



BBC Radio in the Digital Era (1982 -)
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On Hallowe'en in 1981, Paul Vaughan became the presenter of Radio 3's *Record Review*. Vaughan took over from John Lade (the programme's founder-presenter) who had presented exactly 1,000 editions of the programme. Lade had led his listeners from 78s to LPs and Vaughan ushered in the CD era. Since its very first episode in 1957, 'Building a Library' has been at the heart of *Record Review* (re-named *CD Review* from 1998 until 2015). For most of its history 'Building a Library' has been a pre-recorded monologue punctuated by comparative musical examples, but on 22 March 2014 it was broadcast as a two-way live interview with presenter Andrew McGregor from a pop-up studio in London's Southbank Centre. Thus, I was the first contributor to deliver 'Building a Library' live (having worked as a freelance contributor to the programme since 1992). On that spring morning in 2014, I chose Trevor Pinnock's 1993 recording of Mozart's *Coronation Mass* over the 1971 version by the London Symphony Orchestra under Sir Colin Davis. A group of dedicated *CD Review* listeners had congregated around the BBC pod to witness the live broadcast of the programme, and during the course of the segment they started to react to my analytical observations with muted applause and/or good-natured hisses of disapproval. That direct contact with the *CD Review* audience was a wonderful experience, albeit a predictably confirmatory one: Radio 3's audience has an average age of around 60 years old, and that was borne out that morning in the Royal Festival Hall foyer. Four-and-a-half years later, when I recorded 'Building a Library' on Stravinsky's *Mass* for broadcast on 3 November 2018, it was to be that last that I would present as a monologue. Since then, 'Building a Library' has routinely been delivered as a live two-way interview, as is the 'New Releases' segment. This insistence on the two-way interview format has not been received well in all quarters, particularly by members of the independent listeners' group 'Friends of Radio 3'.

One of the pillars of Radio 3 over the last quarter of a century has been the midday weekend programme *Private Passions*. Its precursor in the 1970s was *Man of Action*, and the most obvious differences between those two Radio 3 creations and Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs* are the longer musical extracts, a certain amount of focused musical analysis, and the classical leanings of the Radio 3 programmes. *Private Passions* is presented by the composer Michael Berkeley, godson of Benjamin Britten and son of the composer Lennox Berkeley. Michael Berkeley (since 2013 a life peer) began his broadcasting career as a Radio 3 continuity announcer and a contributor to *Record Review* in the 1970s, and he later became a presenter of Radio 3's drivetime programmes of the 1980s and early 1990s. The signature tune of *Private Passions* is taken from a composition by Berkeley himself ('The Wakeful Poet' – the last movement from the suite *Music from Chaucer* for brass quintet). Berkeley has presented well over 1,000 editions of *Private Passions* and has curated the music choices of guests as varied as Grayson Perry, Kadiatu Kanneh-Mason, Isaiah Berlin, Jeanette Winterson, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and John Peel. Peel distinguished himself by asking Berkeley himself to choose one of Peel's tracks: 'I occasionally listen to records that I know, but not very often, because I'm just more interested in hearing things that I've not previously heard'. Berkeley artfully chose a piece of music for player-piano by Conlon Nancarrow, which Peel was so drawn to that he played it thereafter on Radio 1. The Peel Sessions were legendary parts of BBC radio's music output. Peel and his producer, John Walters, organised over 4,000 sessions, which introduced listeners to a variety of unknown artists offering music from punk, blues, and folk, to psychedelic rock; but those labels don't begin to describe the variety and individuality of the music

that Peel and his producer promoted. As John Walters said: 'We're not here to give the public what it wants; we're here to give the public what it didn't know it wanted'.

