

■ *Dave Calvert*
University of Huddersfield, UK

From Pedrolino to a Pierrot: The Origin, Ancestry and Ambivalence of the British Pierrot Troupe

In this article, the author considers the British development of the seaside Pierrot troupe, arguing that its construction is consistent with the notion of invented tradition, and the associated concerns with identity and nationality. Tracing the history of the character from its origins as Pedrolino in the commedia dell'arte, the article considers the traditional and novel elements of the British form. This also allows a brief account of the origin and aesthetics of the British tradition. Reflecting on the synthesis of the archaic and contemporary dimensions of the form, the author proposes that the new structure constructed an ambivalent class of character. The composition of both troupes and audiences was drawn from across the range of social strata. Through its collectivity and its treatment of contemporary social themes, it is argued the British Pierrot troupe approached and negotiated questions of a cultural and national identity in the late-Victorian period. Dave Calvert is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Huddersfield, UK. His research interests include street theatre, Applied Theatre and learning disabled performance. He is also a member of The Pierrotters, the last remaining seaside Pierrot troupe.

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Introduction

Emerging in the final decade of the 19th century, the Pierrot troupe became a familiar fixture on the British coast. John K. Walton acknowledges the eminent place of such troupes within popular entertainment:

at the beginning of the [20th] century the peculiar menu of seaside entertainments, a set of invented traditions with varying pedigrees, was well-established and flourishing [...] The Pierrots, white-faced performers in clown costumes who provided songs, jokes and sketches on beaches and in parks as well as on the pier, had superseded the Victorian 'nigger minstrels.'¹

Although troupes would visit inland, and some were permanently based there, the British Pierrot remained a regular sight at most seaside resorts during the summer months until the outbreak of the Second World War. Identified by the recognisable costume of a smock with pom-poms, neck-ruff, conical hat and (frequently) whitened faces, the troupes would offer *al fresco* performances to holiday-makers, usually three times a day. While there was no standard size for a troupe, the photographic evidence assembled by Chapman and Chapman suggests that the troupes of the Yorkshire Coast would number between 6 and 11 Pierrots, with Bert Grapho's Jovial Jollies consisting of 15.²

Despite the popularity and visibility of the tradition in the first half of the 20th century, there has been little serious study of the form. Local and amateur historians have preserved many details and stories of the troupes at particular resorts in several valuable books.³ Drawing from their work, alongside contemporary records, related scholarship and popular references, I aim to provide a more detailed overview and in-depth reflection on the historical and cultural significance of the British Pierrot troupe. Below, I investigate the emergence of the Pierrot troupe as an invented tradition at the end of the Victorian era, through the ancestry of its central performance image.

Eric Hobsbawm notes the peculiarity that such newly fashioned traditions "are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations."⁴ The Pierrot character has had a complex evolution, taken up and refashioned in a range of historical contexts. If the establishment of a British Pierrot tradition recalled these older settings, it also reinvented the figure for its own time. Visually and nominally, the British Pierrot troupe extracted the *commedia dell'arte* character Pedrolino, and its later variant Pierrot, from their original Italian and French contexts, resettling them in the late Victorian coastal resorts of Britain.

For Hobsbawm, invented tradition around the turn of the 20th century was bound up with political concerns about the formation of the nation and models of nationality. This, I argue, is the novel situation being addressed by the Pierrot through recourse to archaic practices. Paul Ward offers "an essential warning that nations and national identity are not permanent and unchanging, that they are the products of constant recomposition, renegotiation, contest and debate."⁵ The Pierrot troupe emerged in a period when such questions of identity were becoming a significant concern and the new performance tradition participated in these debates. While negotiating the contemporary concern with national identity and unity, the Pierrot performances became acts of constant

recomposition in themselves that drew from the ambivalence of the character's ancestral origins in the *commedia dell'arte*.

The ambivalences of Pierrot-Pedrolino

The history of *commedia dell'arte* is notable for the proliferations and reimagining of the characters as much as the form itself. In his 1963 book *The World of Harlequin*, Allardyce Nicoll is happy to “aver with assurance that the two theatrical characters most universally known today are Harlequin and Hamlet,”⁶ indicating that by the mid-20th century the individual character of Harlequin (originally Arlecchino) had become more familiar than the form in which it originated. The appropriation and recontextualising of such characters already had cultural precedents when the British Pierrot emerged. Pulcinella, for example, had been transformed into the puppet Mr. Punch towards the end of the 17th century. A variation of Arlecchino, along with other *commedia* characters, was introduced into the English pantomime in the early-18th century, giving rise to the Harlequinade which, in Nicoll's view, “stands far apart from the *commedia dell'arte*, and it was not long before the original Italian characters were vulgarised and transformed into the knockabout Pantaloon and Clown.”⁷

Commedia dell'arte characters received similar evolutionary treatment in other European countries, leading to one reason why the relationship between the British Pierrot and his Italian ancestor is complex. Originally known as Pedrolino (little Peter), the figure belongs, with Arlecchino, to the *zanni*, the servant class of *commedia* characters. A conventional *commedia dell'arte* scenario included two servants, the first and second *zanni*. Broadly speaking, these characters would not determine the narrative direction, but facilitate it through their control and manipulation of situations on behalf of their older masters (the *vecchi*). Sostek cites the writings of Pier Maria Cecchini, who managed the Compagnia degli Accessi between 1583 and 1622:

The first of the two servants is “astute and ingenious,” and “works without buffoonery to manage the plot.” The second is “an awkward ignoramus who pretends not to know, not to understand, and not to be able to carry out his orders.”⁸

Oreglia's description of Arlecchino implies an evolution from the second type to a paradoxical combination of both. The character began as “the stupid and ever-hungry servant, but it later assumed a more complex form; credulous and diffident, a lazy-bones but also a busybody, a mixture of cunning and ingenuousness, of awkwardness and grace.”⁹

Nicoll's overview of Pedrolino's development suggests this character's alternative historical movement from the first astute type to a similarly paradoxical personality. The original character, as created by Giovanni Pellesini in the 16th century and delineated in the scenarios of Flaminio Scala, was “a gay-witted confident intriguer.”¹⁰ Taken on as a role by Guiseppe Giaratone at the

Théâtre Italien in Paris in the latter half of the 17th century, the newly named Pierrot developed a “calculated stupidity; he mistakes absurdly, yet often his errors may be viewed as exhibitions of his common sense.”¹¹ For both Arlecchino and Pedrolino, the flexible dramatic function of the *zanni* results in characters marked by paradoxical ambivalences.

