



RADIO IN THE 78 RPM ERA (1920-1948) PROFESSOR JEREMY SUMMERLY

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At 7.10 pm on 15 June 1920, a half-hour broadcast was given by Australian prima donna Dame Nellie Melba ('the world's very best artist'). Singing from a workshop at the back of the Marconi Wireless and Telegraph Company, the 59-year old soprano described her Chelmsford recital as 'the most wonderful experience of my career'. The transmission was received all around Europe, as well as in Soltan-Abad in Persia (now Arak in Iran) to the East, and Newfoundland (at the time a Dominion of the British Empire) to the West. Dame Nellie's recital became recognized as Britain's first official radio broadcast and the Daily Mail (predictably, perhaps, in its role as sponsor) described the event as 'a great initiation ceremony; the era of public entertainment may be said to have completed its preliminary trials'.

The Radio Corporation of America had been founded a year earlier, run by a young Russian-American businessman David Sarnoff. Sarnoff believed that 'broadcasting represents a job of entertaining, informing and educating the nation, and should therefore be distinctly regarded as a public service', words that were later echoed more famously by John Reith of the British Broadcasting Company. On 11 May 1922, daily radio transmissions of an hour began from the 7th floor of Marconi House at London's Aldwych. The Marconi Company's London station was known as 2LO and its first concert (for voice, cello, and piano) was broadcast on 24 June; the Prince of Wales (later Edward VIII) broadcast from Marconi House on 7 October. 2LO was transferred to the BBC on 14 November and a day later the BBC opened the Metropolitan-Vickers station in Manchester (2ZY) and the Western Electric station in Birmingham (5IT); Newcastle's 5NO was to follow on Christmas Eve. By the end of the year John Reith had been appointed General Manager of the BBC and later became Managing Director. From 1922-32 the BBC was based at 'Savoy Hill' at 2 Savoy Place, off London's Strand.

On 8 January 1923, eight weeks after it went on air, the BBC mounted its first Outside Broadcast – part of Mozart's *The Magic Flute* from the Royal Opera House. Within a few days of its OB of *The Flute*, the BBC relayed parts of *The Marriage of Figaro*, as well as extracts from Humperdinck's *Hansel & Gretel*, Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci*, Wagner's *Siegfried*, and Gounod's *Faust*. By May 1923 the musical director at the ROH, Percy Pitt, had become part-time music adviser to the BBC. Under Pitt's guidance, the 2LO Dance Band, the 2LO Military Band, the 2LO Light Orchestra, and the 2LO Octette became constituent parts of the BBC's musical provision. Crucially, John Reith did not like jazz. Opera, symphonic music, chamber music, song, choral music, brass band, light music, and dance music were deemed acceptable for broadcast; jazz was not.

By the spring of 1923 there were 80,000 licensed radio sets in Britain, but there may have been a quarter of a million in use because many people built their own. A radio licence cost 10 shillings (around one-fifth of the weekly income of a labourer in the south of England), half of which went to the Post Office and half to the BBC.

In 1924, the 20-year old Stanford 'Robbie' Robinson was appointed BBC Chorus Master and in September he formed the 16-voice professional BBC Wireless Chorus, specifically to sing Rutland Boughton's opera, *The Immortal Hour*. Early radio relied much less on playing recordings of music than it does now (this in spite of the advent of electrical – as opposed to acoustic – recording in 1925). Ensembles were heard on the radio and were then approached by record companies who wished to record what they had heard broadcast. The BBC discovered and nurtured talent; the record companies marketed and sold that talent. In 1926, dance music ruled the air waves and the 26-year old pianist Jack Payne was appointed the BBC's Director of Dance Music. Payne formed the BBC Dance Orchestra in 1928 and in 1929 the orchestra took part in the BBC's first television broadcast. Payne and his orchestra became such media celebrities that they left the BBC in 1932 to go their own way as a touring act. Bands ceased to be mere dance accompanists and became headline concert performers. Payne later returned to the BBC as Director of Dance Music from 1941-6.