One of the most successful drivetime radio programmes was that hosted by John Dunn on Radio 2 from 1976 to 1998. Dunn's easy way with his guests made him a valued interviewer, not least because he was always well prepared. In an exotic turn, in November 1996 John Dunn presented his Radio 2 programme from Port Stanley in the Falkland Islands *en route* to Antarctica, where on 28 November John Dunn broadcast from the British Antarctic Survey's research base in Rothera. Right at the end of John Dunn's Radio 2 drivetime stewardship, his programme won the 1998 Gold Sony Radio Award for the best drivetime music programme, a category that was more or less invented for Dunn to win. During the period that John Dunn was gracing Radio 2 with his smoothly resonant tones, the drivetime programme on Radio 3 was *Mainly for Pleasure*, which had begun airing on 2 January 1980, fronted by the clarinettist, Jack Brymer. Other early presenters of *MfP* were the crossover composer and pianist Steve Race, conductor Bernard Keefe, writer and pianist Jeremy Siepmann, and the composer Michael Berkeley. I had the good fortune, shortly after I began working as a BBC Studio Manager, to be part of a studio team (under the direction of producer Graham Dixon) that broadcast the first edition of *Mainly for Pleasure* to use no vinyl records at all – in other words, all the music was played from CD or tape. That was a sign of the times for a programme that – just a handful of years before – had been conceived as an LP strip programme. One of the other early presenters of *Mainly for Pleasure* was the Austrian-born flautist Fritz Spiegl. After leaving the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, Spiegl made a name for himself as a broadcaster, humourist, and composer. On television, Spiegl's hits were the signature tunes for the 1960s police series *Z-Cars* and its spin-off *Softly, Softly*. For radio, in 1978, Spiegl was commissioned by the Controller of Radio 4 (shortly to become Controller of Radio 3), Ian McIntyre, to compile and arrange a *Radio 4 UK Theme* – a five-minute montage of folk tunes from around the British Isles, which was to herald the daily early-morning opening of the Radio 4 network. Beginning and ending with the folk song 'Early one morning', the sequence contrives to combine pairs of folk songs from the four home nations. 'Danny Boy' meets 'Annie Laurie', the 'Drunken Sailor' dances with 'Greensleeves', and the 'Men of Harlech' link arms with 'Scotland the Brave'. Spiegl's clever counterpoint is supported by Manfred Arlan's tautly colourful orchestration. At the end of the medley, there is an early-18th century tussle when Jeremiah Clarke's 'Prince of Denmark's March' invades the musical space of Thomas Arne's 'Rule, Britannia!' in a touchingly amusing way. When it was announced that the *UK Theme* was to be removed from Radio 4's daily schedule, there were protests from some listeners. Three months before the piece's cancellation, an Early Day Motion had been tabled in Parliament:

"This House recognises the pleasure given to early rising listeners to BBC Radio 4 by the subtle and evocative medley of British folk tunes in Fritz Spiegl's UK Theme, which starts daily broadcasting and has become embedded over the years in the affections of listeners; and urges the BBC to reconsider its decision to drop this popular medley and to continue to use the UK Theme in the proud place it has occupied with such success and charm for so many years."

The motion was signed by MPs such as Jeremy Corbyn, Michael Gove, Nick Clegg, and Diane Abbott, but to no avail, and the *Radio 4 UK Theme* was broadcast for the last time at 5.30 am on St George's Day, 2006.

In the meantime, Radio 3's drivetime slot had been re-branded. Richard Baker had joined the team of *Mainly for Pleasure* presenters in 1986, and by 1992 the team of additional presenters had reached dizzying proportions: Anthony Burton, Stewart Collins, Heather Couper, Valerie Cunningham, Andrew Green, David Hault, Lyndon Jenkins, Elisse McDougall, Peter Paul Nash, David Nice, Roger Nichols, Edward Seckerson, Malcolm Singer, Paul Spicer, Fiona Talkington, Philip Titcombe, Jeremys Beadle and Nicholas, Brians Kay and Wright, and the presenter of the last

episode on Friday 10 July 1992, Rodney Slatford. On the following Monday, Natalie Wheen opened up *In Tune* in a transparent bid to compete with Classic FM (which launched less than two months later on 7 September). Whether a serious music station like Radio 3 should have tried to compete with a lifestyle station like Classic FM is a debate that still rages. Three years after Classic FM took to the air, the station had an estimated five million listeners. Radio 3 had half that many and responded with a controversial change to its morning schedule. From 9 October 1995, Andrew McGregor clocked an hour's less sleep every morning because *On Air* began at 6.00 am rather than 7.00 am, and *On Air* was followed not by *Composer of the Week* but by *Morning Collection*, which was presented (gasp) by a defector from Classic FM, Paul Gambaccini. Before he presented a chart show on Classic FM, Gambaccini had hosted Radio 1's USA chart show in the 1970s and '80s. In the event, Gambo lasted just under a year on Radio 3: his last show aired on 27 September 1996. More successful that year had been the advent of 24-hour broadcasting on Radio 3; the overnight programme *Through the Night* was inaugurated by Donald Macleod at 1.00 am on Sunday 5 May.