Pierrot’s move from the witty to the seemingly foolish character is accompanied by another development, from loyalty to honesty. Sostek recognises that “Pedrolino’s particular decorum...is that of a faithful servant of long standing.”¹² On the other hand, Nicoll notes that Giaratone’s Pierrot reveals and exacerbates “the follies of his master” through “gross misinterpretations of orders given to him.”¹³ It is these misinterpretations that are simultaneously markers of common sense and acts of innocent honesty that cut through the *vecchi*’s duplicity. For Duchartre, this accompanies a shift from “simplicity and elegance” to “simplicity and *naïveté* and awkwardness,” establishing Pierrot as a comic character but one with “a tenderness and sensitiveness more characteristic of the lovers.”¹⁴

This particular ambivalence leads to the next development in the theatrical history of Pierrot, its ‘third avatar’ in which “commonsense downrightness becomes changed into sensitivity, and the man who can so clearly discern the follies of others develops into a still honest but gentler character, rather lonely in his visions.”¹⁵ This more sympathetic variant, the unrequited lover trapped in an eternal triangle with Colombine and Harlequin, became the dominant French version of the 19th century. As acted influentially by Jean Gaspard Deburau (1796-1846) at the Théâtre des Funambules, the character became a silent clown invested with emotional intensity through which it “passed over from entertainment into high culture.”¹⁶ Even this romantic variant retained a characteristic ambivalence, however, as “Deburau seems to have presented the most various as well as the most intense version,”¹⁷ including adding “a touch of madness” and performing Pierrot as a murderer in some playlets.¹⁸

Invented tradition at the end of the 19th century benefited from the “capacity to call in the old world to redress the balance of the new.”¹⁹ Accordingly, the wide-ranging and paradoxical traits of the historical character were available to the British Pierrot, invented at the end of the 19th century during a spell of national fascination with the character. It was an offspring of Deburau’s Pierrot, performed in the visiting French mime production, *L’Enfant Prodigue* that sparked this fascination, and gave rise to the British adoption and transformation of Pierrot.

L’Enfant Prodigue and the invention of the British Pierrot

Bill Pertwee records the origin of the British Pierrot as follows:

Early in 1891 a singer and banjoist, Clifford Essex, after a visit to France, was so taken with the costumes and make-up of Pierrot that

he had seen, that he decided to form a 'party' of Pierrot entertainers, which he did. He obtained a booking at Bray near Dublin. Southern Ireland was then still part of the British Isles, so 1891 was the year that Pierrot came into being in the British Isles. Essex soon established his Pierrot troupe when his little party went to Cowes in the Isle of Wight for Regatta week.²⁰

There is no independent verification or record given of the debut performance at Bray. Tony Lidington, drawing from Essex's own memoirs, places the debut performances at Henley Regatta in 1891.²¹ On 20 August 1892, the 'London Gossip' column in *The Ipswich Journal* gossiped:

I hear that one of the most successful ventures of the Cowes Regatta was the entertainments given by the Pierrot Troupe. A well-known London hostess was among the number, and tried to keep up a semi-incognito [...] The greatest attraction of the *troupe*, however, proved Mr. Clifford Essex, who is so well-known.

Neither the Pierrot Troupe nor its founder is treated as a novelty in this brief account, suggesting that both were established by this time. Cowes Regatta had been held at the start of August, and so this later event may be a repeat performance or the performance by Essex's "little party" that Pertwee suggests took place in 1891.

For other reasons, 1891 was highly significant for the development of the Pierrot in Britain, since, as Sophie Nield notes, "the distinctive costume had been seen in London in the popular 1891 mime *L'Enfant prodigue* at the Prince of Wales's theatre."²² Acclaimed during its 1890 run in Paris, the show was created by Le Cercle Funambulesque, a name acknowledging the influence of the Deburau Pierrot. In a narrative loosely based on the prodigal son, the show featured Jane May as the wayward child of the title, the Pierrot son of Pierrot parents.²³ According to Lidington, Essex cites *L'Enfant Prodigue* as his own source of inspiration and claims that his troupe was advised by the same make-up artist that worked with Jane May.²⁴

A review in *The Birmingham Daily Post* on November 24, 1891, remarked that: "Nothing in the history of the modern stage has been more remarkable than the complete success in London of MM.Carré and Wormser's musical play without words." It also remarked, a little more moderately and with greater justification, that "'L'Enfant Prodigue' became the talk, and not only the artistic, but the financial triumph of the London season." Following its premiere on 31 March, 1891, the show's immediate success led to its swift promotion from the afternoon to the evening slot at the 1064-seat Prince of Wales's Theatre, and an extended run of over 250 performances. From late summer 1891, a second cast toured large provincial venues in cities such as Birmingham, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Hull, Sheffield, Bristol, Glasgow and Brighton.

