The BBC and Ultra-Modern Music, 1922–1936

Shaping a Nation's Tastes

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1 The British music industry and the BBC between the wars

From the perspective of the 1990s, two such well-known and predominant institutions as the British Broadcasting Corporation and the Second Viennese School require no introduction: the BBC is so fundamental a part of British contemporary life and culture, and the compositions and idioms of Schoenberg and his colleagues so essential to the twentieth-century development of Western art music that the influence of both today is self-evident. This study of the BBC's early dissemination of music of the Second Viennese circle focuses on a time when this was not yet the case. The reader must shed images of established institutions to rediscover their interwar identities: the BBC's sphere of influence was new and growing, and the impact of Second Viennese School works in Britain were almost entirely dependent on this fledgling medium.

The fundamental purpose of this book is to recapture and examine the BBC's early programme policies and practices concerning the broadcasting of contemporary music, using the music of the Second Viennese School circle as a case study. It concentrates on the organization's initial years as the British Broadcasting Company (1922–6) and its first decade as a Corporation under royal charter (1927–36). Such re-examination seems particularly relevant today, when so much that had come to be accepted and expected with respect to the broadcasting of art music in the United Kingdom is in question.

Early policies, goals and practices can indeed still be perceived today, despite the BBC's many transformations. Interwar Reithian ideals shaped the early stations' priorities, with broadcasts adhering to a fundamental advocacy of lofty educational goals and a mixed programming strategy. Post-war streamlining of wavelengths, intended for specific tastes, led to the formation of the remarkable Third Programme, devoted to exploring the fine arts for six hours each evening; contemporary music broadcasting reached what was perhaps a pinnacle of attention and notoriety on the Third during the experimental years of the 1960s, when William Glock was Controller of Music. Third Programme ideals gradually gave way in the late 1960s as Radio 3 emerged, with art music transmitted all day as well as in the evening. Finally, British licensing of art music on commercial radio in the early 1990s, resulting in Classic FM, introduced such competition for the first time, further transforming the goals, character and programming choices of Radio 3's music broadcasts.[1]

At the roots of this evolutionary development are the original objectives of the men who created British radio. Their decisions not only shaped public attitudes toward art music, but paved the way for general awareness of the latest compositional trends. Collective memory in the latter years of this century has tended to focus on remarkable post-war developments, looking – some with pride, some with horror (and with shifting emphases between these extremes in the past decade) – to the BBC during the Glock years and since to define the Corporation's identity as a radical supporter and disseminator of the new in music. In fact, the BBC established an international reputation for bringing the newest in music into the homes of the British people as early as the 1920s. The considerable achievements of Glock and his successors stand on the shoulders of their predecessors: Reith's idealistic policies led directly to the appointments of the first BBC Music Directors, Percy Pitt and Sir Adrian Boult, who in turn supported and encouraged the unique contributions of the early music programme builders, notably the enigmatic Edward Clark and his practical colleague, Kenneth A. Wright. These men and their associates were fundamentally responsible for the development of the BBC's art music programming, laying the foundation for what later became post-war 'standards'.

What determined the early BBC's approach to contemporary music? Why did policies develop as they did? Who established them and carried them out, making day-to-day decisions about what music to transmit? Who chose which newly composed scores should be aired? How were such scores brought to the BBC's attention? Who made decisions about performers? Who shaped the formats and presentation of art music broadcasts? And how were these emerging policies and practices received – within the BBC, within the music profession and, most importantly, amongst the listening audiences? After all, within just a few years, the BBC was responsible for bringing art music for the first time to the entire British population, on a daily basis and in an easily accessible and affordable format – a phenomenon that could never have been even dreamed of just a few years before.

The following chapters examine these questions in detail, reconstructing the development of the BBC Music Department's personnel structure, programming policies, broadcasting practices and reception concerns, with special focus on programming decisions involving Second Viennese School repertory. For such detailed discussion to be effective, however, it is necessary to have some understanding of historical context. We begin with a brief introduction to significant social and economic issues that defined the nature of the music industry in interwar Britain.

