Radio in the LP Era (1948-1982)
Jeremy Summerly

28 January 2021

The first commercial long-playing (LP) record was released on 21 June 1948 in the USA. Experiments in LP technology had been in train for many years; however, aside from the logistical setbacks of the Great Depression and the Second World War, specific technical issues hampered the acceptance of the LP as a robust medium for the reproduction of music. RCA Victor had developed a 33⅓ rpm (revolutions per minute) disc by 1931, but within two years the project was discontinued because the stylus cut through the vinyl after repeated playing. Columbia experienced similar problems in 1932 and resolved to address these in 1939. Because of the outbreak of the Second World War, the timing was poor, and focused development didn't resume at Columbia Records until 1945. But by 1948 Columbia had developed a commercially viable long-playing record, and had even copyrighted the term 'LP'. The Ukranian-born American violinist Nathan Milstein had earned a reputation for his masterly concert performances of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto. And so ML 4001 became Columbia's first LP release, with Milstein as soloist alongside the New York Philharmonic Orchestra under conductor Bruno Walter.

On the day that Columbia Records released ML 4001, the BBC's Third Programme broadcast a recital by the pianist Gonzalo Soriano of works by living Spanish composers and the recently deceased Manuel de Falla. The BBC Chorus (a large professional chamber choir) sang an anthem by John Blow and a motet by Bach. Also on that evening's playlist was a recital of chamber music by Beethoven and Dvorák and songs by Arthur Bliss. Finally, early 19th-century chamber music by Weber and Schumann was performed by horn player Dennis Brain, amongst others. That constituted three hours of music from six hours of airtime. The Home Service carried music too. On 21 June 1948 there was dance music from Cecil Norman and Harry Davidson, American light music by Morton Gould and Cole Porter, British light music from Anton and his Orchestra, *Music while you Work*, jazz from Billy Munn, an eclectic stylistic mix from Renaissance to modern for two pianos, an orchestral concert of Beethoven, Brahms, and Tchaikovsky for schools, *This Week's Composers* – Auber and Offenbach – and half an hour of Bizet's *Carmen*. There was also an opportunity to share in *The Daily Service* as well as to hear the conductor Boyd Neel talking about national anthems. Six hours from just under 18. The Light Programme also broadcast music: *Housewives' Choice*, *Music in your Home*, *Music while you Work*, *Time for Music*, *At the Console*, *Music for You*, *Melody Hour*, *Concert Hour*, *Band Parade*, *Music Tapestry*, and contributions from Sid Phillips and from The Radio Revellers. Eight hours from 15. Half of the output on both the Light Programme and the Third Programme was music, and music accounted for one third of the output on the Home Service.

The Third Programme had begun transmission on the evening of 29 September 1946. Working titles had been the Droitwich Programme (from where it was transmitted), Minerva Programme, Programme C, Arts Programme, and Cultural Programme. Art and culture was part of the reconstruction of post-War Britain and there was a strong feeling (endorsed by the Labour Prime Minister, Clement Attlee) that British people should be given access to the best of culture. The Third Programme aired only in the evenings, and the BBC's intention was that the programming should

