

TIN PUN ALLEY

In his article "Are there any good jokes in 'Musical Humour'?" (New York Times, Jan. 13, 1980) Donal Henahan distinguishes several different types of musical humour: (1) musico-literary humour, (2) inadvertent humour, usually in the form of a misprint, (3) the intentional verbal joke, usually in the form of a pun, (4) humour in music criticism, and (5) humour that actually expresses itself in sound.

Examples of the first type abound in the recently published Grones Dictionary of Music, Howard Burnham and Dick Butterworth (Ampleforth: Emerson Edition, 1978). The jokes vary in their level of humour, but as a whole they tend to prove Henahan's contention that the wit in musico-literary humour depends on the truth that lies behind it. For instance, is it not true that Mozart "showed his genius by writing the sequel to Rossini's 'Barber of Seville' thirty years before the original composition"? To the detriment of the book, unfortunately, examples of the third of Henahan's types are also prevalent, and are evidence for one of his other points, namely, that intentional musical puns can be laboured. A particularly good example of such a pun in the new Grones concerns the time Brahms snubbed an honorary doctorate and the Cambridge University "replied by giving him the Bruch off." Butterworth's illustrations are for the most part grotesque to an extreme and unfunny.

A special subclass of Henahan's category two is the inadvertent humour of children. Howard Dunn's collection "When the Conductor Steps on the Odium...." (Music Magazine, May/June 1980, pp. 17-19) runs the risk of going on too long, but is for the most part disarmingly funny. For example: "Franz Schubert was always poor. His life teaches us the advantage of enjoying what we have, even if there isn't any."

Both Henahan and Fritz Spiegl (in his foreword to the new Grones) point out how contemporary avant garde music has damaged musical humour that expresses itself in sound. What was once humorous in music is now a serious part of somebody's idiom. Fritz Spiegl puts it this way: "They filled their pianos with nuts, made it up as they went along, twiddled electrics, made rude noises -- but no one laughed. They weren't meant to. Not even the performers, except when they got their pay packets."

Funny, isn't it?

Merwin Lewis.