The changing face of the music industry

The interwar years were a time of extraordinary developments within the music industry, completely changing the fundamental nature and motivations of music-making, not only in the UK but throughout the world.[2] The early decades of this century saw an abrupt move from the established 'Edwardian infrastructure of music consist[ing] of buildings, institutions and processes through which musicians, as producers, and the public, as consumers, came to the market place'.[3] In the new musical order, technological advances enabled the emergence of the modern commercial music industry: the dissemination of music through mechanical means – specifically, sound recordings, broadcasting and film – transformed the role and potentials of music-making in everyday life at all levels of Western society. Participants in the traditional infrastructure continued to play key roles, but the composers, publishers, performers and audiences increasingly served as satellites to new commercial enterprises and priorities. As Cyril Ehrlich has succinctly stated about the twentieth-century music revolution: 'Fundamental patterns of consumption, manufacture and distribution have been realigned, sustaining an enormous growth in the use of music. Mechanized sound has replaced live performance as the normal experience.'[4]

These interwar years were rocky ones for British musicians: within this short period, external economic and social pressures forced sudden, profound shifts to work opportunities within the music industry. During the first decades of the century, silent cinema had rapidly gained popularity, offering musicians extraordinary employment options.

> Far from being silent, it required a ceaseless flow of music which could not yet be reproduced mechanically . . . So long as no soundtrack was available musicians were indispensable; their services required simultaneously everywhere, for most of the year . . . At every level of competence and ensemble, from 'fleapit' pianists or trios with drums to *quasi* symphony orchestras in the principal city theatres, instrumentalists found jobs throughout the country.[5]

However, the arrival of talking films in the late 1920s suddenly changed all that: 'the market collapsed practically overnight . . . Within a few years some 15,000 players lost their jobs.'[6] In addition, the period directly following the 1929 stock market crash brought the national economy into an erratic state.

> Although unemployment, hunger, and severe economic deprivation profoundly affected certain regions of the country . . . other areas of Britain, particularly the South, experienced marked economic growth and a steady rise in the standard of living.[7]

The unpredictable economy contributed to unstable working conditions for many in the music industry. Moreover, in the 1930s, British musicians' interests were threatened by large numbers of European refugees who flocked to safety and what they hoped were work opportunities in the United Kingdom, as the Weimar Republic gave way to the Nazi tide.[8] During this turbulent period, the BBC was born and rapidly gained power, resources and credibility – and, perhaps most significantly in this time of social and economic fluctuation, the BBC had money to spend.

The rapid development of the new music industry was paralleled by profound changes to the way in which British music activities were prioritized, decided and controlled, changes that were avidly fought by men who had achieved positions of authority in the old musical establishment. Success in the new musical world did not necessarily require the skills that had defined the power structures of the old; consequently, the old establishment, based in the music conservatories, performance venues, publishing houses and agencies, found that it was no longer possible to influence in the same way the direction and content of British musical life. Instead, in an incredibly short span of time, men who came from non-traditional – or even non-musical – backgrounds came to control the most powerful new-order institutions, as well as their budgets, and seized responsibility for decisions that affected the lives and livelihoods of a significant percentage of British musicians. The old establishment did not accept this loss of power meekly, and the conflict between those who felt they should be exerting influence and those who actually controlled the new music industry characterizes this period.[9] In particular, within a decade of its formation, the BBC not only became the most significant music disseminator in Britain, it was the foremost employer of British musicians, and the music establishment's attempts to challenge this reality and to exert influence over its ramifications are considered at length in later chapters.

This technical and commercial revolution not only changed the way that music was marketed and consumed, it had a direct impact on the substance of music in terms of the development of new repertoires, such as jazz, and radio and film incidental music. The technological developments and the depth and breadth of their impact on society are responsible at least in part for the division of music audiences into the distinct layers that characterize twentieth-century music reception, initially distinguished in the UK as 'high brow', 'middle brow' and 'low brow'. Within the art music realm, growing accessibility of old repertories and the ease with which works, both small and large-scale, could be heard – and repeatedly – may well have encouraged the further division of audiences, with strong prefer-

ence for non-contemporary repertories, another distinctly twentieth-century phenomenon.

Finally, the new opportunites for music composition, performance and dissemination were paralleled by the development and increasing power of organizations such as the Performing Right Society, the Mechanical Copyright Protection Society, the Incorporated Society of Musicians and the Musicians Union; together with more effective copyright laws following the 1911 Copyright Act, these institutions built up financial structures that enabled creative artists to share in the financial rewards of the industry's new marketplace.[10] These structures provided the social and economic framework for the development of the 'professional' performing musician or composer in the modern sense.[11] The BBC played a vital role in helping to establish the effectiveness and influence of these new organizations, its 'Programmes as Broadcast' records providing detailed information about all transmitted music, enabling accurate distribution of fees.

