betters', sending the children to Sunday school, and not banding together to resist the status quo.

The music hall trade newspaper, *The Encore*, devoted more editorials between 1914 and 1918 to the defence of respectability than it did to questions connected with the war, and theatre managers were eternally eager to stop artistes overstepping the bounds, banning all ad-libbing and sacking artistes who were too rude. Newspaper review of shows habitually reassured readers that there was 'no vulgarity' involved in the evening's entertainment. The great Moss Empires theatre chain advertised in the trade press insisting on strict rules:

all scripts to be submitted three weeks before appearance  
artistes' business must be absolutely free from vulgarity  
artistes must attend rehearsals, no deputies being accepted<sup>19</sup>

In April 1916, when one comedian wrote a letter to the newspaper of the performers' trade union, saying that vulgarity was not such a bad thing ('Who needs all this refinement?'), the paper received an avalanche of letters disagreeing.<sup>20</sup> The same year the Bishop of London brought his very considerable influence to bear, denouncing indecency or improper behaviour in music hall lounges.<sup>21</sup>

In summary, one might say that more complex elite priorities, which had had more success implicating the general population, were very much carried in music hall practices.

### **How working-class voices were present**

Apart from elite voices, what other voices might we hear? Examining the repertoire, the important presence of questions of everyday working-class life and fantasy are perhaps what

mark it most clearly as a working-class voice. Colin MacInnes pointed this out almost fifty years ago:

Since they [music-hall songs] were chiefly written by, and sung by, working-class men and women for working-class audiences, we may hear in them a *vox populi* which is not to be found in Victorian and Edwardian literature<sup>22</sup>.

What does this *vox populi* mean when we look at the wartime songs? Firstly that 'life goes on'. Life was hard before the war, life is hard during the war: many themes sung about do not change, and the valorisation of ordinary working-class life continues as a main plank of music hall content. Many pieces have as their subject good food and drink, in particular good working-class food and drink, conjured up in song to exorcise memories of hunger, and defended against bourgeois pretention, as for example in a series of hits by Harry Champion including 'Home-made Sausages' (1912) 'A Little Bit of Cucumber' (1915)<sup>23</sup> and 'Pudding, Pudding, Pudding' (1917). There are plenty of songs about working class courtship and marriage,<sup>24</sup> and about the ups and downs of working class friendship. The songs about the war are about Tommy, not about the empire. And there are very large numbers of songs dreaming of a distant paradise, far from the war (generally rural Ireland or 'Dixieland', both places which most of the audience would never go to, and which seemed to them to be vaguely similar).

The singers are from working class backgrounds, with working class stage names (Harry, Gus, Lily, Fred, Kitty, Sam, Jock, Florrie, Daisy, Ernie...) and working-class accents. They sing in a tone of down to earth neighbourliness, as can be seen in these opening lines from Marie Lloyd's song 'Now You've Got Yer Khaki on':

P'r'aps you don't know Johnny Brown who sold the flowers and fruit?

I stood 'im 'cos he used to make me laugh

The other day he rolled up in Khaki, if you please

I says, 'Lumme! don't it suit yer, Jack. Not 'arf!'

There is, then, a working-class voice in the repertoire, which is generally (but not completely) reserved for the expression of everyday individual joys and difficulties: a political voice is all but absent. So, when there are waves of strikes before, during or after the war (the Great Unrest of 1910-14, the enormous strike wave of 1919, or the important industrial conflicts of 1917) the strikes may be popular among working class audiences, but we see almost no songs speaking of them. Music hall remains a consensual genre, principally because of the combination of sing-along practices which oblige singers to present choruses that the entire audience will like, and the power of generally conservative theatre managers.