The Controller of Radio 3 from 1992-98 was Nicholas Kenyon, and it was on his watch that a daily children's strand was re-introduced to weekday afternoons on Radio 3. On Tuesday 4 January 1994 *Music Machine* hit the airwaves with its dynamic presenter Tommy Pearson. *Radio Times* announced that *Music Machine* would look at 'all aspects of music and its effects on our lives'. Pearson went on to promise that 'if it's music, it'll be here – from New Age to Stone Age and from reggae to rock 'n' roll'. *Music Machine* covered a kaleidoscope of subjects such as the acoustics of musical instruments, improvisation, music exams, pop versus classical, African drumming, musical borrowing, muzak, Jewish melodies, writing music for children's television, national anthems, noise music, music printing, the Bradford Festival, music therapy, the Norwegian folk fiddle, how composers earn a living, and much more. For the first edition of *Music Machine* on Tuesday 4 January 1994 *Radio Times* explained that Pearson would 'set his pulse racing when he talks to Annie Nightingale [Radio 1 presenter] about what sets her feet tapping and asks Richard Hickox [conductor] why he isn't just a human metronome'. Over the next five years Tommy Pearson, Verity Sharp, and various other guest presenters kept a youthful passion for music alive, and like all good children's programmes, *Music Machine* appealed just as much to adults as to the age-group at which it was aimed. I presented it for the first five days of 1996 and can testify to the fact that – in conjunction with my tireless producer Antony Pitts – those five 15-minute programmes took many weeks to assemble. As any teacher will acknowledge, keeping children engaged is simultaneously life-affirming and exhausting. Nicholas Kenyon had departed for the Proms by the time that *Music Machine* ended on 2 April 1999, but as Controller of Radio 3 Kenyon had instituted a number of other interesting strands, not least *Spirit of the Age* (early music) and *Night Waves* (arts and ideas). *Spirit of the Age* began on 13 September 1992 with the incomparable Christopher Page at the helm, and the programme distinguished itself by focusing on medieval and Renaissance music as well as Baroque music. And the 300th anniversary of the death of Henry Purcell in 1995 became the catalyst for *Fairest Isle*, 'Radio 3's year-long celebration of British music and culture'. Kenyon gradually dovetailed his interest from Radio 3 to the Proms by becoming Proms Director from 1996 (and from 2000 their Controller) and relinquishing control of Radio 3 in 1998. Before he left Radio 3, Nicholas Kenyon and his close associates had been concerned that Radio 3 presenters were in danger of complicating matters for their listeners, not least by using dates to contextualise musical works. As the presenter of Radio 3's weekly programme *Choir Works* I struggled with the suggestion that the use of dates might alienate listeners. My colleague at the Royal Academy of Music and at Radio 3, Gerard McBurney, was engaged in the composition of a Proms commission when the memorandum arrived. And so McBurney decided to begin his *Letter to Paradise* for singer and orchestra (to a text by the Soviet-era writer Daniil Kharms) neither with the letter's salutation ('Dear Raisa Ilinishna') nor with the opening of the actual message ('Maybe it's for the best...'). Instead, the Bass soloist declaimed (albeit in Russian) '2 November 1931', which had a few of us rolling in the aisles of the Royal Albert Hall at the première on 28 July 1998.

Nicholas Kenyon had been Music Editor of the BBC's *The Listener* magazine from 1982-87. After an existence of more than six decades *The Listener* folded at the start of 1991. *The Listener* covered a broad range of BBC programmes, but for a brief period there was also a magazine devoted specifically to Radio 3, called 3 magazine. To quote from the first issue of October 1982, 3 was an 'attempt to interest those readers who do not automatically switch to the network as well as those for whom no other exists'. The February 1984 edition asked its readers to help with market research by answering 28 questions ranging from whether the reader was a professional musician, through which types of radio programme (drama, classical music, modern music, or talks and documentaries) the reader enjoyed, to the name of their daily newspaper and whether they owned a video recorder or not. This was too little too late and 3 magazine disappeared. In 1992 *BBC Music Magazine* was launched, its most obvious selling point a 'free' classical music CD taped to its front cover. Staff were moved from London to Bristol in 2004 amid a flurry of protest and resignations and speculation as to the future of the publication. At the time, the demise of *BBC Music Magazine* was predicted by some, yet it remains in circulation today.