From the beginning, the BBC was an intrinsic player in the new music industry, setting new standards and developing new trends as a powerful employer of musicians, as a commissioning body for new compositions, as a disseminator of music repertories – inevitably shaping new audiences – and as a leading distributor of music-related funds. For this reason it is interesting to consider the early development of the BBC itself, to gain a sense of why British radio and music programming within it developed in the precise way that it did.

A brief introduction to BBC history, 1922–1936

Following World War I, radio in Britain was still experimental, of interest mainly to the military and the shipping industry, but also to a growing number of amateur enthusiasts who built their own sets in order to send and receive transmission signals. In February 1920, the Marconi Company began to broadcast short, daily programmes of news and music, which were received by the amateurs and sailors. However, the military disapproved of radio being used for entertainment purposes and the Marconi programmes were banned in November of that year. After extensive lobbying by the amateur enthusiasts, the Post Office gave the Marconi Company permission to resume broadcasts, once a week for fifteen minutes from February 1922. By May, the company was broadcasting non-musical programmes nightly from a powerful station in London called 2LO, by June musical items were also included, and by autumn 1922, 2LO was heard by approximately 50,000 people.[12]

As broadcasting increased in popularity, radio grew as a commercial

entity. Anyone who wanted to 'listen-in' had to acquire a radio set; thus companies that produced radio equipment promoted broadcasting because it encouraged sales of their products. At the same time there was governmental concern about difficulties that had developed in the United States, where the lack of broadcasting control had resulted in too many stations using the limited wavelength band, adversely affecting reception.[13] In spring and summer 1922, official meetings took place in London to consider these issues. After much discussion and negotiation, the British Broadcasting Company was formed on 18 October 1922, and, in a decision of monumental significance, the government granted it sole right to broadcast in the United Kingdom. On the new monopoly's Board of Directors were representatives of the six most important British manufacturers of radio equipment. BBC broadcasting officially began on 14 November 1922, the day of the General Election. The first orchestral concert was given on 23 December, the same day as the first general news bulletin was read from London and the first broadcast talk was given. At that time the BBC had a staff of four,[14] headed by John Reith as General Manager.

The Company's policy was remarkably simple: on the technical side, to provide a broadcasting service for anyone in the country who cared to listen, and on the programme side, to bring the best of everything into the greatest number of homes. The growth of the Company between 1923 and 1927 was phenomenally rapid on all levels: departmental organization, staff size, building space, technical capability, geographical range, licence and listener numbers, broadcasting hours and programming coverage all expanded as the demand for wireless spread and the expected quality of its output increased. By the end of 1924, eight main stations had been built, which served different regions of the country. By July 1925, when the long-wave station at Daventry (5XX) was opened, 85 per cent of the British population had the capability to receive regional BBC programmes even on crystal sets, the simplest, least expensive early radios. As technological advances broadened transmission range and improved reception quality, the number of BBC licences sold each year increased: in 1924, 1,130,000 licences were sold; by the end of 1926, that number had nearly doubled. Other technical innovations during this period included the development of 'simultaneous broadcasts', where telephone wires linked different stations so that one programme could be transmitted across the country, and 'outside broadcasts', where programmes not confined to a BBC studio were transmitted.

As the BBC's size, responsibility and impact grew, the General Manager, Reith, and the government realized that the nature of the institution

should be reconsidered. In 1925, an official committee chaired by the Earl of Crawford was appointed to examine the future of broadcasting; in March 1926, its findings were published, recommending that from the beginning of 1927 the British Broadcasting Company would become a new independent, public body called the British Broadcasting Corporation set up by a royal charter valid for ten years. When the Corporation began on 1 January 1927, Reith became Director-General and there were 773 members of staff.