Many maintain that the war was not in the interests of working-class people, yet there was little on the music-hall stage to reflect this. Though the anti-war movement was very much marginalized (except in Ireland) in 1914, in 1916 it was strong enough to hold 'Stop the War' meetings in every significant town and a 1500-strong delegate conference in London.<sup>25</sup> The echoes of this dissent on the music hall stage were more than muted (since consensus was so important), but did exist. A song like 'The Military representative' sarcastically mocking the committees who refused exemption from military conscription on any grounds whatsoever, was a smash hit.<sup>26</sup>

### **Gendered voices**

Men, women and love are major themes in the repertoire, and the authorial voice of the songwriter in music hall with regard to gender should be looked at. The authorial voice is

generally little developed in the music hall song compared to later genres of popular music such as rock. The showman was more present than the *auteur* in song writing in this period. This can be shown by the fact that one of the most prolific songwriters, Fred Godfrey, wrote thirty or so popular ‘Scottish songs’ and at least as many ‘Irish songs’, with titles such as ‘It Takes an Irish Heart to Sing an Irish Song’<sup>27</sup> and ‘The Mother Old Ireland Gave Me’. Godfrey claimed that it was because of his Irish mother that his Irish songs came straight from the heart. In fact, his father was Welsh and his mother was English; he had no Irish roots at all. The *auteur* was even more clearly a fabricated construct than they are today.

Nevertheless, one might think that the fact that 90% of the songwriters were men,<sup>28</sup> and none of the most well-known and prolific were women. (whereas at least a third of the singers were women) affected the content of the songs. It is certain that women do not get treated well in the repertoire. A very large number of songs complain, with hyperbole, about the position of the husband in marriage (and indeed, in most working-class families, the woman was in charge of the finances: most men brought their wage packets home and were given pocket money).<sup>29</sup> Many of these pieces wax lyrical about domineering or even violent wives, whereas there are no equivalent songs complaining about bossy or violent husbands.

Billy Merson’s 1911 song ‘Take an Old Woman’s Advice’ (which he sings in drag) includes the following sing-along chorus:

Girls, girls, when you are married  
Take a tip from one who knows  
Treat your old man like you would a pet dog  
Kind words are better than blows!

A 1914 song 'She's So Jealous' portrays a wife who gives very little pocket money to her husband, for fear he should spend it on drink and women; to guard against any risk of infidelity, she cuts off his ears. George Formby Senior sang in 1917 his hit 'Since I've had a row with the wife' in which his wife made him sleep in the kennel with the dog, after having beaten him.<sup>30</sup> The theme of the dominating wife could, furthermore, always be brought up to date with current events: in 1918, the piece 'Since My Wife Joined the WAAC'<sup>31</sup> is billed in *The Performer* of 25 April 1918 as a 'bang up to date henpecked husband song'.

Of course, popular comic songs have always been very much marked by hyperbole, but the fact that these pieces are not ever balanced by narratives about dominated wives shows that they are part of an ideological structure validating traditional roles. The bullying wife is sung about and ridiculed because she is considered unnatural, whereas the bullying husband is seen as a regrettably normal part of social life, nothing to make a song and dance about, so to speak. One of the important functions of music hall was to bring into the public sphere for the purpose of collective singing and laughing, the everyday difficulties of working class life. These could be joys and problems with friends, difficulties in courtship, difficulties in marriage. Men's difficulties were explored far more than women's. The women characters in music hall lyrical content are more limited in scope, and often examined only in their relationships to men.

Further, fantasies of perfect partners, very common in music hall songs, are in their vast majority male fantasies, such as this one:

Off in the gloaming when the lights are low  
Comes a picture in fancy of one girl I know;  
A maiden so sweet with the charms of a rose,  
Thought of ways of the world tis but little she knows

In all Erin's land there is none fairer than she

The dearest of all in this wide world to me!

The link with the absolute male domination of the songwriting profession is doubtless not the only reason for this, but is part of it.

This is not to say that all discourses about men's and women's roles can be categorized as gendered voices. Some types of song are more complex. There are dozens of songs, for example, about women's new roles in wartime, with titles such as:

- Kitty, the Telephone Girl 1914
- The Ladies Football Club 1915
- The Editress 1915
- Which Switch Is the Switch, Miss, for Ipswich? 1915
- If the Girlies Could Be Soldiers 1915
- The Lady Bus Conductor 1916
- Tilly the Typist 1916
- Dance of the Fire Brigade girls 1915
- Women's Work 1917
- Where Are the Girls of the Old Brigade? 1917
- Polly from the GPO 1918