be listened to closely, *in lieu* of a visit to the theatre or concert hall. 2½ million people tuned in to the Third Programme in its early days. Moreover, the Third Programme revived post-War British interest in German culture. But in time, the mass entertainment of the 1950s saw Britain's perceived value of high culture slipping away. In 1953 the *Daily Express* launched a campaign to 'scrap the Third Programme' on the grounds that too much public money was being spent on too few people. In 1956 the Third Programme's budget and air time were indeed reduced. From 30 Sept 1957 the Third Programme broadcast daily from 8.00 pm till 11.00 pm, and before that there were two hours per day of Network Three, which broadcast programmes of educational and minority interest such as bridge, motoring, gardening, amateur dramatics, learning a foreign language, cycling, and fishing. And because LP collecting was perceived to be one of those minority interests, Network Three is where *Record Review* ended up from 5 October 1957, presented by John Lade. *Record Review* had been broadcast occasionally from 8 December 1949 (40 minutes on a Thursday evening in the case of its first show) but floundered when the producer – the writer and reviewer Alec Robertson – left the BBC in 1952 in order to become editor of *Gramophone* magazine. The re-founded *Record Review* usually lasted for between 40 and 45 minutes and moved around the schedule before settling on Saturday mornings on 12 December 1964. Most excitingly, it was part of Saturday morning experiments (*Stereophony*) when programmes were broadcast in stereo using Network Three's frequency for the left channel and television sound for the right channel. At the heart of *Record Review* since 1957 has been its 'Building a Library' strand, where a reviewer surveys all of the available performances of a chosen work in order to make a recommendation for an addition to the listener's record collection. In gloriously predictable canonic fashion, the first subject of 'Building a Library' was the 5th Symphony of Beethoven, when the conductor Trevor Harvey chose Otto Klemperer's recent version with the Philharmonia Orchestra – a recording that Stephen Johnson made his historic choice half a century later on the programme's 50th anniversary edition. John Lade presented exactly one thousand editions of *Record Review*, and his last was broadcast on 24 October 1981. Lade took the programme from the last gasp of the 78 record, all the way up to the eve of the CD revolution.

While programmes like *Record Review* delighted in employing specialists to explain to listeners what music they should like and why they should like it, other programmes left it to the listeners themselves. On the Light Programme, *Housewives' Choice*, *Family Favourites*, and *Children's Favourites* ('Hello children, everywhere') turned the choice of music over to the network's listeners. The Third Programme's answer to *Children's Favourites* (*Junior Choice* from 1967) was *The Young Idea*, a record request programme designed for the under20s. It began on 26 March 1965, introduced by Derek Parker and within a month, the music critic Stephen Walsh had written:

> When *The Young Idea* first took the air in March it might have turned into just one more request programme…the fact that this hasn't happened is both chastening and gratifying. Young people are, of course, always eager to identify themselves with the new – and that in a real spirit of enquiry – and already several have requested works that they admit they've never heard. Most intriguing of all is the incidence of twentieth-century works. Music by Stravinsky, Britten, Shostakovich, and Roberto Gerhard has been requested repeatedly. Unfashionable composers like Vaughan Williams and Sibelius, as well as semi-fashionable ones like Bartók, figure prominently in the lists, and recent records of music by Bax and Tippett already have their vehement advocates.

In the mid 1960s, without the internet, there was much less immediate access to recorded music than there is now – you either owned recordings or you borrowed them. The third way was to write to the BBC with a request. The icing on the cake was the chance for a young person to have their name read out on the radio. And if your request was played, then you might have a friend who could record your request on their new-fangled cassette recorder. Musicassettes had been introduced in 1963 by Philips, and where vinyl records suffered from surface noise and were easily scratched, compact cassettes delivered tape hiss. The Dolby NR (Noise Reduction) system helped to counter

tape hiss: Dolby A was introduced in 1965 and Dolby B in 1968. The main advantage of cassettes over records was that cassettes could record as well as replay, whereas records were repro only.

