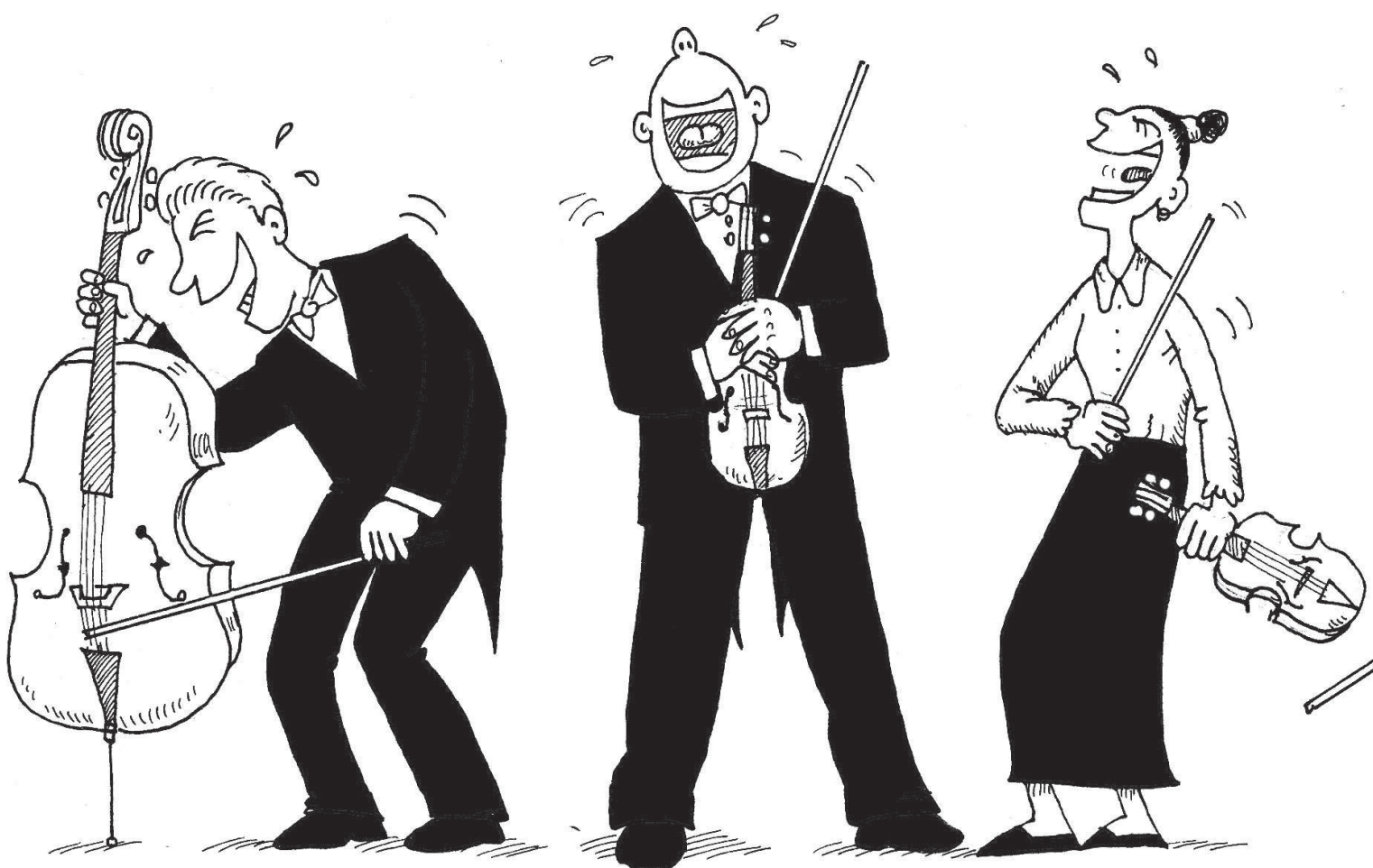


# Dressed for the part

*Does the audience really still want its musicians broiled in tail suits, or should they hang loose in open-neck shirts? Should the women players go for the Kylie look? Should the men try to do a Chippendales? Ian Fisher tells the tail of the tails (when his concert dress was almost a concert dress) and ponders sartorial issues at the symphony*



I thought you said we were doing the

I performed a concerto the other day. I mention this not in order to brag but merely to set the scene for what preceded it. Wanting to look the part, I had taken my tail suit to the dry cleaner's to be freshened up (a ritual I go through every five years whether or not it needs it). On Saturday, the day before the performance, my wife went to collect my suit as I was otherwise engaged trying to get more paint on the walls than on myself as I decorated my son's bedroom.