At the London premiere, Pierrot was received as an alien figure. Most reviewers of the original run commented on the novelty of the performance in that it was “acted by a French company in an English theatre before a purely English body of spectators, in dumb show.” This review in *The Times* on 1 April, 1891, located the French identity of the production partly in the character of Pierrot which may “apprise a French public that they are about to witness something pantomimic. Such a consideration can have little or no weight in this country, however, where the pure white of Pierrot has, since the days of Grimaldi, given place to the spots and the dabs of red paint of the English clown.” Similarly, the *Bristol Mercury and Daily Post* on 1 September, 1891, commented that while the mime communicated effectively, “[w]hat is not so well understood is the white face and costume of Pierrot.”²⁵

When *L'Enfant Prodigue* returned to London at the Criterion Theatre in 1892, the figure of Pierrot was more firmly established and passed without comment or explanation in the reviews. Across both years, the production launched a trend for all things Pierrot, including a host of theatrical imitations, both French and British. As early as 18 April, 1891, the fashion advice in *The Cheshire Observer* included: “The latest craze is the ‘Pierrot’ ruffle and [...] can be worn with day as well as evening gowns. ‘Miss Jane May’ looked bewitching in this article of attire.”²⁶ According to *The Daily News* on 31 December, 1891, the fancy dress costumes at the Royal Opera House’s carnival season included “every variety of the clown family, the ubiquitous Pierrot predominating.”²⁷ The image was also taken up by some variety artistes: W.C. Bertram adopted the costume for his conjuring act in the “very merry ballet” *By the Sea, or Fun on the Sands*,²⁸ and in 1892 the Sisters Preston performed a music hall duet in which one appeared in Pierrot costume.²⁹ The trend for Pierrot styling—metropolitan in focus but spread through provincial middle-class consciousness—would suggest that, whether Essex took inspiration from travelling abroad or from *L'Enfant Prodigue*, his invention of the Pierrot troupe was not itself importing a new model from France but tapping into the fashionable reintroduction of Pierrot to a British public.

The ubiquity of the Pierrot image in carnival, fashion and Variety made it much less alien, and Pertwee cites *The Variety Theatre* newspaper as observing of the seaside troupes that “Pierrot became the order of the day. The tasteful white costume [...] fairly ‘caught on.’”³⁰ If Essex’s own contribution capitalised on the trends of 1891-92, it also instigated a new tradition of performance that would eclipse the popularity of *L'Enfant Prodigue* and expand over the following decades into an established fixture of the British seaside holiday. This ‘fourth avatar’ of the Pierrot extended the meaning of the white face and costume for British spectators, while reiterating elements of its French catalyst and the Italian original.

Aesthetics of the British Pierrot

As *The Variety Theatre* noted, the primary identifying feature of the Pierrot was a “tasteful white costume,” which consisted of a “loose blouse,

ornamented with pom-poms, the equally loose pantaloons, the natty shoe, [...] the black silk handkerchief which wound artistically round the head, and tied tastefully at the side, [...] surmounted by the conically-shaped white hat.”³¹ This remained the classic costume of the seaside acts, as illustrated by a variety of photographs of troupes such as Johnny Grove’s Royal Redcar Pierrots, Carrick’s Popular Pierrots, the Waterloo Pierrots and Gold’s Margate Pierrots.³² Variations on this classic image were largely restricted, initially, to the positioning of the pom-poms and the size and pattern of the ruff.

As the figure became more familiar to British holidaymakers, the costume design became more adventurous. George Royle’s Imps added pixie-like touches to the ruff and boots, while photographs of Grapho’s Jovial Jollies from the 1930s show a reversed scheme of dark tunics with light pom poms. One photograph of Catlin’s Royal Pierrots shows the troupe in a mixture of classic and reversed costumes, though all have white ruffs.³³

The black-and-white photographs give little information about actual colour. Compton MacKenzie’s 1918 novel *The Early Life and Adventures of Sylvia Scarlett* features a fictional troupe called The Pink Pierrots who wore pink costumes.³⁴ The contemporaneity of the novel is probably reflective of some extravagant adaptations of the classic Pierrot costume. A 1923 photograph of Hornsea’s Reps Concert Party shows “traditionally shaped Pierrot suits, the difference being that they were made from brightly coloured printed material with plain sleeves [...] The ladies’ dresses were [...] topped with saucy little hats of the same material.”³⁵ Where troupes were mixed gender, photographs suggest a convention that the men retained the classic conical hat while the women’s hats were differently shaped.

These variations in costume indicate the retention of a classic, recognisably Pierrot impression alongside a move to add varying degrees of novel and innovative touches to it, reflecting the British approach to the Pierrot character itself. Despite the fervour provoked by *L’Enfant Prodigue*, adoption of the classic costume recalled the more distant *commedia dell’arte*. Illustrations of the time suggest that the fashion for ruffles sparked by the production copied the most prominent element of a hybrid theatrical costume, worn by Jane May. Rather than pantaloons, she appears to wear breeches, as well as a waistcoat and jacket.³⁶ The British Pierrot does not adopt this metropolitan image from the French pantomime, but returns to the original baggy white suit of the *commedia*.

