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RESEARCH

New Zealand Jazz Concerts, the Use and Abuse of Grand Pianos, and One Cartoonist's Response

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Political, social, and cultural controversies are the main fodder of staff cartoonists at newspapers. From the serious to the silly, newspaper cartoonists are expected to comment on whatever happens to be in the news cycle on any day. This commentary creates both ephemera and historical evidence of events and their effects on society. This article investigates an incident at a jazz concert in Auckland in 1952 at which the musicians were charged with abusing the new Steinway grand piano and the following controversy about the jazz musicians' use of town hall facilities. From this incident New Zealand Herald cartoonist Gordon Minhinnick responded with a cartoon and a comic strip about the debate. By examining Minhinnick's contributions via the lens of cultural history we can apprehend the shape of this dispute (politically and culturally), how it impacted Auckland society, and also gain a sense about how jazz was perceived by society at large at that time. We can also see how Minhinnick used the debate to illustrate other important political issues facing Auckland at the time.

Keywords: history; jazz; jazz concert; New Zealand; politics

It may seem curious from a twenty-first century perspective that jazz concerts could ever be contentious, but in 1950s New Zealand they were. Although jazz concerts were very popular with a large section of the public, they were less popular with councils and committees who ran the town halls that these concerts were frequently performed in. Various councils and citizens' committees were concerned about whether the organisers of jazz concerts should be allowed the use of Town Halls at all, and importantly to this paper, whether they should allow musicians the use of the (very expensive) grand pianos (*Auckland Star* 2 September 1952, p. 1; *New Zealand Herald* 4 September 1952, p. 10).

In this article I will examine one specific instance of the controversies surrounding jazz concerts: the conflict over jazz musicians using, and allegedly abusing, town hall grand pianos, and its representation in New Zealand press. Focusing on cartoons relating to an incident in the Auckland Town Hall in September 1952 I will discuss how one cartoon and one comic strip are both ephemera and historical evidence regarding the perception of jazz as a risqué entertainment, the use or abuse of grand pianos and the resulting perceptions by the media and the public.

Before focusing on the specific incident I will give a brief overview of jazz concerts and the controversies that surrounded them in 1950s New Zealand.

Jazz Concerts

In the mid-twentieth century jazz concerts became a phenomenon with the establishment of Norman Granz's Jazz at the Philharmonic concept (henceforth JATP) in the United States of America in 1944. While there had been jazz concerts and concert tours since the 1920s (the first notable jazz concert being Paul Whiteman's Experiments in Modern Music in 1924 which served as the premiere of George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*) (Shipton 2001: 212–213; 632–640), the JATP concept was somewhat different.

Until the JATP concept concerts usually featured one or two usually self-contained bands (occasionally, but rarely, more), and were usually designated a special event. For example: Louis Armstrong touring Great Britain, or Benny Goodman's Spirituals to Swing concerts at Carnegie Hall in New York are prime examples of these types of concerts. They were special events that focused on a particular artist or band with 'one-off' programmes.

The JATP concept, however did not just have self-contained bands. Granz brought together the greats of jazz on one stage and had them perform in various combinations from duo to big band. These concerts gave musicians opportunities to perform with colleagues who worked in different bands, or great artists whom they admired. The highlight of these concerts were the staged jam sessions and 'battles' where all the musicians would cut loose to the delight of the audience, supposedly reconstructing the private musicians ritual for public consumption (DeVeaux 1989).

These concerts were not one-off's but a series of family friendly concerts with the same programme repeated several times over.

The first jazz concert in New Zealand was held in Auckland in August 1950 and followed the JATP concept. The organiser selected twelve well-known local musicians and they performed in combinations from trios to big band, concluding with an on-stage jam session. This concert was a resounding success, and the idea of jazz concerts began to spread across the country. By 1952 there were concerts in most towns three or four times a year and in the main centres there were jazz concerts every few weeks as frequently as two or three times a month. Such was the public appetite for jazz concerts there were several occasions where there were rival concerts held on the same evening and both reportedly gaining large audiences (Ward 2012).