In 1927, the British Broadcasting Company was dissolved and was replaced by the Crown-chartered British Broadcasting Corporation. Eight members of the BBC Wireless Chorus were offered contracts and formed an octet called the BBC Wireless Singers. In that year, Gustav Holst's choral ballet *The Morning of the Year* became the BBC's first music commission. The words were written by the Tenor Stuart Wilson, who later became Director of Music at the BBC. *The Morning of the Year* received its first performance at the Royal Albert Hall on 17 March 1927.

In the early years of the BBC, classical music was given less airtime than other music, but there was a peak-time Wednesday evening orchestral slot. Some early listeners (the words "listener" and "listeners" were usually presented within inverted commas) found the classical diet too heavy. But education through, for instance, the daily quarter-hour 'The Foundations of Music' series helped. And in 1927 the BBC salvaged the Queen's Hall Promenade Concerts. When the impresario Robert Newman had begun *The Proms* in 1895, Newman stated that he wanted to 'train the public by easy stages...gradually raising the standard until I have created a public for classical and modern music'. This training had been of a time and of a place. The time was the off-season (early August to early October) and the place was London's two-year old Queen's Hall. Cheap tickets and proximity to the players were but two features of this radical undertaking, which was nothing less than cultural appropriation of classical music towards the masses and away from the élite. Another goal was the professionalization of British music-making through disciplined orchestral training. In this endeavour, Newman had engaged the 26-year old Henry Wood as conductor of the newly-formed Queen's Hall Orchestra. Newman abolished British pitch (higher than on the continent) in favour of French pitch (pretty much modern concert pitch) and marketed transferable season tickets. When Newman died in November 1926, the future of *The Proms* looked bleak. Chappell's no longer wished to run the concerts, so the BBC stepped in, initially with the full support of the BBC's Director of Music, Percy Pitt, and Henry Walford Davies (a musical adviser to the BBC and a presenter of talks about music). The concept of the BBC Proms was eventually given full support by John Reith, who rightly concluded that a 'big public gesture' such as saving *The Proms* would do the BBC's reputation no harm at all.

Orchestral provision at the BBC had got off to a grinding start. The BBC's first broadcast symphony concert was given on 1 October 1923, conducted by Percy Pitt. An 18-piece BBC Wireless Orchestra was founded under Dan Godfrey Jr and the forces rose to 37 players for special occasions. In 1924 the orchestra was expanded to 22 regular players and was contracted for six concerts per week; in the following year it changed its name to the BBC Wireless Symphony Orchestra.

In 1927 the orchestra gave a series of concerts with 150 players but the results were not good. To make matters worse, the Berlin Philharmonic and Wilhelm Fürtwängler visited London in 1927 and showed Queen's Hall audiences how a symphony orchestra should sound. The humiliation of the Berlin orchestra's visit was compounded by subsequent visits of the Concertgebouw Orchestra under Willem Mengelberg and the New York Philharmonic under Arturo Toscanini. In response, Sir Thomas Beecham tried to form a BBC Radio Orchestra, but it didn't work out. By contrast, 1928 was something of an *annus mirabilis* in the British choral scene. In 1928 the BBC National Chorus was formed and on Christmas Eve 1928, the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols was broadcast by the BBC from King's College, Cambridge for the first time.