In the early days of *commedia dell’arte*, the classic Pierrot costume was not exclusive to Pedrolino; very similar outfits were worn by related characters such as Bertolino, Pagliaccio and Pulcinella. Noting this similarity, Nicoll draws a particular distinction between Pierrot and Pulcinella, in that the latter “has no real basic ‘character’” while the former “is a developing personality, each stage in this development remaining consistent within itself.” He observes, consequently, that representations of Pulcinella in the visual arts have a “tendency to double, treble and quadruple his person [...] Whether such droves of similarly clad, identical figures could have been actually found on the stage or not does not

matter” since Pulcinella is artistically imagined “not as a single recognisable entity but as a stock type capable of extended reproduction.”³⁷ Alternatively, such multiplication would be anathema for Pierrot, especially in Giaratone’s interpretation of a character “rather lonely in his visions [...] likeable but strange.”³⁸

This romantic isolation, developed further by Deburau, is echoed in Jane May’s description of Le Cercle Funambule’s Pierrot, in *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 4 May, 1891, as “a symbolical being, with the white moon, [...] a poetized [sic] being.” Pierrot, in this French phase, moves towards its apotheosis as an emblem of high culture. This is acknowledged in the previously quoted review by *The Bristol Mercury and Post*, where *L’Enfant Prodigue* is described as “true art” that, despite “touches of genuine comedy,” is predominantly a “drama of serious interest” from which “much of the humorous element [of British pantomime...] is practically absent.”³⁹

The Pierrot troupe deviates from this strand of the French Pierrot, abandoning both the artistic intensity and the sense of isolated individuality. The performance material of the seaside entertainment is neither narrative in form nor silently pantomimic in style. It corresponds more with the Variety stages of the Stoll-Moss Syndicates, and many performers moved between the indoor and alfresco platforms. Adeler and Sutton’s Pier Pierrots at New Brighton comprised four comedians, a ventriloquist, two singers and a pianist. According to Geoff Mellor in *The Stage*, 7 May, 1998, Andie Caine’s swansong troupe in Filey, 1939, had a similar line-up including comedian / ventriloquist Gus Yelrob and his ‘feed’ Tom Hall, singers Billy Gill and Wally Cliff, dancers Betty and Mollie Cutie and pianist Johnny Walsh.

Harry Russell exemplified the crossover between Variety theatre and the Pierrot troupe, having won the 1901 Professional Variety Artists Competition at the Middlesex Theatre of Varieties in Drury Lane. Subsequently, he:

appeared in the Halls with such luminaries as Kate Collins, G.H. Elliott, George Robey and Dan Leno. It was at this period that Harry wrote his first summer show which he produced on the Hoe at Plymouth for two or three seasons. He called his troupe Harry Russell’s Popular Pierrots, which consisted of T. H. Biddick, musician; Beatrice Royle, singer comedienne; W. Pettitt, banjo; E. Harcourt, singer; and the Sisters Sylvia, soubrettes. Harry provided the laughs.⁴⁰

These troupes retained the *commedia dell’arte* ensemble of skilled performers working in solo segments, various combinations and concerted sequences, across comic, musical and novelty routines, moving between slapstick comedy, witty routines, virtuoso recitations, romantic ballads, comic songs and specialty turns. This breadth of form allowed various incarnations of the Pierrot genealogy to be embraced: the clever intriguer; the lonely romantic; the knockabout clown; and the performer of impressive, or surprising, abilities. Where the specialities of *commedia dell’arte* would have commonly focussed on the acrobatic, in the

Victorian and Edwardian Pierrot show these echoed the novelty acts of the Variety theatres and Music Halls. Further following the Variety structure, each song, sketch or routine would have its own slot and internal logic, without the overarching narrative frameworks of either the Italian or French forms of *commedia*.

Establishing the British Pierrot outside of a conventional dramatic framework in this way recontextualised the figure. This was not a revolutionary development but a radical one, a return beyond *commedia dell'arte* to the roots of the Italian form, a return which recurs throughout the history of the characters. Rudlin notes that "*Commedia dell'arte* was born, some time around the middle of the 16th century, in the market place where a crowd has to be attracted, interested and then held."⁴¹ In this context, characters were utilised which were absorbed later into the narrative structures of *commedia dell'arte*. Drawing from contemporary accounts, he conjectures that:

A full mountebank performance, then, might have begun with busking by the Masks, leading to the introduction of the mountebank, who would begin to deliver his pitch with the aid of his masked *saltimbanque* assistants leaping on and off the stage to complete transactions or using their juggler's skills to throw the goods precisely to the person who had paid. When the audience were judged to have been sufficiently tapped, they would have been rewarded with a *Commedia* performance.⁴²

He adds to this market place origin a recognition of the participation of the *commedia* characters in medieval carnival, pointing to "at least a mid-16th century interaction between the popular street celebrations of Carnival and professional performance [...] by itinerant troupes."⁴³

The French performers of *commedia dell'arte* were restored to such a boisterous outdoor context following the closure of the Théâtre Italien in 1697. The theatres at the fairs, a synthesis of the carnival and the market place, featured "the marionettes of Brioche and the two-headed cow" alongside vendors "selling Marseilles soap, Siamese bonnets, all sorts of Greek and Italian wines, and hot cream *ratons*."⁴⁴ The *commedia* actors here "returned to their original practice of tight-rope walking and acrobatics."⁴⁵ Three centuries later, the British Pierrot combined these roles of entertainer and vendor:

All members of the troupe had to take their turn at "bottling" (going round with the collection box) to the crowds which invariably gathered round the deck chairs (for which a fixed charge was made) and vantage points on the Promenade. The Pierrots had collecting bags on long sticks to cater for the Promenade viewers! They also had to sell song copies and picture post-cards of the troupe.⁴⁶

The commercial basis of the seaside troupes situates them in relation to traditional market place exchanges, where the performative and the economic coincide.

There were other economic frameworks in operation at the seaside: the troupes would license pitches from the council, and then charge for deckchairs as a principal source of income. The artefacts for sale were also directly concerned with the performances, promotional merchandise rather than the broader range of goods available at the marketplace. Nonetheless, the form of exchange that links the Pierrot marketing back to the theatres at the fairs, an interactive model based on bartering and bantering, aestheticised the commercial structure. Rudlin, for example, suggests that an ideal starting point for the practical study of *commedia dell'arte* would be to:

listen to a barrow boy or a china salesman pitch his goods from a van in an outdoor market. His direct relationship to his public [...] has an ancestry as old as such markets themselves.⁴⁷

The aesthetics of this economic structure in themselves constructed the troupes as a form of invented tradition, operating an arcane commercial model distinct from the trading systems of industrialised Britain.