Choral Evensong lags nine months behind *The Week's Good Cause* (titled *Radio 4 Appeal* since 1998) as the BBC's longest-running programme; *Choral Evensong* is the longest-running outside broadcast in the world. With audience figures of perhaps a quarter of a million listeners, *Choral Evensong* might look unimportant. Yet the storm that was created by the 2006 decision to move the service from Wednesday afternoons to Sunday afternoons was significant. Quite apart from places of worship finding it difficult to accommodate BBC sound crews on their busiest day of the week, it had been a midweek beacon of calm and tranquility for some. Added to which, clergy and church musicians found it difficult to listen to the broadcast because they themselves were often working on a Sunday afternoon. In the 'Listen Again' age, it was a timely reminder that certain listeners do listen to radio there and then. The rationale behind Radio 3's decision was that it believed that weekday afternoon schedules should carry the same slots from day to day – *Composer of the Week* at noon, *Afternoon on 3* at 1.00 pm and *In Tune* at 5.00 pm. *Choral Evensong* would have distorted Wednesdays. Ash Wednesday (21 February 2007) from St John's College, Cambridge was the last of the 4.00 pm Wednesday broadcasts; the following Sunday, *Choral Evensong* came live from Worcester Cathedral. It took over 18 months for the decision to be reversed, yet in September 2008 *Choral Evensong* resumed its Wednesday 4.00 pm position, with the added advantage of the retention of the Sunday afternoon slot for a repeat of the previous Wednesday's broadcast – win-win. By 2012 *Choral Evensong* had moved to 3.30 pm. 7 October 2026 (a Wednesday, as it happens) will be the centenary of the first broadcast of *Choral Evensong*. Who knows how Radio 3 will mark that event: a reconstruction of the inaugural 1926 service from Westminster Abbey; a programme of newly-commissioned music; something global and virtual; or a lottery draw for one lucky cathedral, church, or chapel?

Notwithstanding his visceral aversion to jazz, Lord Reith (the BBC's first managing director and later Director General) would be puzzled by the sheer variety of music broadcasting within BBC Radio. Radios 1-4, 6 Music, World Service, 1Xtra, and the Asian Network all have their own specific input. Lord Reith might not have approved of the delineation of these radio channels, but he might have approved of the range of musical styles within those channels. Radio 3 and 6 Music seem particularly to promote the idea of musical variety within their various ambits. Radio 3's service licence aligns itself to a 'core proposition of classical music' yet it also broadcasts jazz and world music. Radio 6 Music aims to 'entertain lovers of popular music', but its service licence announces a remit to celebrate 'the alternative spirit in popular music from the 1960s to the present day'. And age ranges are specified in other service licences: Radio 1 contemporary music to 15-29 year olds, Radio 1Xtra contemporary black music to 15-24 year olds, Radio 2 popular music to over 35s, and the Asian Network to British Asians under 35. Much of that music can perfectly well be found freely on the internet. For me, the beauty of BBC radio's music output is that it is provided by people who care, and who decide what to programme, for how long, and at what time of day. I like having music chosen for me by people who are passionate and knowledgeable and I am frequently impressed by

how time-specific radio's output is – if you don't believe that, try listening to Radio 3 while you're in California or Melbourne and you'll find that the music choice may grate. It won't be the rare time-checks that give the game away, it will be the style of presentation, the choice of music, and the length of pieces played.

