

Classical Music Radio in the United Kingdom,
1945–1995

Tony Stoller

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palgrave
macmillan

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ISBN 978-3-319-64709-8 ISBN 978-3-319-64710-4 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64710-4>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017951560

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Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

For Andy

PREFACE

I was born in May 1947. Along with the million baby-boomers born in the UK that year, I have been offered throughout my life access to the most audacious provision of high culture as entertainment that had ever been attempted, and accepted it as a normal state of affairs; as—if you like—my birthright as a citizen of post-war Britain. The transcendent significance of the fusion of radio broadcasting and classical music—confirmed in September 1946 by the establishment of the BBC’s three radio services, each carrying classical music—was something I really only came to understand when I undertook my Ph.D. research more than 60 years later.

My career has brought me into contact repeatedly with that aspect of radio broadcasting. As a junior official at the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) between 1974 and 1979, when it was responsible for establishing and then overseeing Independent Radio, I watched and listened as the fledgling commercial radio stations embraced their new almost-obligations to this genre of output. Then, from 1981 to 1985 as the Managing Director of Radio 210 in Reading, the smallest of that first tranche of Independent Local Radio (ILR) stations, I produced, presented and found the funds for classical music broadcasts and concerts of our own. In later years, as Chief Executive of the Radio Authority from 1995 until 2003, I was responsible for the regulation of Classic FM, the pre-eminent example of commercially funded, national classical music radio. Thus, it was probably inevitable—and certainly enjoyable—that I would come to complete though Bournemouth University a Ph.D. into classical music on UK radio, from which this book has been derived.

The first proper history book I ever read was E.H. Carr's *What is history?*, given to me in the Sixth Form. Ever since, I have been influenced by Carr's observation that everyone is born into a society, and is moulded by that society. He cites as an example Robinson Crusoe, who is not to be regarded as an abstract individual but an Englishman from York, who carries his Bible with him and praises his tribal God. For my part, I am an English grammar school boy, university-educated in the late Sixties, who has spent much his working career in the commercial, managerial, editorial and regulatory aspects of media, especially radio.

From that experience, I have come to espouse a series of opinions about this genre of radio—and its place within the ecology of UK broadcasting—which inform this history. I share the approach of those in radio with whom I worked for many years, that to deploy sound broadcasting both to entertain and to enlighten a large number of people who may not naturally seek such enlightenment is an activity to be approved of; that to restrict access only to those who meet some set of self-referential elite qualifications is to be disapproved of; and that the use of the limited public resource of the airwaves solely for commercial ends is deeply regrettable.

Can you write history of a period which represents your lived experience? The five decades in question are certainly 'my half-century', which introduces a particular subjective bias. Yet it would not be possible for anyone to write broadcasting history without being at least partly in the same circumstance: broadcasting—and perhaps radio in particular—has been all-pervasive and ever-present through the second half of the twentieth century.

The educative potential of radio appears in the pages of this history mainly in the form of specific programmes intended to improve the knowledge or awareness of listeners. However, there is another, arguably stronger influence at work in classical music radio. If awareness of classical music had to depend only upon attending concerts, or on the—alas, sadly diminishing—provision of music through the school system, it would have been a poor lookout. However, for millions of listeners, the availability of classical music simply to be listened to without let or hindrance, enabled them to absorb an outstanding musical education. These auto-didacts—such as my father, who left school well before the then official age of 14, but became a self-taught classical music buff, not least through his radio listening—give the lie to those who argue that a pre-existing level of musical education is essential for a 'proper' listening

experience. Their prejudices appear frequently in the following pages; my own predisposition in their presence will be clear.

I believe that there is a natural affinity, even a symbiosis, between classical music and radio broadcasting. That is not to diminish the value of live performances heard in the concert hall or recital chamber (or even in the open air alongside Kenwood House, where much of my early musical education took place). However, radio is ideally suited to the dissemination, explanation and advancement of classical music. Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin would have disagreed: the former considered that a classical symphony in particular was somehow diminished in scale by being heard only through the distorting box of a radio set; the latter decried the mechanisation of culture. But neither of them had the opportunity to enjoy radio through modern transmission and reception technology. In any event, just as Robinson Crusoe's culture distorted his 'pure' perception of society, so our ears, our cultural predispositions, those we are with and those who are unwrapping sweets in the row behind us, all distort the experience of hearing live music. Radio provision of classical music is both personal and potentially sociable, and offers infinite range and scope. This history has been written in admiration and not a little awe at the potential of this medium, and at all that those working in it—and listening to it—have achieved.

Winchester, UK
November 2017

Tony Stoller

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

When I began my doctoral research, which underpins this history, I was warned that it would be a solitary task. On the contrary, I have been helped along the way at all stages. I owe particular thanks to my academic colleagues and supervisors at Bournemouth University, especially Sean Street, Hugh Chignell, Kristin Skoog and Kate Murphy, and to both Kathryn McDonald and Emma Wray as we walked parallel paths in our research into the endlessly fascinating medium of radio. Jean Seaton graciously allowed me early access to her draft and notes for her recent history of the BBC after 1974. Emily Russell and Carmel Kennedy and Aishwarya Balachandar at Palgrave Macmillan agreeably encouraged and guided the book to completion and publication. Trish Hayes and her fellow archivists at the BBC Written Archive Centre in Caversham have once again been endlessly helpful; how could broadcasting history ever be written without them?

I am grateful to all those who agreed to be interviewed for my research, and for their openness, generosity and encouragement: Kevin Appleby, Ralph Bernard, Leo Black, Tim Blackmore, Michael Checkland, Paul Gambaccini, Peter James, Nicholas Kenyon, Rodney Livingstone, David Owen Norris, Gillian Reynolds, Susannah Simons, Fiona Talkington, John Thompson and Roger Wright, together with others who prefer not to be named. I had talked previously on this topic with Michael Bukht and Gerard Mansell, before their deaths, and all too briefly with the late Ian McIntyre. The death of John Thompson—‘JT’—as this book was being finished is a huge loss to all his colleagues and friends, and truly the end of an era.

Many of those I have worked with in radio and elsewhere over the years have offered advice and encouragement. Friends and colleagues have read earlier drafts of this book and I am grateful for their detailed and constructive criticism. The final result is so much better for their efforts, but the flaws which remain are my responsibility alone.

My wife Andy has been my most faithful reader of endless redrafts, and has put up with my preoccupation with this task with unfailing support and encouragement. In this, as in everything else she does and has done for me, even after 50 years I still cannot believe my luck.

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