For John K. Walton, the British seaside context of the late-19th and early-20th centuries also “conjures up the spirit of carnival, in the sense of upturning the social order and celebrating the rude, the excessive, the anarchic, the hidden and the gross, in ways which generate tension and put respectability on the defensive.”⁴⁸ Operating in this context, the Pierrot troupe did not simply reflect or adopt the performance modes and structures of the Variety tradition, but revitalised the elements of song, dance, clowning and spectacle in the disruptive manner of the theatres at the fairs and earlier carnivals.

This is not solely a question of aesthetic form and atmosphere, but of engagement. For Rudlin, the carnival centres on an “inherent battle [...] between asceticism and artistic licence, censorship and freedom of expression.” This was a shared quality, in his view, with the *commedia dell'arte*, manifested by the characters in both as a “battle between the authority and the underdog, rich and poor, privileged and dispossessed.”⁴⁹ This element of tension became lost in 19th-century carnival, at least in its exclusive and most visible masked form. The Covent Garden carnival of 1891 mentioned above, with its ubiquitous Pierrots, was the preserve of the upper and middle classes, a more exclusive event than the theatre of the fairs. Similarly, based on an eyewitness account, Rudlin considers the Carnival in Rome in 1826 “a pretext for Hooray Henriets to have fun at the expense of the lower classes.”⁵⁰

The seaside context is more suited to the spirit of the popular carnivalesque. Just as attendance at the theatres at the fairs extended to “people belonging to every station in life,”⁵¹ Walton observes that “[b]y the beginning of the 20th century the capacious diversity of the British seaside had room for

visitors of all social classes and strata.”⁵² With such a representative audience, the traditional carnival battles between authority and servitude could recommence; the battle itself was a playfully engaging one, however, concerned with unity rather than division.

For Hobsbawm, invented traditions are:

highly relevant to that comparatively recent historical innovation, the ‘nation,’ with its associated phenomena [...] All these rest on exercises in social engineering which are often deliberate and always innovative, if only because historical novelty implies innovation.⁵³

It is with the innovations demanded in the particular historical context that the novel and exploratory ambivalence of the British Pierrot originated as an invitation to renegotiate a shared national identity.

The British Pierrot and Invented Tradition

The apparent historicity of the Pierrot, constructed through the depth of its recall to various traditions, means that nostalgia can overshadow novelty in perception of the performance. Nonetheless, the British Pierrot differs fundamentally from its predecessors. The most novel innovation, different to that of the *commedia dell’arte*, is that the entire ensemble is now made up of Pierrots. This is the very multiplication that Nicoll perceived as inimical to the character’s transhistorical construction as an essentially unique individual. Such multiplication is potentially foreshadowed in *L’Enfant Prodigue* where Pierrot *films* appears in a domestic setting with Pierrot *père*, also in conventional costume.

The multiplication of the British Pierrot was much greater, however, and framed neither as a familial or genetic connection between the individual figures, nor as a replicable essence, as in the case of Pulcinella. As noted, the breadth of performance registers allows the troupe to contain diverse types and personalities. The primary means of connecting the disparate performers (regardless of their specific roles, individual skills and personal characteristics) were the visual uniformity of the troupe’s costume design (however deviant from the classic Pierrot outfit), and the application of the title ‘Pierrot’ itself. The title now acquires an indefinite article: Jean Gaspard Deburau is simply ‘Pierrot;’ Clifford Essex is ‘a Pierrot.’ To be ‘a Pierrot’ designates role or occupation rather than persona; it also marks a particular mode of belonging by conferring membership of a wider collective of Pierrots, whether the immediate troupe or the greater constituency of the whole tradition. In this sense, the British construction emphasises its Pierrot less as a representation of a type of individual than as a *class* of character in its own right, instituting a historical shift in the symbolic capability of the figure. This class is not identified along socio-economic lines, but a wider, communal negotiation of identity.

If the multiplication of Pierrot overrides the usual isolation of the figure, it also ranges beyond the limited status of the *zanni*, despite contrary expectations

and perceptions. Green and Swan note a wider, and contemporary, Modernist practice which embraces the irreverence and theatrical artificiality of *commedia dell'arte*. This attention to the “comedic spirit” in the work and/or lives of Diaghilev, Picasso, Meyerhold, Stravinsky, Reinhardt and others is viewed as “highbrow and solemn” while being deliberately and “paradoxically, vulgar.”⁵⁴ This is understood to be distinct from the seaside troupes, described as “the more sordid and proletarian side of the *commedia* tradition.”⁵⁵

The justification given by Green and Swan cites Sacheverell Sitwell’s recollection that one Scarborough pierrot “was a rich man who paid for the privilege of dressing and singing as a woman. [Sitwell] hints at sexual scandal.”⁵⁶ Any distinction from the highbrow and solemn cross-dressing of Jane May in *L’Enfant Prodigue*, or the comedic spirit and irreverent sexual scandals of Diaghilev is not opened up, and so the accusation of sordid practice is not fully clarified. There does, however, appear to be an assumed correlation between sordid and proletarian, which seemingly distinguishes the Pierrot troupe from the Modernist artists, however much the latter reacted against bourgeois artistic values. This correlation needs contesting, however, since we have already noted the socially diverse seaside audience, and the performer observed by Sitwell is himself rich, rather than proletarian.