Although jazz concerts were held in a variety of venues both indoors and outdoors, the main venue of choice appears to have been Town Halls and those particular concerts were subject to many complaints. The level of 'noise' by other users of the halls was the most frequent complaint about jazz concerts. There were also complaints about dancers jiving in the aisles and corridors, and knocking over chairs, or up in the balcony denting the plaster on the walls. There were also frequent complaints of a more moral nature- couples supposedly behaving 'inappropriately' in the hallways and quieter areas of the gallery (as noted above jazz was still seen as a risqué entertainment in some quarters). Finally, there were the complaints about the use and alleged abuse of the expensive grand pianos (DHJA MS-Papers-9018-60).

'Can Jazz be Unkind to a Piano?'

On 1 September 1952 the Auckland Town Hall was the venue for a jazz concert, one of many it had seen that year. The line-up featured prominent local musicians including pianists Jack Thompson, John Corban, Monte Oliver, and Julian Lee. It also featured an appearance of the New Zealand Jitterbug champions. The concert appears to have been a success, and the reviews in the newspapers the following day were uniformly positive. However, while the reviews were positive they were also accompanied by stringent protests about the jazz pianists use of the new Steinway grand piano. The review in the *Auckland Star* (Auckland's evening paper) on 2 September was situated

on page 5 (Hilton 1952), but at the centre of the front page was an article headlined 'Protests over Jazz Pianists' use of Steinway' (*Auckland Star* 2 September 1952, p. 1). The *New Zealand Herald* (the local morning paper) followed this up the next day with an article on page 10 (clearly this issue was less important to the editor of the *Herald* than the *Star*) entitled 'Can Jazz Be Unkind to a Piano?' (*New Zealand Herald* 3 September 1952 p. 10), and on 4 September with another article boldly stating that '"The Grand" is not for Jazz!' (*New Zealand Herald* 4 September 1952, p. 10).

The initial article in *The Auckland Star* was prompted by a letter to the editor from an audience member who was 'appalled to see the hammering with both hands and feet which the Town Hall Steinway suffered'. When the *Star* enquired into the issue they were told by a Town Hall spokesperson that it was a mistake because when the musicians were granted the use of both the Steinway and the older Chappell grand officials 'did not realise that the Steinway would be used for jazz' (*Auckland Star* 2 September 1952, p. 1).

In something of a reply to this article the *New Zealand Herald* published 'Can Jazz be Unkind to a Piano' on 3 September. In this article the journalist sought the opinion of the Head of Auckland University College's School of Music, Professor Horace Hollinrake, accompanist Alan Pow, Gordon Short, a judge for the Auckland Instrumental Competition Society, and pioneering jazz pianist Henry Shirley as to whether jazz could actually damage a piano. Professor Hollinrake sat on the fence stating that 'it depends entirely on the pianist.' Short agreed with this stating that some jazz pianists had a light touch, but others used the full weight of the arm. Alan Pow on the other hand believed that the rhythmic style of bass had the potential to do damage to the felt on the hammers, but not the mechanism itself, and Henry Shirley disagreed about the potential of damage to the hammers, but believed that the pedals could be damaged if the pianist was beating time with their foot over or on the pedals (*New Zealand Herald* 3 September 1952 p. 10).

On the same day in the *Auckland Star* the jazz musicians in question replied to the allegations of abuse in the article 'We Don't Like The Steinway Anyhow!' in which the pianists Monte Oliver and Julian Lee stated that they felt that the action

of the Steinway was bad, that it was out of tune and generally inferior to the older Chappell grand. They stated that the only reason they used it at all was because the Chappell was in an awkward position on the stage to communicate with the other musicians and for blind musician Lee, impossible to get to. They further stated in reply to the *Herald*'s querying article 'Can Jazz be Unkind to a Piano?' that they did not need to pound out the bass because they had a good rhythm section, and that the pedals could not have been damaged because they did not use them (*Auckland Star* 3 September 1952, p. 1).