Many of these songs do not pronounce themselves in favour nor opposed to women's new roles, but intrigued or anxious about them, and this cannot be necessarily categorized as a masculine voice of anxiety: there is ample evidence that women too were worried about the

changes. In a number of situations where women took over commercial roles, they could find that customers, both women and men, simply refused to accept them.<sup>32</sup>

### **How is voice used in the music hall?**

This overview has shown some key elements of social voices present in the halls. How did this affect the literal use of voice by the singers? I am not intending to carry out a technical, musicological analysis of voice in music hall, but to look at how different aspects fit in to the entertainment experience and are used to carry meaning. Using some of Philip Tagg's ideas about understanding popular music, I aim to see what the use of voice was, not from the point of view of the singer, but from the point of view of the listener.<sup>33</sup>

By way of introduction, three basic points must be made about the 'consumption' of voice in music hall a century ago. Firstly, there are no microphones on the music hall stage until at least the mid-1920s, yet the variety theatres, especially the newer ones, seat two or three thousand people.<sup>34</sup> This meant that 'intimate' voices could not be used, projection was essential, and indeed many artistes would use a mix of reciting and singing. The practice of audience singalong allowed to inject some much-needed vocal volume into the show.

Secondly, the star's voice was a much rarer commodity than it is today. A fan who goes to a concert in the twenty first century has heard the artistes sing many times on CD, on the radio, on the television or on Mp3. The audience a century ago might know the song well, having bought the sheet music and sung it around the piano, or listened to street singers doing their versions (hits sold hundreds of thousands of copies in sheet music, and there were three or four million pianos in Britain at the time). They would not, however, have much heard the voice of the artiste: the gramophone was still reserved to a small minority of the population. For the price of one record containing two songs, one could buy, in 1916, six tickets for a



music hall evening; for the price of a cheap gramophone, 220 tickets. Many soldiers heard a gramophone record for the very first time during their years in the army.

Finally, the centrality of sing-along needs to be again underlined. The artiste proposes a position, a fantasy, an emotion etc. which he or she invites the whole audience to project together. As Philip Tagg has pointed out, sing-along (or singing in unison) has a social meaning: it constitutes 'a rather obvious aural icon of individuals sharing (supposedly or actually) a common cause, or identity, or set of values and beliefs.'<sup>35</sup>

Let us turn to our sample of wartime music hall songs. The recordings used for this analysis are not live recordings, which contemporary technology could not provide; nevertheless, the artistes at the time tried to record in the same way as they sang on stage, since the stage show was considered primary.<sup>36</sup>

The first song 'Your King and Country Want You' performed by Helen Clarke,<sup>37</sup> is one of the best known of the 1914 recruitment songs. It was taken up by a number of artistes at the time. The operatic style of voice (received pronunciation, accentuated vibrato, rolled R's) represents 'high culture' and communicates not just respectability but also prestige. The audience singing along feels it absorbs some of the prestige. This use of voice contributes to the production of an anthem giving an establishment point of view. The seductive voice fits with the somewhat daring end to the song (indeed some sang 'bless you' instead of 'kiss you' in the last line of the chorus, in order to maintain an air of respectability). Nevertheless, the opera voice contrasts a little incongruously with the jolly sing-along tune. The use of voices taken from opera or operetta was common on the music hall stage, and stars such as Gertie Gitana and Zona Vevey made much use of it. It was of course quite suited to large halls without microphones.

The second piece, sung by Ernie Mayne in 1917, is 'Lloyd George's Beer'.<sup>38</sup> The lyrics of the song complain sarcastically about the new regulations reducing the strength of beer in

licensed premises, introduced as part of the government's vision that alcohol consumption was putting the war drive in danger. Mayne sings in a working-class voice, coming over as 'one of the lads'. Slightly out of tune at times, his untrained voice might give an impression, along with the lyrics, of 'a favourite uncle, a bit rough around the edges but with his head screwed on'. He sounds as if he has been drinking, but this may well be projected as a positive characteristic ('A man who likes a drink'). His voice is that of the sardonic working-class civilian, an 'ordinary bloke' who accepts the need to win the war, but resents the restrictions imposed, he feels, solely on ordinary people. The naming of Lloyd George as personally responsible allows the song to express (in the sing-along chorus) bitterness against the Prime Minister, but on a topic which does not seriously threaten patriotic ideology.