The socio-economic class composition of troupes was also complex. Some of the troupe managers were originally craftsmen, particularly those that developed troupes in their home towns such as Joseph Denton, a stonemason from Scarborough, and Joe Mulvana, a jet turner from Whitby. Billy Scarrow, founder of the Cosy Corner Pierrots and The Optimists in Redcar, was the son of a locomotive driver. The more successful impresarios, who often adopted towns as their performance territory, frequently had professional backgrounds in popular performance: Clifford Essex was already a celebrated banjoist and Will Catlin performed in Variety theatres as a double act with Charles Carson. Both entrepreneurs became well-off, Essex as an acclaimed manufacturer of banjos whose company still trades today and Catlin through a far-ranging empire of seaside troupes, variety entertainments and cinemas. In the 1911 census, another Pierrot entrepreneur, Robert Sample, founder of the Cleveland Cadets (known as Sam Paul), gives his occupation as Picture Hall Manager and includes a servant in the household listing.

As discussed, Harry Russell also had a professional background in popular entertainment, while his personal background belonged to the educated middle classes. Russell’s father “was a Doctor of Music who had obtained his degree from Trinity College, Dublin. He [...] was also a classical scholar in Greek, Latin and Hebrew.”⁵⁷ This is not an isolated example: mention has already been made of a semi-incognito London hostess performing with Essex’s troupe; Celia Ridgway, who performed with the Cosy Corner Pierrots, was the daughter of an army officer and grand-daughter of a physician; and Kemsley Scott Barrie, female impersonator with Will Catlin’s Scarborough troupe, “was related to Sir Percy Scott, Admiral of the Fleet.”⁵⁸

The social composition of the troupes took a particular turn during the First World War. While Walter Sickert's 1915 painting 'Brighton Pierrots' depicts a listless troupe performing to empty deckchairs at home, the tradition was flourishing in army training units, on the front line, in Prisoner of War camps and military hospitals.⁵⁹ Such troupes more commonly comprised lower middle class and working class performers. Two possible reasons may account for this narrowing of the troupe composition. Fuller points to the satirical use of concert parties which allowed grievances to be aired at the expense of the officer class. This process required a social division between stage and auditorium, which permitted a temporary reversal of authority.

Officers were sent up, and the pleasure was all the greater for the victims' presence. Beyond pleasure, the value of the occasion was also increased. Officer attendance, and often participation, gave their implicit sanction to the proceedings. They accepted the comic strictures offered from the stage; they did not stand on their dignity; they were 'alright' at bottom, simply men doing their job.⁶⁰

For such satire to prove cathartic without unsettling the solidarity of the war effort, the performances required different levels of the social hierarchy to occupy different roles relative to the Pierrot performances.

Victor Emeljanow draws attention to the account of General Sir John Monash and his description of his regular attendance at frontline Pierrot shows, during which he and General Godley were the targets of many "respectful" jokes. Emeljanow also observes that performance for soldiers and prisoners of war was psychologically valuable as an act of memory which recalled the stability of pleasant times before the horrors and meaningless of war.⁶¹ The choices of performance for the officer classes and the other ranks were polarised according to social access to 'high' and 'low' art. The privileged ranks would reflect a cultural history rooted in the middle and upper class experience, while the comforting reassurance of culture for the lower and middle class soldiers would incline towards popular forms such as the Pierrot tradition.

With the end of the war, however, this realignment of Pierrot composition along social lines was not sustained. Performers from the middle and upper classes once again engaged in the tradition alongside those from the lower middle and working classes. The continuing prosperity of the Pierrot impresarios also allowed for social mobility within the field of such performances. In the interwar years, the balance of the audiences may have shifted, however, as Walton notes that "the continuing expansion of the British holiday market [...] was founded on the increasing purchasing power and holiday entitlements of the lower middle and urban working classes."⁶²

Neither constituency, the performers nor their audiences, was therefore homogenous throughout the tradition, rather they comprised a diverse range of social levels. Ambivalence regarding socio-economic class is also inscribed into the aesthetics, commerce and marketing of the performances. One of the focal

points of paradoxical ambivalence was the negotiation of respectability within the troupes. While the act of ‘bottling’ may have aligned the British Pierrot with the beggars, buskers and hawkers of medieval fairs, the troupes were also at pains to emphasise their refinement, as in this 1904 playbill:

MR. ANDIE CAINE
 BEGS TO PRESENT HIS
 Troupe of Refined
 Pierrot Entertainers
 (10th SEASON)
 AN ENTERTAINMENT STRICTLY FREE
 FROM VULGARITY.

“Begs” is suitably ambiguous here, operating as both a semi-accurate marker of the economic relationship with the audience, and a nod towards polite discourse. The performance range similarly troubles the distinction between refinement and vulgarity.

In an anonymous letter to *The Dalesman*, November 1964,⁶³ a spectator recollects a childhood memory of a performance in which Caine himself “lay on the floor on his back, playing an imaginary violin and saying to the audience ‘Wake me at 7 with a cup of tea and a bath bun’ and we all pealed with laughter.” The performance here stretches questions of refinement. It playfully lampoons the gentility of the leisured classes, whose principles of decorum set standards for refinement in social matters and manners. In its buffoonery, it also eschews decorum and recalls the vulgarised knockabout Nicoll perceives in the Harlequinade’s corruption of *commedia dell’arte*, rather than foregrounding sophisticated artistry.

As such, the performance problematises the polarity of the vulgar and the refined, which are clearly not identified here according to the aesthetic tastes and mannered dignity of the privileged classes. Another letter of 1903 complained of “intolerable nuisances caused by the performances of two troupes of pierrots, and of various other itinerant musicians, who are rapidly bringing down Filey, to the level of Margate and Yarmouth.”⁶⁴ Nonetheless, other routines in the repertoire could observe more genteel qualities, especially in romantic ballads. A songbook from c.1912 includes the simple yet elegant lyric ‘There’s Something Fascinating In The Moon’ which is reminiscent of Jane May’s poetic characterisation of Pierrot:

Why do all the poets write about the silv’ry moon
 And rave about the bright star-light?
 Why does ev’rybody need the silv’ry moon to spoon
 When the sun shines just as bright?