This unequal (and ultimately unsuccessful) challenge wasn't completed until late afternoon and so, having cleaned my brushes, I went to hang up my tails. I picked up the bag. It felt far lighter than it should have done, and alarm bells began to ring: but it was only next-door's anti-burglar device which goes off at the slightest hint of a breeze. However, a feeling of panic overwhelmed me as my thoughts returned to the weight of the dry cleaning bag and the realisation dawned on me that perhaps only the trousers had been returned and the jacket was hanging inaccessibly at the now closed cleaner's.

It turned out to be much worse than that. On opening the bag, I discovered not a tail suit (and not even just a pair of trousers from a tail suit) but



MacMillan first!

Harry Venning

a bronze coloured, knee length, strapless evening dress. This wouldn't have been too bad were it not for the fact that I didn't have the right shoes to do it justice.

A few panicky phone calls later and the dry cleaning lady had been persuaded to open her shop on Sunday morning especially for me to get my suit (I generally find sobbing does the trick) but this sorry affair did set me wondering about the whole notion of concert dress. When I started out in the profession, tails were standard dress for orchestral concerts. The first time I needed some, one of my previous horn teachers kindly lent me his spare set which had an interesting patina of green mould. Several trawlings of charity shops and ex-hire sales provided my concert gear in subsequent years but these days tails are definitely 'out.' Not accessible for audiences, apparently.

I've never been sure what to make of this argument. Audience members I have spoken to – and it has to be admitted that after concerts I try to get home as quickly as possible without speaking to anyone, so this is hardly an exhaustive survey – tend to say that a tail suited orchestra adds to the sense of occasion. Despite this, concert dress has evolved a great deal in recent years as arts organisations have attempted to reach a wider public. For instance, the men in my orchestra have now been moved to wearing black lounge suits with white shirts and silver ties. No doubt smart and dapper but it does tend to make us look like a bunch of bankers (were it not for the fact that, in an effort to be more accessible, everyone working in my bank now dresses in shirtsleeves and open collar).

True, some of the old tail suits were not of the best quality or vintage but as a whole the effect was of something distinctive.

So what impact does concert dress really have on audiences? This is a tricky one to evaluate. Presumably, people who had been attending during the tails era were quite happy with the status quo, but would audiences have been more numerous if we'd altered our dress code? This isn't a debate limited to musicians and bank staff. The minister at my local church has taken to wearing what I can only describe as a coloured frock surmounted by a rainbow-hued scarf. All very bright and lively but as far as I can tell it hasn't improved his conversion rates. People certainly aren't queuing up to come to church because of the way the clergy dress.

And surely that is the point. The whole issue of concert dress could be a red herring devised (dare I say it?) by lazy marketing departments who can't be bothered to actually earn their keep and generate interest in music and concerts. Do we perhaps have to accept that while 'popular' programmes will always fill concert halls, exploring the wider reaches of music takes more effort on the part of both promoters and audiences than the simple expedient of waving a wand over the way musicians dress? If, however, dress is vital for reaching new audiences, then perhaps we should embrace the change rather more wholeheartedly than hitherto. Think of the impact it would have if all the lady players were attired in the sort of thing Kylie wears on stage. Or if the men imitated the Chippendales.

Admittedly, depending on the orchestral personnel available, it may not be a positive impact but if that seems a step too far, the orchestras could maybe dress according to the music they are playing at the time. Frock coats and cravats for Haydn, Beethoven and Mozart; tweeds for Elgar; grey macs and fedoras for Shostakovich; kilts for James McMillan.

Of course, that might work for a concert consisting of pieces by just one composer but it could prove awkward when the overture, concerto and symphony (if that isn't in itself an outmoded way of presenting music) were all from different periods. Too many changes between pieces might be time-consuming (and possibly confusing for some musicians of my acquaintance) so it may be necessary to have a compromise outfit. It would need to be something that doesn't overshadow the music but leaves the performance to speak for itself.

For balance, it should also be tailored in a style that lies midway between the 21st century and the beginnings of orchestral performance in the 17th. Let's see, that would be about the middle of the 19th century. What was usual concert dress in those days? I know, the tail suit!

Do you think it might catch on?