In fact dissent, by 1917, was widespread. Large waves of strikes<sup>39</sup> were taking place, and anger about the conscription process was very common.<sup>40</sup> This song probably expressed the dissent, but attached it to a subject which was relatively harmless, and which fit a music hall tradition of singing about drink.

Both of these songs, then, use clear class markers in their voices. The opera voice represents both virtuosity and bourgeois respectability, this last being at the time a crucial plank of society.<sup>41</sup> The implication is that being respectable includes actively supporting the war drive. The working-class voice underlines that some popular priorities are despised by the powers that be, but it can be taken in two different ways. Much of the audience will identify with the sardonic narrator, whereas other, perhaps more expensive, parts of the theatre might see him as an object of fun. Ambiguous presentations of this sort were common in music hall.

The third song we will discuss is 'Goodbye' by Courtland and Jefferies, from 1918.<sup>42</sup> A received pronunciation 'posh' voice is used in the first verse, which goes along with the use of some elements of bourgeois slang in the chorus. In the music hall, such bourgeois slang will be being mocked. The voice is clipped, that of someone who has difficulty expressing

their feelings, perhaps. The title word 'Goodbye' and several rhyming words have a distorted pronunciation which can be interpreted in different ways. Might it be baby-talk, the tragedies being lived through making adult reactions no longer possible? The power of the song is to reproduce in light-hearted tone the dreadful and sometimes tragic goodbyes which are part of the audience's wartime experience. The laughing, indirect references to death, the obsessive repetition of 'goodbye' in the chorus sung by the whole audience, give an impression of bitterness and inexpressible pain.

Good Bye! Good Bye!

Wipe the tear, baby dear, from your eye

Tho' it's hard to part, I know,

I'll be tickled to death to go.

Don't cryee! don't sighee!

There's a silver lining in the skyee

Bonsoir, old thing! cheerio! chin-chin!

Nah poo! Toodleoo! Goodbye!

There are no tearful goodbyes on the music hall stage during the war. The voice in this song plays a role in the communication of ambiguous psychology, rather than being an elite voice or a working-class voice.

Our fourth example is the hit song 'When I take my Morning Promenade' by Marie Lloyd in 1916.<sup>43</sup> Marie Lloyd was tremendously popular, and her nickname of 'Our Marie' symbolized her status as a perceived working-class woman's voice on stage, ready to eagerly mock prudery and excessive respectability while never going 'too far', never being clearly vulgar. In this she is part of a popular music tradition of 'moderate transgression which continues to this day.'<sup>44</sup>

Her working-class voice was central to her stage personality. In this song, she uses 'bourgeois' vocabulary like 'promenade', and a 'flirty' tone of voice, using almost a high yodel to sound cheeky. She represents a woman in control as an independent individual, through the seduction game, though in no way undermining the separation of gender roles, which are felt and presented as 'natural' in this and other songs of hers. Indeed her 1915 song 'Woman's Opinion of Man' whose title might lead one to expect some critique of masculine domination, is on the contrary a text which mocks women's attempt to critique men, and insists that traditional roles are wholesome and desirable.

She understands man, or she thinks so at least  
She's read the six novels, and calls him a beast  
She vows she won't marry, but when she is tough  
Oh, she's fearfully certain she won't get enough  
Dear, dear, hum, hum, don't fret  
If a fellow says 'Wilt? will she wilt? You bet

To return to 'When I take my Morning Promenade', her use of voice includes both class elements: accent and vocabulary, and gendered elements: seduction and flirting. The whole remains deliberately ambiguous: respectable but mocking bourgeois pretention, seductive but not vulgar.