The Young Idea ran from 1965 until 1979, latterly presented by the harpsichordist Christopher Hogwood. Hogwood had been a member of the Early Music Consort of London, and had known the ensemble's founder-director, David Munrow, since their Cambridge University days at the start of the 1960s. Munrow's appearances on Radio 3 were even more charismatic and appealing than Hogwood's. Munrow presented his own show, *Pied Piper*, four times per week, and it ran from 1971 to 1976. *Pied Piper* was subtitled 'tales and music for younger listeners', and those listeners were ostensibly between the ages of six and 12. In practice, the target audience became teenagers, although research showed that the average listener age was 29 years old. *Pied Piper* focused on one theme per week, of which one programme per week was an interview. In the second week of October 1974, for instance, the theme was Babylon. So, as the composer of the 1931 cantata-cum-oratorio *Belshazzar's Feast* (which ends with the fall of Babylon), Sir William Walton was the interviewee. 'Were you determined to be a composer?', asked Munrow. 'I couldn't do anything else, actually', replied Sir William. *Pied Piper* ran for five series and a total of 655 episodes. David Munrow's death on 15 May 1976, at the age of 33, shocked the musical world. Munrow had packed more musical exploration and innovation into a third of a century than most others do into an entire lifetime, as a teacher, performer, and broadcaster. Munrow embodied the Reithian principles of information, education, and entertainment. His *Pied Piper* programmes sounded authoritative but relaxed. Actually, Munrow found them anything but relaxing to compile. According to *Pied Piper* producer, Arthur Johnson:

> *Pied Piper* was a big strain – on me as well as David…he was obsessive, and he was driven. He was a perfectionist, and he wanted to do everything himself…he would be setting up LPs on the grams decks, and finding the right groove, though it was someone else's job.

One of BBC radio's most cherished institutions is a request show that was broadcast originally on the BBC Forces Programme during the Second World War. *Desert Island Discs* was devised and first presented by Roy Plomley. The requests were not those of the public but of Plomley's celebrity 'castaways'. The castaways are allowed to take eight recordings with them to their desert island. The most chosen band has been The Beatles, and their most favoured song 'Yesterday'. The most popular composer is Mozart and *The Marriage of Figaro* his most requested work. Plomley was a gently-spoken and well-researched interviewer who made his celebrities feel at home enough to bring something of their true selves to the programme. Indeed the Soprano Elisabeth Schwarzkopf brought an awful lot of herself to the show. All eight choices on 28 July 1958 were Schwarzkopf's own recordings, although, with some magnanimity, Schwarzkopf made her eighth record the Introduction to Richard Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier* – the very opening of the opera in which there is no singing. Even more magnanimously, Schwarzkopf name-checked Dennis Brain for his noteworthy Horn playing in the extract. But the full complement was achieved on 31 July 1979 by Moura Lympany (this was the pianist's second appearance on *Desert Island Discs*; her first had been in 1957). Lympany chose her own performances for all eight records as well as choosing wine from her own vineyard as her luxury. She did not, however, make her autobiography her choice of book – only because she didn't publish it until over a decade later. However, several guests have chosen their own autobiographies, not least the jazz legend Louis Armstrong in 1968. A more expansive and less fanciful version of the format aired for the first time in the early-1970s. *Man of Action* ran for almost seven years (between 30 September 1972 and 23 June 1979) and was broadcast on Saturday afternoons on Radio 3. The guests were bookended by Lord Harewood (newly-appointed Managing Director of English National Opera – Sadler's Wells as it was then) and Lord Weidenfeld (publisher and philanthropist). The strand was renamed *Woman of Action* when appropriate; as, for instance, in the cases of Myfanwy Piper, librettist of three of Benjamin Britten's operas, *prima ballerina* Dame Margot Fonteyn, and Dame Ninette de Valois, founder of the Royal Ballet. *(Wo)Man of Action* (as it was never dubbed) was over twice the length of *Desert Island Discs*

and featured more focused chat, in keeping with its Radio 3 (as opposed to Radio 4) audience. The guests themselves were high-achievers rather than celebrities and entire movements were played rather than short musical extracts.

Even longer running than *Desert Island Discs* is *Choral Evensong*. 95 years old this coming Autumn, *Choral Evensong* began life on the National Programme before being subsumed into the Home Service, thence to Radio 4. In April 1970 Choral Evensong swapped to Radio 3 and became monthly rather than weekly. It took less than three months and 2½ thousand letters of complaint for the BBC to reinstate *Choral Evensong*'s weekly status. *Choral Evensong* may not have a large audience, but it has a fervent and dedicated one. And within a year of that ill-fated BBC decision to mess with its listeners, *Choral Evensong* made its first stereo broadcast – on 17 March 1971 from Gloucester Cathedral under Master of the Choristers, John Sanders.