At the end of 1929, Edward Clark, programme planner at the BBC, hatched a plan for the formation of an orchestra of 114 full-time players, which could be split into four smaller groups. This resulted in the formation of the BBC Symphony Orchestra under its first conductor Adrian Boult. Seasoned principals were joined by young, enthusiastic rank-and-file players, some of them fresh out of music college. The BBC Symphony Orchestra was the first permanent salaried orchestra in London and it gave its first concert in the Queen's Hall on 22 October 1930: Wagner's 'The Flying Dutchman' Overture and Brahms's Fourth Symphony were followed by the A-minor Cello Concerto by Saint-Saëns and Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloë* symphonic fragments. British music was encouraged as well, and although it was never finished by the composer, Elgar's 3rd Symphony was commissioned by the BBC on 14 December 1932, after much encouragement from the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw. As recorded in the Daily Telegraph: 'The dedication of the symphony will be to the BBC, which must surely be the first corporation ever to be inscribed on the title page of a symphony'. In the first decade of its existence, the BBC Symphony Orchestra was conducted by luminaries such as Richard Strauss, Felix Weingartner, Bruno Walter, Serge Koussevitzky, Sir Thomas Beecham, and Willem Mengelberg. Arturo Toscanini, regarded by many as the greatest conductor of the day, also conducted the orchestra several times; just before the outbreak of the Second World War Toscanini told Boult that the BBC Symphony was 'the orchestra I would like to take round the world'.

On 17 June 1932, a Mr Glover wrote to the Radio Times from his home in Bermondsey, describing himself as 'a man who has to work for a living'. He felt let down by the BBC because 'mournful music is not very appetizing for anyone who has to listen after a hard day's work'. Glover's gripe was that he 'was never schooled to hear such beautiful classical music as we get from all those musicians with fancy names and cosmopolitan titles to their music'. On the other side of the fence, the contralto Dame Clara Butt had said five years earlier that 'wireless is helping to build up a vast new body of intelligent listeners; it is educating them by giving them the finest music'. And the composer Igor Stravinsky described the BBC in glowing terms as an 'eclectic organization' and praised the BBC for its promotion of new music with 'invincible tenacity'.

In 1932 the BBC moved from Savoy Hill to Broadcasting House in Langham Place, and on the Monday before Christmas the BBC Empire Service was inaugurated. The BBC's Director General, by then Sir John Reith, played down this monumental initiative as he addressed the world on 19 December 1932: 'Don't expect too much in the early days: for some time we shall transmit comparatively simple programmes [which] will neither be very interesting nor very good'. Six days later, King George V struck a more optimistic tone in his first Christmas broadcast, when he described the Empire Service as designed for people 'so cut off by the snow, the desert, or the sea, that only voices out of the air can reach them'. The Empire Service limped along on a shoestring at first, its shortwave broadcasts subject to all manner of interference and ethereal serendipity. Regular news bulletins were broken up by music played from gramophone records and material relayed from the BBC's national networks. Dance music was the staple: live relays from hotels and dance halls abounded; this dance diet was complemented by chamber music, reviews, and talks.

But there was one sea change that the Empire Service unwittingly instigated. At home, listening to the radio in the evening was the norm, whereas in the far-flung reaches of the British Empire, any time of day would do, particularly in places that were not served by any form of local broadcasting.

Within the newly-constructed Broadcasting House at London's Portland Place there was a Concert Hall, in which had been placed a new John Compton four-manual organ with a movable console. Plaster walls gave the Concert Hall a relatively generous reverberation time of $1\frac{3}{4}$ seconds, with similarity between rehearsal and performance conditions ensured by heavily upholstered chairs and onstage carpeting. Higher up in the new building, Studio 3E was decked out as a chapel for the broadcasting of the Daily Service at 10.15 a.m. (Mondays to Saturdays). Four singers were initially used for these religious broadcasts, then in 1934 a larger group was formed, known as 'Singers B'; this octet famously included a 24-year old Peter Pears, later to become one of the most celebrated English tenors of the 20th century. In the year that Singers B was formed, the BBC commissioned Benjamin Britten's choral variations *A Boy was born*. Peter Pears was introduced to Britten at the première.