One feature that was discussed by radio listeners before Classic FM took to the airwaves in 1992 was the fact that this new commercial classical music station had stated its intention to broadcast individual movements from longer works. 'I don't want to hear bleeding chunks', I heard a London musician declare. Aside from the striking mixed metaphor (a reality in a hospital theatre or an abattoir, but rarely on radio, surely) this was something that serious music lovers found easy to attack. If you're going to play a symphony, then play all of it, not just the approachable minuet. But Classic FM did indeed play bleeding chunks. Radio 3 only didn't do so because it chose to broadcast, for instance, short self-contained musical items at times of day when the pace of the programme demanded it. In the event, an even easier feature to attack turned out to be the inability of some Classic FM presenters to pronounce the names of composers and performers correctly. At the BBC we rang up the Pronunciation Department – that was not an option at Classic FM. But the crux is this: Radio 3 is a *music* station whereas Classic FM is a *lifestyle* station. Scala Radio, which began broadcasting two years ago, is also a lifestyle station. Although the three stations are manifestly different in their approach, they have one recent strand in common – a regular programme about music for video games: Classic FM pressed the button with the BAFTA-winning Jessica Curry presenting *High Score* from 22 April 2017; Ms Curry later joined Radio 3 to start *Sound of Gaming* on 26 October 2019, leaving the way open for the Irish composer and conductor Eimar Noone to take over *High Score* at Classic FM on 9 November; meanwhile on its opening in March 2019, Scala Radio's *The Console* was presented by the Scottish composer Luci Holland.

Because the BBC is a public service broadcaster, there will always be howling dissatisfaction with the BBC's music output. For instance, I personally would like to hear more folk music, even more experimental music, and much more pre-Baroque music. Yet for some people, those would be the very genres that they would complain about more than toothache. Yet, I like to think that the remit of a public service broadcaster might be to promote interest in good music, irrespective of genre. The concept was clearly stated by jazz legend Duke Ellington: 'There are simply two kinds of music, good music and the other kind'. But that pre-supposes that we all agree on what constitutes good music. The presence of jazz itself on Radio 3 has its critics and some Radio 3 listeners find the broadcasting of pop music (or even allusion to pop music) inappropriate on 'their' network. With an annual licence fee of £159 and with over-75s again having to pay for their licences, it is hardly surprising that people call for value for money (although, since February 1971 you haven't needed a licence to listen solely to the BBC's radio output). Many call for a reform of the licence-fee model. At the moment it seems that the (TV) licence is here to stay because of the lack of an appropriate broadband infrastructure in the UK, without which digital reform would be problematic. 2038 seems to be the earliest year from which BBC funding might change drastically. At which point, not only would the funding of eight interactive television channels, ten radio networks, over 50 local television and radio services, and the BBC's online services be reviewed, but the status of the BBC Symphony Orchestra, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, BBC Philharmonic, BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, and the BBC Concert Orchestra would face review – assuming that those orchestras will still be making music 17 years from now. That's not to mention Britain's only full-time professional vocal ensemble, the BBC Singers, the BBC Big Band, and the amateur BBC Symphony Chorus and National Chorus of Wales.

Next year the BBC will celebrate its centenary, and it will do so amidst a clamour of revolutionary and reactionary criticism and suggestion. The BBC has embraced digital technology and has thereby exposed itself to commercial values and comparison. In the same way that the BBC's Radiophonic Workshop made itself redundant by developing electronic techniques that may now be emulated on free computer software in the comfort of your own home (or on the bus), the whole

BBC itself may have paved the way for the dismantlement of its public-service remit. I tend to take myself out of the equation when musing about the future of BBC radio, but I do consider the radio needs of my five-year old daughter – which are seemingly none (or zero, as she herself would say). When my radio choices of music by, for instance, Machaut, or Monteverdi, or Haydn, or Tallis, or Debussy, or The Beatles, or Sondheim, or Bellowhead, or Squarepusher invade her musical space, she either turns up the YouTube volume on her purloined smartphone or finds Netflix or CBeebies on our television. Radio gets in her way, whereas radio *is* my way. Who knows what she will feel by 2038, when she will be in her early-20s? Whatever happens, I envy her current state of radio naïveté – she has it all to come. And one thing is for sure; when the German physicist Heinrich Hertz reported in 1887 that ‘I do not think that the wireless waves I have discovered will have any practical application’, he was dead wrong.

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Further Reading

Michael Berkeley *Private Passions* [the first decade] (Faber and Faber, 2005)
Sean Magee *Desert Island Discs – 70 years of castaways* (Bantam Press, 2012)
David Hendy *Public Service Broadcasting* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)
Andrew Dubber *Radio in the Digital Age* (Polity Press, 2013)
Kyle Devine *Decomposed – the political ecology of music* (The MIT Press, 2019)