On 30 September 1967, the BBC's radio networks had split into four. Radio 3 opened its umbrella over The Third Programme (launched on 29 September 1946), Network Three (launched on 30 September 1957) and the daytime Music Programme (launched on 22 March 1965, with breaks for live sport coverage). The Home Service (launched on 1 September 1939) became Radio 4. And the Light Programme (launched on 29 July 1945) was split into Radios 1 & 2. Tony Blackburn was the first Radio 1 DJ to air. Blackburn didn't like hard rock, for which his playlists were sometimes criticised. Other criticism, which was outside Tony Blackburn's control, was that there was too much speech on Radio 1. This was because 'needle time' (the amount of music that was taken from commercial gramophone records) was limited to 51 hours per week over the entire BBC – just over seven hours per day. This legislation was negotiated by the Musicians' Union and Phonographic Performance Limited. The MU and PPL thus forced the BBC to make its own recordings of bands and classical groups. And because the music played on, for instance, Radio 1, was limited by needle time and recording budgets, there was a lower music-to-speech ratio than listeners had been used to from Tony Blackburn on the pirate stations Radio Caroline and Radio London. The first song to be played on Radio 1 was 'Flowers in the Rain' by The Move. It was No. 3 in the charts at the time. That week the Top 20 included Stevie Wonder, Jimi Hendrix, The Bee Gees, The Beach Boys, Cliff Richard, and Tom Jones (the latter two, respectively, three and four decades away from knighthoods). Engelbert Humperdinck was at No. 1 for the fourth of five weeks with 'The Last Waltz', and just prior to that Englebert (real name Arnold Dorsey) had been in the Top 40 for 47 weeks with 'Release me'. As Radio 1 opened up, The Beatles were at No. 27 with 'All you need is love', which was just about to drop out of the charts after 12 weeks, three of those at No. 1. Both living members of The Beatles now have knighthoods – the pop charts in the 1960s was a classy place to hang out.

Apart from beaming music across the airwaves, the BBC is also a proprietor of many groups of musicians. After the Second World War, the BBC ran a Symphony Orchestra, Northern Orchestra, Welsh Orchestra, Scottish Orchestra, Theatre Orchestra, Review Orchestra, Dance Orchestra, Variety Orchestra, Scottish Variety Orchestra, and Midland Light Orchestra, as well as the BBC Singers, BBC Choral Society, and BBC Welsh Chorus. Over the next two decades some of these groups were renamed and were joined by the Northern Ireland and West of England Light Orchestras, the Northern Variety Orchestra, the Northern Singers, the West of England Players, and the New BBC Orchestra. In addition to those traditional combinations of instruments, from April 1958 the BBC engaged in creating entirely new sounds from its Radiophonic Workshop. Daphne Oram was given technical assistance by Desmond Briscoe and Dick Mills. Maddalena Fagandini brought pop techniques to the Maida Vale studios (where the Workshop was based) and she was later joined by Jenyth Worsley and Delia Derbyshire. Derbyshire had been refused employment at Decca Records on the grounds that women weren't allowed to work in their recording studios. Fortunately the BBC had been employing women in studios for years and consequently Derbyshire was allowed to compose some astonishingly individual and effective incidental music for the BBC over the next decade. Other weird and wonderful sounds were heard on *Music in Our Time*, which began on 26 March 1965, piloted through choppy seas by its producer, Stephen Plaistow. Contemporary music

in the mid-20th century played havoc with the expectations of musiclovers. Some tolerated *Music in Our Time* as an hour of faintly amusing oddity, but some felt violated by its very existence – much contemporary music was seen as at best a confidence trick and at worst unmusical, indeed anti-musical. The explanatory announcements also came in for criticism as being dense and complicated. In the early 1970s, Stephen Plaistow responded:

> The presentation of contemporary music is a problem that will always be with us. I don't want to sound defeatist, but it will…Please don't let's talk down to them. When listening to a cricket commentary I don't expect the commentator constantly to remind me what 'over the wicket' means or what a 'leg-spin bowler' is…Next time someone tells you that modern music is a confidence trick tell him to go and get himself educated, perhaps by listening regularly to *Music in Our Time*.