In 1936 another new Compton organ was installed at the BBC – this time in St George's Hall, across the road from Broadcasting House. This organ had four manuals and 260 stops including, literally, bells and whistles. To tame this beast of an instrument, Reginald Foort was appointed BBC Theatre Organist. Reggie received thousands of fan letters every week, and in 1937 he was voted the most popular radio entertainer in Britain (he polled twice as many votes as Gracie Fields). Because of his popularity with the public, Reggie Foort left his sedentary job at the BBC to spread his wings and to travel the country. Roderick MacPherson was appointed Theatre Organist in Foort's place. 'Sandy' MacPherson, as he was known, was in post when World War II broke out, and provided the lion's share of broadcasting in that first month while the BBC worked out the form that wartime broadcasting should take. MacPherson played every day, and some listeners rather insensitively suggested that they'd rather face the German guns than listen to more MacPherson. They should have been more careful of what they wished for: St George's Hall was bombed on 24 September 1940 and its organ destroyed. A few months later, on the night of 10 May 1941, the adjacent Queen's Hall was destroyed by an incendiary bomb and with it many instruments belonging to the London Philharmonic Orchestra. A famous photograph of Sir Henry Wood gazing at the burnt-out shell of the Queen's Hall brings a lump to the throat. The BBC Symphony and London Philharmonic immediately relocated to the London Coliseum, near Trafalgar Square, and the 1941 Proms moved (permanently, as it turned out) to Kensington's Royal Albert Hall.

By 1939 there were nine million radio licences in Britain, hence why radio was the medium that the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, used to announce the declaration of World War II. The BBC Music Department was initially evacuated to Bristol during the War, but when Bristol itself was heavily bombed, the Music Department moved to Bedford. While it would seem natural for the BBC to broadcast new music by British composers, it is easy to miss quite how much new continental music had been broadcast by the BBC between the two World Wars. This was partly attributable to the influence of Edward Clark, who was on the staff of the BBC from 1927 to 1936. Clark had studied with Arnold Schoenberg, and he was extremely well connected to composers and performers of contemporary music. Music by the three major members of the so-called Second Viennese School (Schoenberg, Alban Berg, and Anton Webern) was played by the BBC, as was music written by their wider circle (Egon Wellesz, Hanns Eisler, Roberto Gerhard, Adolph Weiss, and also Schoenberg's rival Josef Hauer). So it was, for instance, that the BBC Singers premièred both Webern's *Das Augenlicht* in 1938 and (posthumously) Webern's *First Cantata* in 1946.

And in 1946, alongside the Home Service and the Light Programme, the Third Programme was launched. When the BBC was less than two years old, in 1924, the suggestion had been made that a separate wavelength should be made available for 'highbrow education and better class material'. BBC programming at the time had its critics. Airings of Tudor music, 'groaning' chamber music, 'new-fangled' songs, and readings from 'unknown' poets were criticized not just by the listening public but at board level. The first music broadcast on the Third Programme, at 6.45 pm on Michaelmas Day 1946, was Bach's Goldberg Variations, played by harpsichordist, Lucille Wallace. Benjamin Britten's commissioned Festival Overture opened a concert of Handel and Purcell under the baton of Sir Adrian Boult. Later on, music by Vaughan Williams, Arthur Bliss, and Parry was followed by Nadia Boulanger's pioneering 1937 recordings of the madrigals of Monteverdi.

Sir William Haley, Director General of the BBC 1944-52, wrote of the Third Programme that 'it will have no fixed points. It will devote to the great works the time they require. It will seek every evening to do something that is culturally satisfying and significant... In declaring these standards the BBC realizes that it is aiming high'. One year later, in 1947, recording with magnetic tape became commercially viable, and a year after that, Long Playing (LP) records were available. 12 inches in diameter and running at 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ revolutions per minute (rpm), the LP held over 20 minutes of music per side, as compared to a maximum of five minutes on one side of a 12-inch 78 rpm record. A revolution in how the public consumed music was under way.

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Further Reading:

Susan Briggs *Those Radio Times* (Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1981)

Gerard Mansell *Let Truth be told – 50 Years of BBC External Broadcasting* (Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1982)

Asa Briggs *The BBC: the First Fifty Years* (OUP, 1985)

Jennifer Doctor *The BBC and Ultra-modern Music 1922-1936* (CUP, 1999)

Jennifer Doctor & David Wright *Into the Arena: The Proms – a new History* (Thames & Hudson, 2007)