The following day the verdict from the Town Hall was clear: jazz musicians would continue to be allowed use of the Chappell, but they were not allowed to play the Steinway, which would be reserved for serious concert work (*New Zealand Herald* 4 September 1952, p. 10). This hard line stance created a wave of letters to the editor in both the *Star* and the *Herald*. Writers vigorously argued the pros and cons of this, and whether it was overstepping the bounds. After all the Town Hall and its facilities were meant for use by the community, which included everyone, not just 'serious' music lovers. Letter writers debated heatedly whether or not 'serious' pianists were more or less likely to damage a piano during the course of a concert than jazz musicians. They also debated whether any one section of the community had the right to dictate the use community facilities to the council.

The Cartoonist's Response

Over the next two weeks this controversy was debated in the *Star* and the *Herald* (though as an aside, it does not appear to have been scandalous enough to pique the interest of local tabloid *New Zealand Truth*), primarily through letters to the editor, but at least one local cartoonist also took up the issue.

The first cartoon to appear was 'In the Groove' in the *New Zealand Herald* on 4 September (**Figure 1**), drawn by long time *Herald* cartoonist Gordon Minhinnick. Minhinnick began cartooning in the 1920s, drawing for the *Wellington Freelance* and *Auckland Sun* before becoming the *New Zealand Herald*'s resident cartoonist in 1930 where he remained until his retirement in 1976, though he continued to contribute cartoons into the 1980s. Minhinnick contributed caricatures, political/satirical

Figure 1: Gordon Minhinnick, 'In the Groove,' *New Zealand Herald,* 4 September 1952, p. 10 (© *New Zealand Herald*).

panel cartoons and comic strips, the longest running of which featured his man–about–town character Sam (who I will discuss further down). Minhinnick aimed to amuse rather than provoke his audience (in contrast to fellow New Zealand political cartoonist David Low), and he was held in high regard by his audience and political 'victims' for his ability to defuse tensions through his art (Grant 2013: Te Ara).

'In the Groove' is a one panel political cartoon, which depicts a 'jazz' band hard at play, getting into the groove in fact with a direct reference to the piano controversy in the top right corner by way of a 'clipping' of the article 'Can Jazz be Unkind to a Piano?' On closer inspection, however, you can see that aside from the prominent grand piano, the vocalist, and the drummer, none of the other players are playing 'normal' musical instruments. In front of the pianist is a band member playing a row of squeeze horns. On the left of the pianist there are three musicians who are not playing any recognisable musical instruments: in fact they are playing a representation of the soon to be built Auckland Harbour bridge (in the fashion of a double bass), some drain pipes (curving around like a sousaphone) and what appears to be a faucet (potentially representing a saxophone). The titles that each player is given

also give clues to the satire that Minhinnick is setting up: the vocalist is 'local bodies', the horns player 'transport loan', the drummer represents municipal works, then our three non-instrument musicians are the bridge loan, drainage loan, and water works respectively. The pianist (who appears to be a caricature of the then Mayor of Auckland Sir John Allum) appears to be conducting the band in the latest song, 'The Four Per Cent Drag,' playing the 'Money Market £650 Grand' piano.[1]

'In the Groove' serves a double purpose for Minhinnick. Here he comments on both the silliness of the controversy surrounding the jazz concert and the grand piano, and on the more serious issues that were facing the Auckland region through the government's budgetary problems of the time. This cartoon reminds the audience that the incident of alleged abuse of the grand piano occurred and subtly indicates that it was a proverbial storm in a teacup detracting from the more serious issues of the day. At the same time however, Minhinnick is also poking a little fun here at the issues regarding the Government's budgetary stance pointing out how the issues need to be pulled together like a band in order to play nice.

The title of the sheet music on the piano, 'The Four Per Cent Drag', refers to local bodies wanting the National Government to raise the interest rates to four per cent on the loans they made to various bodies for regional works. The issue here is that the then current interest rate (3.25 per cent) was considered to be too far below market rate to increase competitive investment and re-investment of funds that were used by local bodies. However by increasing to four per cent the regional governments could potentially re-prioritise future spending, with some much needed works moving further up the list for finance. Additionally, with a greater return on the loans, local governments would be able to finance more projects without relying as much on rates income or national government funding such as those depicted in the cartoon (*New Zealand Herald* 20 August 1952, p. 8). The use of the word 'drag' in the song title has a similar double meaning. A drag was a popular music and dance style in the late 1920s and 1930s that preceded jitterbugging in the 1940s and 1950s (Giordano 2007: 58–59). In the cartoon, Minhinnick uses the term in its musical (jazz-related) sense, but also in its colloquial meaning: these issues were a drag on Auckland society!