Our final song is 'Jolly Good Luck to the Girl who loves a soldier!'<sup>45</sup>, a 1914 piece by the male impersonator Vesta Tilley, which mixes an expression of support for the war drive with gentle mocking of the young officer narrator, who is something of a 'ladies' man'. The most notable feature of her use of voice is the question of gendering. She is a male impersonator, well-known for precise imitation of her male characters' dress, gait and

gestures, yet there is no attempt to imitate a male voice; on the contrary she uses a semi-operatic voice. At the time, male impersonation was still considered a little ‘risqué’: though Vesta Tilley was allowed to perform her turn in front of the royal family at the Royal Variety Performance in 1912, it was said that the queen was shocked by the sight of a woman in trousers. This is why the imitation of masculinity must not go too far. Indeed, off stage, Vesta Tilley was careful to look as ‘feminine’ as possible, in jewels and fur, and, having no children of her own, was very visibly involved in children’s charities.<sup>46</sup> The feminine voice she uses in this song is a sign of the tension around gender roles which will become even sharper as the war wears on and women are able to take on jobs previously closed to them. This is also shown in other aspects of her stage show – for example she never wore false beard or moustache and generally played androgynous young men. The clear, almost exaggerated diction underlines the theatrical atmosphere. We are not supposed to be fooled by her impersonation.

## **Conclusions**

Music hall could not be an unambiguous voice of the elite, nor an unambiguous voice of the people, since it relied on consensus, customer demand and sing-along, but also on respectability and establishment support. The actual use of voice by the showmen and showwomen who were singing reflects their communicative aims quite deliberately. They could valorize working-class experience, ‘common-sense’ or scepticism, or they could symbolize integration into respectable society with its establishment priorities. It has only been possible to analyse here a small sample of voice use in wartime music hall, but we hope it has enabled an exposition of what is at stake, and shown the importance of a close-textured analysis of popular songs which is able to bring about some of the hidden communication and deliberate ambiguities inherent in twentieth century popular music.

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<sup>1</sup> Cecil James Sharp, *English Folk-Song: Some Conclusions* (London, Simpkin, 1907).

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Brake, *The Sociology of Youth Culture and Youth Subcultures: Sex and Drugs and Rock'n'Roll?* (Abingdon, Routledge, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones criticizes simplistic views in his article 'Class Expression versus Social Control?', *History Workshop Journal* 4, (1977).

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<sup>4</sup> James Harding, *George Robey and the Music Hall*, (London, Hodder and Stoughton, 1990), p. 16.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>6</sup> Dave Russell, *Popular Music in England, 1840-1914* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1988) p. 83.

<sup>7</sup> Histories of ‘white-collar’ trade unions of the time give ample evidence of this. See for example William Richardson, *A Union of Many Trades – the History of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers*, (Manchester, USDAW, 1979) or Brown, A. J., *The Taxmen’s Tale – the History of the IRSF*, (London, Inland Revenue Staff Federation, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> Colin MacInnes, *Sweet Saturday night - Pop song 1840 to 1920* (London, Macgibbon and Kee, 1967), p. 34.

<sup>9</sup> Siegfried Sassoon, *The Old Huntsman and Other Poems* (New York, Dutton, 1918).

<sup>10</sup> J. B. Priestley, *Margin Released -- a Writer's Reminiscences and Reflections* (London, Heinemann, 1962).

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Andrew August, ‘A Culture of Consolation?’ *Historical Research*, vol. 74 (2001) p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> John Mullen, *The Show Must Go On! Popular Song in Britain during the First World War* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> *Francis and Day Annual 1915*, (London, Francis and Day, 1915).

<sup>14</sup> Research carried out on the sheet music catalogue of the British Library.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Excellent German overstrung instruments cost about £30’ Cyril Ehrlich, *The piano -- a history*, (London, J. M. Dent, 1976) p. 107.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Moynihan, *God on Our Side –the British Padre in World War One*, (Londres, Secker and Warburg, 1983) p.15

<sup>17</sup> This song will be further analysed below.

<sup>18</sup> I analyse the social practice and ideology of music hall respectability more fully in John Mullen, ‘Victorian Respectability, “Anti-Social Behaviour” and the Music Hall, 1880-1900’, in *Anti-Social Behaviour in Britain, Victorian and Contemporary Perspectives* edited by Sarah Pickard (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).