[...]

The moonbeams seem to teach you how to love

And your heart seems just as light,
 There's something fascinating in the moon
 When it shines on a summer's night.⁶⁵

The popular Pierrot tradition is no less concerned with traversing the distinction between refinement and vulgarity than the Modernists. In this instance, however, the paradox is not a matter of individual morality but a testing of the terms on communal and aesthetic levels.

The meaning of “refined” in the context of Caine’s sign is difficult to definitively pin down. It could refer simply to the elegance of the Pierrot costume. At a performative level, it could relate to the virtuosity of the performers—comic, musical or novel—in the same way as the ‘*arte*’ of the *commedia*. Alternatively, or additionally, the suitability of the performances for children could suggest refinement as a matter of avoiding material that would be considered offensive across social strata, rather than according to elite mores. It is in this latter sense that the vulgar buffoonery can be, paradoxically, refined. As such, the troupes negotiated refinement, and vulgarity, as a communal concern beyond the tastes of any particular socio-economic class.

This suggests that the uniform identity of the collective Pierrot troupe opened out to propose a unifying relationship with its audience. The aesthetic uniformity of the troupe was not concerned with constructing Pierrot simply as a symbol of the proletarian class, affiliated with his servile and comic *zanni* ancestor. The framework for uniformity inside the ambivalent and contested space was not principally provided by the shared costume, character or status of the performers. Instead, it emerged from the historical and geographical adoption of the name, further qualifying the significance of a Pierrot governed by an indefinite article.

In the transition from the Italian Pedrolino or French Pierrot to the British Pierrot, the direct etymological reference to ‘little Peter’ is lost. Inasmuch as this divorces the title Pierrot from being a proper noun, it opens the possibility for Pierrot to be redesignated as a class of character, rather than an identified personality. In one sense, this empties the name of any specific identification with the individual who adopts it other than imposing the traditional and cultural associations of Pierrot on to them. In another, historically novel, sense, a new linguistic association is formed out of the relocation to the seaside context and the relationship between Pierrot and “[t]hat potent symbol of the Victorian seaside, the pier” which, for Walton, is “the essence of liminality.”⁶⁶ This sets the symbolic framework for the Pierrot to occupy a metaphorical and literal space between the distinct tastes and judgements of socio-economic classes, and concern itself with broader questions of collective identity.

Through this linguistic association, ‘Pierrot’ replaces its status as proper noun with a status as demonym, assuming citizenship of a fictional and liminal nation-state, the Pier. The fundamental ambivalences of this Pierrot, therefore,

become concerned with the theatrical negotiation of identity as a question of collective nationhood rather than individual personality. Accordingly, the invented tradition of the Pierrot performer centres on a final ambivalent symbol that is, simultaneously, British and foreign.

The social diversity and concerns of the alien Pierrot reflected the social diversity and concerns of the spectating British public. For example, as Ranger notes, “[o]ne of the functions of the invention of tradition in 19th-century Europe was to give rapid and recognisable symbolic form to developing types of authority and submission.”⁶⁷ In exploiting the ambivalence of ‘refinement,’ with markers of social respectability yoked to the performed economic dependency of the busker, the Pierrot troupe engages internally in the battle between authority and underdog that is characteristic of both contemporary political concerns and carnivalesque play. In this way, where *commedia dell’arte* performed ambivalence in the lowly individual character within a social hierarchy, the invented tradition of the seaside Pierrot approaches performance as an act of reconsidering collective identity at a cultural level of real and feigned nationality, beyond the divisions of socio-economic class.

Conclusion

The arrival of *L’Enfant Prodiges* in London during 1891 inspired British experimentation with the image of the Pierrot that spanned the legitimate and Variety stages, masked balls and fashion houses. The very foreignness of the character, evolved primarily through Italian and French contexts, allowed for reinterpretation of the figure while maintaining its historic associations. As such, the trend could serve the late-19th century enthusiasm for invented traditions as contemporary responses grounded in references to historical situations. The alien and anachronistic qualities of the character were also pertinent for performers around the British coast, offering a striking visual image suitable to their alfresco performances. Linguistic association with the Pier also constructed a sense of belonging at the seaside. Equally significantly, the early modern roots of Pierrot formed a bridge between the entertainment structures of Variety theatre and the carnivalesque spirit of the holiday resorts. While embracing the freedoms afforded by this environment, the British Pierrot multiplied its ancestral counterpart from an individual type to a class of character. In synthesising these aesthetic strands the British Pierrot followed other invented traditions in renegotiating models of national identity that transcended social groupings.

Acknowledgements

With thanks to the Crimlisk Fisher Archive and Tony Lidington for access to their collection.