The meaning of the text on the inside of the piano lid ('Money Market £650 Grand'), is less obvious. Clearly the use of the word 'grand' rather than zeros to indicate a thousand refers to the issues surrounding jazz concerts and the 'grand' pianos discussed above. However, what the amount of '£650 Grand' (New Zealand Pounds) refers to is unconfirmed. This sum was never directly referenced in any of the related articles within either the *New Zealand Herald* or *Auckland Star* (for either the budgetary issues or the grand piano controversy), nor does it appear in any of the historical resources that I consulted in preparing this paper.

The second relevant cartoon in the *New Zealand Herald* is another Minhinnick creation, part of a regular Saturday edition comic strip about the adventures of raffish man-about-town Sam (**Figure 2**). Sam was one of Minhinnick's earliest serial creations, first published in the *Auckland Sun* in the late 1920s. A New Zealand version of 'John Citizen' he was the man on the street experiencing current affairs (to the point that during World War Two he became 'Old Soldier Sam') and poking gentle fun at the day's controversies (Grant, 1987: 135).

Minhinnick described the Sam strips as 'purely fun', and it is evident that he enjoyed placing Sam (and his adventures, or misadventures- Minhinnick frequently killed and resurrected Sam) into the events of the day (Grant 2013: Te Ara). The strips consisted of four or five panels before World War Two, but from that point they were consistently five panels. The strips also frequently featured a small dog who accompanied Sam on his adventures (particularly during and just after World War Two when Sam was Old Soldier Sam). While the pre-World War Two strips frequently

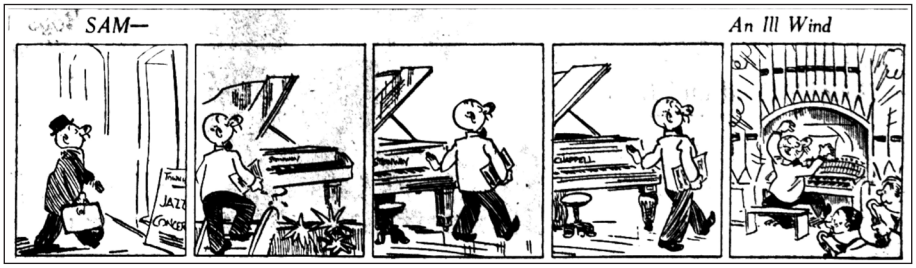

Figure 2: Gordon Minhinnick, 'Sam – An Ill Wind,' *New Zealand Herald,* 6 September 1952, p. 10 (© *New Zealand Herald*).

included dialogue, the later strips do not, and the only narration in the later strips is usually contained in sign texts, frequently billboards or newspapers (Minhinnick 1933; 1945; 1946).

Sam was represented in a variety of guises. In addition to Old Soldier Sam, Sam was dockworker or other unionist, a concerned constituent, traveller, confused agitator (not knowing whether to increase or decrease conscription in one strip), and even Santa Claus. When he was not in obvious costume or uniform, Minhinnick drew Sam in a suit, tie, and hat (with various components being put on or off as the strip required- no tie or jacket when he was a unionist for example) commensurate with what New Zealand men would wear during the 1930s–1950s. Depending on what Sam was portraying his movements could be anywhere from a slouchy walk to a marching gait. If he was earnest about something Sam is portrayed leaning or moving forward, if he was startled his hat frequently bounced off his head. If he was feeling confident his head would be tilted back slightly with his nose in the air (Minhinnick 1949).

This particular strip appeared on 6 September just as the grand piano controversy was gathering steam in the letters to the editor columns. Entitled 'An Ill Wind', Sam portrays a jazz musician resplendent in white dinner jacket and bow tie. He is shown walking confidently into a venue that is hosting a jazz concert (presumably the Town Hall), onto the stage and past both the Steinway and Chappell grand pianos with a wave of the hand before seating himself at the pipe organ to play with the band (two saxophonists are positioned in the right foreground).