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<sup>19</sup> *The Encore*, 7 January 1915

<sup>20</sup> *The Performer*, 6 April 1916

<sup>21</sup> *The Performer* 20 April 1916

<sup>22</sup> Colin MacInnes, *Sweet Saturday night - Pop song 1840 to 1920* (London, Macgibbon and Kee, 1967), p. 34.

<sup>23</sup> Can be heard online here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OvMFBQgkxrg> consulted 15 February 2018.

<sup>24</sup> See for example George Formby Senior 'since I had a Row with the Wife' (1917), which can be heard online here : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NTExTHBhmz0> Consulted 16 February 2018.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Cummins Kennedy, *The Hound of Conscience: a History of the No-conscription Fellowship, 1914-1919*, Fayetteville, University of Arkansas Press, 1981, p. 114.

<sup>26</sup> A 1918 recording can be heard online here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OcUPm3terhA> Consulted 15 February 2018.

<sup>27</sup> A 1914 recording can be heard here : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BdKTSp6vsq0> Consulted 17 February 2018.

<sup>28</sup> A quick count of the first three sections (A-C) of Kilgarriff's list of lyricists and composers 1860-1920 gives a list of 251 men and 28 women. Michael Kilgarriff, *Sing Us One of the Old Songs – a Guide to Popular Song 1860 – 1920* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Roberts, *A Woman's Place: an Oral History of Working-class Women 1890-1940* (Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 1984), p. 110. Catherine-Émilie Corvisy and Véronique Molinari, *Les femmes dans l'Angleterre victorienne et édouardienne: entre sphère privée et sphère publique* (Paris, L'Harmattan, 2008), p. 55.

<sup>30</sup> These songs and others by George Formby Senior can be heard online at [http://www.monkey-hole.co.uk/formby\\_senior/downloads/](http://www.monkey-hole.co.uk/formby_senior/downloads/) Accessed November 12, 2017.

<sup>31</sup> The Women's Army Auxiliary Corps.

<sup>32</sup> The example of a woman who took over her father's role delivering meat can be found in Joyce Marlow (Ed.), *The Virago Book of Women and the Great War* (London, Virago, 1999), p. 195.

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<sup>33</sup> Philip Tagg, *Music's Meanings* (New York: Mass media scholars Press, 2012), chapter 1. My thanks to the group of friends and colleagues who listened to the songs and commented on the use of voice. In the absence of available Edwardians, they were very helpful: I have used some of their comments in my text

<sup>34</sup> In March 1915 in Dublin, the Coliseum, a brand-new variety theatre with 3 000 seats, opened. In June 1916 The Hippodrome, a new music hall with seats for 3 000, opened in Folkestone.

<sup>35</sup> Tagg, *op. cit.*, p. 451.

<sup>36</sup> I wished to use songs which can be heard online. This does mean that from a thematic point of view, the sample is not representative. Most world war one songs available online speak of the war, whereas during the war itself, three quarters of music hall songs dealt with other themes.

<sup>37</sup> Can be heard online at <http://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/yourkingandcountrywantyou.htm>  
Accessed November 12, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Can be heard online at <http://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/lloydgeorgesbeer.htm> Accessed November 12, 2017.

<sup>39</sup> John Horne, *A Companion to World War I* (London, Wiley-Blackwell, 2012) p. 411.

<sup>40</sup> According to the centenary section of the UK parliament's official website, in April 1916, 200 000 people demonstrated against conscription in Trafalgar Square. <http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/yourcountry/overview/conscription/>

<sup>41</sup> Cf John Mullen, 'Victorian Respectability...'

<sup>42</sup> Can be heard online at <http://www.firstworldwar.com/audio/goodbyeee.htm> Consulted November 12, 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Can be heard online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1iAVTJFHwZY> Consulted November 12, 2017.

<sup>44</sup> Katy Perry's song 'I kissed a Girl' which both described this supposedly daring experience while reassuring the audience of the narrator's heterosexual credentials is a twenty first century example of this moderate transgression.

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<sup>45</sup> Can be heard online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRWSng0bSYA> Accessed November 12, 2017.

<sup>46</sup> Sara Maitland, *Vesta Tilley* (London: Virago, 1986), p. 58.