The Bell Telephone Hour Encyclopedia Article

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The Bell Telephone Hour

Every Monday night for 18 years, from April 29, 1940, America was treated to *The Bell Telephone Hour,* a musical feast broadcast by NBC Radio. Featuring the 57-piece Bell Telephone Orchestra, directed by Donald Voorhees, who composed their theme, "The Bell Waltz," the program brought the best in musical entertainment across a broad spectrum, in a format that made for easy and popular listening. Vocalists James Melton and Francia White performed with the orchestra until April 27, 1942, when the program initiated its "Great Soloists" tradition, showcasing individual artists of distinction. Among the many "greats" were opera stars Helen Traubel, Marion Anderson, and Ezio Pinza, concert pianists Jose Iturbi and Robert Casadesus, leading artists in jazz such as Benny Goodman, top Broadway stars such as Mary Martin, and popular crooners, including Bing Crosby.

NBC took *The Bell Telephone Hour* off the air in 1958, but revived it for television from October 9, 1959, with Donald Voorhees and the Orchestra still in place. Always stylish and elegant in presentation, the small-screen version ran for 10 years, offering the same eclectic mix as the radio original for eight of them. The visual medium allowed the inclusion of dance, and viewers were treated to appearances by ballet idol Rudolf Nureyev and veteran tap-dancer Ray Bolger, among others. On April 29, 1960, the program memorably brought Gilbert and Sullivan's operetta, *The Mikado,* to television with a cast led by soprano Helen Traubel as Katisha and comedian Groucho Marx as the Lord High Executioner.

In 1966, however, the show abandoned its established format in favor of documentary films. Subjects included such established performers as pianist Van Cliburn, conductor Zubin Mehta, and jazz man Duke Ellington, but the program lasted only two more years, ending a chapter in broadcasting history on April 26, 1968.

Further Reading:

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