During the decade under the first Charter, broadcasting played an increasingly significant role in British life and culture; as the BBC's sphere of influence grew, so did the Corporation's staff and hierarchical structure. Briggs describes this relationship as follows:

> On 1 January 1927 the BBC employed 773 people. There were then 2,178,259 wireless-licence holders. On 1 September 1939 the BBC employed nearly 5,000 people and there were 9,082,666 wireless-licence holders. To put the matter simply, in 1927 the BBC was still a small organization, catering for a minority, if a large and growing minority, of the British public. In 1939 the BBC was a large organization, and it was catering for a majority of the British public.[15]

As Table 1.1 demonstrates, by the end of 1926, about 20 per cent of the nation's households owned radios. By December 1933, this number had increased to 50 per cent and by the end of the period under consideration in this study, almost 65 per cent of the population were listening to BBC broadcasts in their homes. In those early years, the absence of other forms of domestic media entertainment and limited programme choice[16] meant that items the BBC chose to transmit were widely heard throughout the country by people of all economic classes and educational backgrounds, encompassing the spectrum of personal interests.

The new Corporation continued to expand throughout the 1930s in terms of size, importance, technical capability and programme sophistication. Since important developments in organizational structure, official policy and programme content are discussed in detail in later chapters, only a few events of historic significance will be mentioned here. On a technical level, the BBC put into effect the Regional Scheme, which enabled listeners in all parts of the country to receive BBC programmes on a minimum of two different wavelengths; this two-programme arrangement remained in effect until the beginning of the war. Musically, the most significant event of the period occurred in summer 1930, when the BBC Symphony Orchestra was formed; soon after, Adrian Boult became its Chief Conductor. On a physical level, the Corporation planned and constructed a

Table 1.1 *Relationship between the number of BBC licences sold annually, the number of British households and the number of BBC staff, December 1926–December 1936*

	licences current on 31 December	% increase from previous year	approximate number of licences per 100 households	number of BBC staff
1926	2,178,259	32.4	20.0	773
1927	2,395,183	10.0	21.7	989
1928	2,628,392	9.7	23.4	1,064
1929	2,956,736	12.5	26.0	1,109
1930	3,411,910	15.4	29.6	1,194
1931	4,330,735	26.9	37.1	1,287
1932	5,263,017	21.5	44.5	1,512
1933	5,973,758	13.5	50.0	1,747
1934	6,780,569	13.5	56.1	2,031
1935	7,403,109	9.2	60.7	2,518
1936	7,960,573	7.5	64.4	3,350

The estimated population of the United Kingdom according to the 1931 census was 46,189,445; by the end of 1936, this estimated figure had increased to 47,229,400. For statistical purposes, the BBC estimated that in each British household, there was an average of 4 to 5 people.

The first three columns of statistics were reproduced from 'Licence figures', *BBC Handbook 1939*, 129. The final column was reproduced from Briggs, vol. ii: *The Golden Age of Wireless*, 450.

prestigious, purpose-built London headquarters, Broadcasting House, into which it officially moved on 15 May 1932. On 15 October of that year, the Concert Hall in Broadcasting House first came into use for Corporation-sponsored public concerts, which were also transmitted to listeners across the country. Finally, the last development of note was the renewal of the BBC charter on 1 January 1937. This important event was preceded by a thorough investigation of the Corporation's policies and achievements in its first decade, years in which the very nature of British radio was defined and determined. This review was carried out by a publicly appointed committee headed by Lord Ullswater, and the committee's favourable findings were published in the Ullswater Report of 1936.

Beginning in November 1922, when the British Broadcasting Company was formed, its staff of four began to build an empire in what was basically unchartered territory. It was impossible in those early days for anyone to

predict how deeply sound media would permeate contemporary society or how influential the BBC would become – and how breathtakingly swiftly those processes would take place. The questions the early staff faced required groundbreaking and sometimes visionary decisions concerning technical developments, programming choices, presentation formats, and, perhaps most importantly, how to interact with social and economic forces on a national scale. Of these many questions, one in particular was fundamental to the organization during the interwar years: as a publicly funded monopoly, how best could the BBC serve the public and provide for its multiplicity of needs?

These questions could have been answered in many ways, and British radio could have developed along any number of different lines, perhaps similar to the commercial models that characterized early radio in the United States. The specific ways in which these fundamental questions were resolved and the values that the young organization adopted provided a platform for BBC policies, some of which are still recognizable in BBC radio today. This study is a detailed investigation of the way that the early administrators and programmers addressed fundamental questions concerning the broadcasting of art music, particularly contemporary art music, between 1922 and 1936 and the long-term ramifications of their answers.