Education had been the second of the three pillars of Lord Reith's vision – information, education, and entertainment. That trio of Public Service Broadcasting principles was first floated by the Russian-American businessman David Sarnoff, although Sarnoff ordered them with entertainment first and education last. But the BBC was proud of its position as one of the nation's educators, but for some Radio 3 critics, Auntie's attitude was more akin to preaching and snobbery than enlightened instruction. Yet, however it was branded, there was an educational element to most of the station's output, whether it was Humphrey Lyttleton's weekly *Jazz Record Requests* (begun on 12 December 1964) or *Music Magazine* (from 24 May 1944 with Alec Robertson, then Julian Herbage from 1952, becoming *Music Weekly* in 1973), or the daily slots of *This Week's Composer* (launched 2 August 1943) and the drivetime programme *Homeward Bound* (begun in 19 July 1972 as a 20-minute segment and becoming two 20-minute segments split up by a 5-minute news bulletin on 1 January 1973). In the case of the last of these, *Homeward Bound* deliberately did not identify the works played until the very end of the segment. That technique suited two groups of people – those who didn't care to be talked at and just wanted to listen to classical music, let's say on the drive home from work. The other group wanted to stretch itself and see if its members could work out the identity of the composer for themselves. This latter idea had been pioneered by composer Robert Simpson, whose programme *The Innocent Ear had* begun on 2 November 1959. The *Radio Times* described it as:

> A programme designed to enable the listener to approach music without preconceptions. Although the works are not identified until after they have been heard, the programme is not intended as a guessing name. The object is to let the listener judge the quality of the music without previous knowledge.

That said, for some listeners *The Innocent Ear* was indeed a guessing game. And some of those listeners also enjoyed listening to the opposite approach, where a work was analysed in loving detail by the pianist and composer Antony Hopkins without ever hearing the work in its entirety. *Talking about Music* was first broadcast on 26 September 1954. Hopkins had a knack for radio, indeed he had the distinction of having once achieved a pre-reformation radio full house, that's to say appearing simultaneously on the Light Programme, the Home Service, and the Third Programme. Hopkins had a knack of taking technical musical matters and making them intelligible, aided and abetted by helpful illustrations at the piano.

This era of music at the BBC ended with some of the most unpleasant scenes of the Corporation's history. In 1980, the BBC announced significant cuts that would result in the closure of five of its 11 orchestras – the Scottish Symphony Orchestra, the Northern Ireland Orchestra, the Northern and Midland Radio Orchestras, and the London Studio Players. The Musicians' Union called a strike, which had the effect of cancelling 20 of the Proms concerts that year (including the First Night) and also caused certain presenters to withhold their services – one of whom was Antony Hopkins. In the event, three of the BBC's dance orchestras were disbanded: the Midland, Northern, and Scottish

Radio Orchestras. The Proms eventually started up on 7 August, almost three weeks late, and the rancour of the dispute between the BBC and the Musicians' Union has not been forgotten by any of those involved.

Further Reading:

Asa Briggs *The BBC – The First Fifty Years* (OUP, 1985)
Humphrey Carpenter *The Envy of the World – Fifty Years of the BBC Third Programme and Radio 3* (Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1996 & Phoenix, 1997)
Louis Niebur *Special Sound – The Creation and Legacy of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop* (OUP, 2010)
Jean Seaton *Pinkoes and Traitors – The BBC and the nation 1974-1987* (Profile, 2015)
Tony Stoller *Classical Music Radio in the United Kingdom*, 1945-1995 (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017 & 2018)