The title 'An Ill Wind' plays on the adage 'an ill wind that blows no good', with Minhinnick hinting (tongue in cheek) that the incident could be worse- the jazz musicians could be using the even more expensive pipe organ. At the same time the title implies that this debate has been blown all out of proportion. The way that Minhinnick has drawn this strip also bears out the idea that the debate was a bit ridiculous. By having Sam reject both the Steinway and the Chappell grand pianos and then move onto the organ, Minnhinnick is using him to poke a little gentle fun at the debate.

This strip contrasts with Minhinnick's political cartoon examined above in that here he keeps the strip's contents within the issue of the concert and resulting controversy, without explicit reference to any other events. It is clear that the intention here is to make his audience laugh at the silliness of the debate by having Sam use the most unlikely jazz instrument in the town hall – the pipe organ!

Dressing Sam formally in white dinner jacket and bow-tie reminds the viewer that jazz musicians were not degenerates as many of the negative articles and letter writers were attempting to portray them, but normal members of society. By setting the strip in what is presumably the Auckland Town Hall, Minhinnick is also quietly commenting on the other aspect of the debate- who should be allowed use of the Town Hall and its facilities. Here he reminds the audience that the Town Hall is a community facility, that there is more to the music scene than serious classical music and others, including jazz musicians, should have fair access to the facilities. Perhaps Minhinnick also hoped that his audience would think about whether this debate was even worth a debate, at the end of the day, no matter how nice the piano was (and as outlined above, that itself is debateable), it is just a piano.

What is also interesting about the 'Sam–An Ill Wind' strip is that it presaged (and may have influenced) another jazz concert incident in the following year. There was an uproar in March 1953 over pianist Julian Lee (one of the pianists in the original incident) using the Auckland Town Hall's pipe organ during a concert (*New Zealand Herald* 11 March 1953, p. 8). Whether or not there is any connection to the cartoon is unknown. However, Lee is well known for his sense of humour on the New Zealand jazz scene, so it would not be surprising if there was some influence from the cartoon in his decision to make use of the organ.

Conclusion

While journalists were happily stoking the fires of controversy with pointed headlines and articles that spurred on the Letters to the Editor writers, both of Gordon Minnhinnick's cartoons served as a balance to remind readers of the *Herald* that this debate really was a little ridiculous. Minhinnick's politically oriented cartoon

reminded the erstwhile writers of letters to the editor and journalists that there were more important things to worry about than the use, or abuse of a piano- even an expensive, newly purchased one. His 'Sam' comic strip also served the same purpose from a different angle: no matter how nice, it is just a piano. It should also be noted that in spite of all of the harrumphing over the alleged damage, no repair work was ever reported as needing to be done to the Steinway after the incident, not even a routine tuning.

Minhinnick's political cartoon and the Sam comic serve as both ephemera and historical evidence of the grand pianos/town hall use debate, and the budgetary issues facing Auckland at the time. Both use Minhinnick's trademark humour, getting his audience to laugh at the overt issue of jazz being unkind to pianos, but at the same time the cartoon and the comic were designed to make the audience stop and think. The underlying message of both, that there were more important things to worry about than how a pianist treated a piano, served as a reminder to the audience of those issues, and even while making them laugh, urged them to pay attention to the bigger picture.

The Town Hall clerk Mr T.W.M. Ashby had the final word in this controversy. After seeing an advertisement for a forthcoming jazz concert in October declaring that the pianists would use the Steinway, Ashby issued a statement to the *New Zealand Herald*, published on 20 September stating that, 'there will be no swing on the Steinway' (*New Zealand Herald* 20 September 1952, p. 8).

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

Editorial Note

This paper is part of the special collection Brilliant Corners: Approaches to Jazz and Comics, co-edited by Dr Nicolas Pillai (Birmingham City University) and Dr Ernesto Priego (City University London).

Note

[1] It should be noted that the amount of '£650 grand' denotes New Zealand Pounds not British Pounds Sterling as this was pre-decimalisation of New Zealand currency.

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