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- ¹ John K. Walton, *The British Seaside* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 94.
- ² Maeve Chapman and Ben Chapman, *Pierrots of the Yorkshire Coast* (Beverley: Hutton Press, 1988).
- ³ Chapman and Chapman, *Pierrots*; Geoff J. Mellor, *Pom-Poms and Ruffles* (Clapham: Dalesman Publishing Ltd, 1966); Bill Pertwee, *Promenades and Pierrots* (Vermont: David and Charles Ltd, 1979).
- ⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 4.
- ⁵ Paul Ward, *Britishness Since 1870* (Oxon: Routledge, 2004), 13.
- ⁶ Allardyce Nicoll, *The World of Harlequin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 2.
- ⁷ Nicoll, *Harlequin*, 202.
- ⁸ Edward L. Sostek, "The *Commedia dell'Arte*: A Study In Dramatic Form" (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 1978), 26.
- ⁹ Giacomo Oreglia, *The Commedia dell'Arte* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), 56.
- ¹⁰ Nicoll, *Harlequin*, 24.
- ¹¹ Nicoll, *Harlequin*, 90.
- ¹² Sostek, *Commedia*, 157.
- ¹³ Nicoll, *Harlequin*, 90-91.
- ¹⁴ Pierre L. Duchartre, *The Italian Comedy* (London: Constable and Company, 1966), 251-252.
- ¹⁵ Nicoll, *Harlequin*, 92-93.
- ¹⁶ Martin Green and John Swan, *The Triumph of Pierrot* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 5.
- ¹⁷ Green and Swan, *Pierrot*, 11.
- ¹⁸ Green and Swan, *Pierrot*, 6.
- ¹⁹ David Cannadine, "The Context, Performance and Meaning of Ritual: The British Monarchy and the 'Invention of Tradition,' c.1820-1977" in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 124.
- ²⁰ Pertwee, *Promenades*, 12.
- ²¹ Tony Lidington, *Pierrot Hero: the Story of Clifford Essex* (BBC Radio 4, 25 January 2013).
- ²² Sophie Nield, "Popular Theatre, 1895-1940," in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre Vol. 3 Since 1895*, ed. Baz Kershaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 101.
- ²³ Jane May was a French actress noted for a combination of intelligence and comedic skill in the interpretation of light roles. By the time she performed as Pierrot fils in *L'Enfant Prodigue* she was already known to London audiences as a stalwart of the French seasons at the Royalty Theatre, Soho. Her roles there included: Suzanne in Pailleron's *Le Monde où l'on S'Ennuie* (1884 and 1889); Cypriennes in Sardou's *Divorçons* (1884-5); Emmeline in Baynard and de Bréville's *Un fils de famille* (1888); and the title role in Hennequin and Millaud's *Niniche* (1888).
- ²⁴ Lidington, *Essex*.
- ²⁵ *Bristol Mercury and Daily Post*, 1 September 1891, 3.
- ²⁶ *The Cheshire Observer*, 18 April 1891, 2.
- ²⁷ *The Daily News*, 31 December 1891, 6.
- ²⁸ See *The Era*, 13 February 1892, 19.
- ²⁹ From a review titled "The Middlesex" in *The Era*, 25 June 1892, 14.
- ³⁰ Pertwee, *Promenades*, 12-13.
- ³¹ Pertwee, *Promenades*, 12-13.
- ³² See Chapman and Chapman, *Pierrots*; Mellor, *Pom-Poms*; Pertwee, *Promenades*.
- ³³ Chapman and Chapman, *Pierrots*, George Royle's Imps 33, Grapho's Jovial Jollies 29, Catlin's Royal Pierrots 46.
- ³⁴ Compton MacKenzie, *The Early Life and Adventures of Sylvia Scarlett* (Forgotten Books, [1918] 2012), originally published by Hutchinson and Co, London,
- ³⁵ Chapman and Chapman, *Pierrots*, 81.
- ³⁶ See 'The Art of Pantomime' in *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 4 May, 1891, 1-2.
- ³⁷ Nicoll, *Harlequin*, 88.
- ³⁸ Nicoll, *Harlequin*, 93.
- ³⁹ *Bristol Mercury and Daily Post*, 1 September 1891, 3.
- ⁴⁰ Chapman and Chapman, *Pierrots*, 79.

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- ⁴¹ John Rudlin, *Commedia dell'Arte: An Actor's Handbook* (London: Routledge, 1994), 23.
- ⁴² Rudlin, *Handbook*, 27-28.
- ⁴³ Rudlin, *Handbook*, 33.
- ⁴⁴ Duchartre, *Comedy*, 109.
- ⁴⁵ Duchartre, *Comedy*, 109.
- ⁴⁶ Mellor, *Pom-Poms*, 14.
- ⁴⁷ Rudlin, *Handbook*, 23-24.
- ⁴⁸ Walton, *Seaside*, 4.
- ⁴⁹ Rudlin, *Handbook*, 32-33.
- ⁵⁰ Rudlin, *Handbook*, 31.
- ⁵¹ Duchartre, *Comedy*, 109.
- ⁵² Walton, *Seaside*, 51.
- ⁵³ Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions" in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 13.
- ⁵⁴ Green and Swan, *Pierrot*, 8, 13.
- ⁵⁵ Green and Swan, *Pierrot*, 43.
- ⁵⁶ Green and Swan, *Pierrot*, 43.
- ⁵⁷ Chapman and Chapman, *Pierrots*, 77.
- ⁵⁸ See Chapman and Chapman, *Pierrots*, 46. It is unlikely that Barrie is Sitwell's sexually scandalous figure who paid for the privilege of performing. Barrie subsequently had a celebrated spell as a performer, including as pantomime Dame in London, before dying in the Great War.
- ⁵⁹ Artefacts relating to Pierrot performances by serving soldiers can be found in the Liddle Collection, University of Leeds, and in collections at the Imperial War Museum, notably those relating to troupes The Transportation Pierrots and The Categories. A number of artefacts relating to amateur and hospital troupes during World War One are held at the Greater Manchester County Record Office.
- ⁶⁰ J.G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 102.
- ⁶¹ Victor Emeljanow, "Palliative pantomimes: some excursions into the role of popular entertainments in prisoner-of-war camps during World War 1." Paper presented at FIRT/IFTR Annual Conference, Santiago, Chile, 22-28 July 2012.
- ⁶² Walton, *Seaside*, 56.
- ⁶³ Cutting, in the Crimlisk Fisher Archive, Filey.
- ⁶⁴ Crimlisk Fisher Archive, anonymous letter written to the local council, cutting from unknown newspaper dated 5 September 1903.
- ⁶⁵ Written by Bob F. Sear, Worton David and Walter Wilson. From the private collection of Tony Lidington.
- ⁶⁶ Walton, *Seaside*, 104.
- ⁶⁷ Terence Ranger, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa" in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 237.