

The Royal Variety Performance.

Is this the tackiest show on earth? It always seems to have the worst acts, unfunny comedians, off-key singers, robotic comperes, and an excess of special effects - as though Her Majesty might fall asleep if the noise level and weirdness of it all were not maintained.

Who can possibly have imagined, for the recent show, that the Queen is such a fan of pop music that she would be thrilled to see and hear six male groups, in one evening? Or that raunchy stand-up comedians were welcomed. Or that she would want to see, probably for the fiftieth time, the pas de deux from 'Swan Lake'? Difficult to understand the mind-set of its producers. At least, those viewing it on television had the welcome relief of the advertising, if they were determined to continue to watch such second rate stuff. Us in the seats didn't.

The pop groups all seemed to wear identical jeans - an observation which probably enthralled Her Majesty as a clue to the dress code of her citizens. They all had glistening hair and they all sang with an expression suggestive of constipation but probably meant to express deep emotion. There were the usual tedious close-ups of the drummers hammering their cymbals and of the lead singers doing their little jigs in-between verses, jigs that might make you think they had a hip problem.

As a relief from the pop, Her Majesty was presented with the latest TV talent show find - a tenor. He sang a few bits from opera accompanied by no less than thirty young women, each in a little black dress and each with the same length hair, playing violins. Then he sang a bit more, accompanied by thirty different girls, again identically dressed and coiffed, singing along. Meanwhile, on a very long swing, another girl, smiled winningly, while managing to swing back and forth in time to the music. The tenor's voice, apparently a good one, was lost in all this folderol.

Later four male singers entertained Her Majesty and us. They too were identically dressed. They were supposed to be standing in a wafting mist but the draught from the left wing blew it away to the right, creating an unfortunate imbalance and perhaps diminishing the emotional force of their wailing.

The Comperes (Masters of Ceremonies? Introducers?) were a man and a young woman. She was definitely unused to and uncomfortable in her dress and smiled fixedly at the insinuating and jokey manner of the man accompanying her, whose neat hair arrangement must have taken an hour to fix. Indeed he looked as though he had been totally manufactured.

Between them they gave probably the longest intro most of us had ever heard to the star of the evening. A classical pianist! Who is going to open the Beijing Olympics! On he came, a little bowed under all this new-found western stardom. He sat at the Steinway and dashed into Liszt's Hungarian Whatisit, against a background screen of huge

proportion depicting the naked 'Mars and Venus' of some Renaissance painter. Yards of podgy flesh. Regrettably, the Steinway appeared to have been tuned by a stage hand with a hammer and ear-ache. It sounded dreadful. Its bass was muted and its treble almost electrified. The pianist must hope for better than this at the Olympics. As must we.

After that, all the performers got together on the stage and wished Their Majesties a happy sixtieth wedding anniversary, which they followed with a sing-along of 'Let It Be'. Nobody knows why. It was horrible, unrehearsed and unenhanced by technology.

Nevertheless, Her Majesty was imperturbable as usual and kindly met the performers afterwards who, away from the stage, seemed diminished and their glossy stage presences slightly grubby and freakish. But Her Majesty smiled sweetly. She was probably, like the rest of us, thinking 'I'll need a stiff one after this lot'.