

BBC SCOTTISH SYMPHONY CLUB

Honorary President Donald Runnicles OBE

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Newsletter

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The Club Newsletter's publishing history is chequered. The earliest surviving issue in our archives is 'No 4, Winter 1981' but numbering quickly stopped and production over the ensuing years could be fitful. In Spring 2010 Martin Armstrong (our previous editor) introduced the classy format with which you are now familiar. The use of seasonal titles like 'Autumn/Winter 2014/2015' and the fact that that edition was followed by 'Autumn 2015' continue to confuse the archivist in me and so I have decided it's time to reintroduce simple numbers. By a happy accident (if you are a Tom Waits fan) this appears to be our 55th Newsletter.

This Newsletter is also the first to include Club concert reviews all of which have been written by one person. The editor is very grateful indeed to Daniel Divers who kindly agreed to become our resident reviewer, at least for the time being! The results, I hope you will agree, are thoughtful and thought-provoking essays of a uniformly high standard. No longer does Nancy Dickinson have to approach unsuspecting concert attendees and try to appeal to their latent literary ambitions. Equally, concert attendees can now relax when Nancy approaches them with her winning smile. It is appropriate also to mention Norman McGadie who is now supplementing his excellent recordings (for the players and the Club's archives) by becoming photographer-in-chief at

the recitals. The Club is greatly indebted to him.

In this issue, in addition to Dan Divers' reviews, we have a splendidly provocative piece by Ian Robertson on Mahler's symphonies. You will find our customary news of arrivals and departures from the BBC SSO, and some information about new releases of recordings by the Orchestra. You may be interested to note that the new recording of Moszkowski's Third Piano Concerto, mentioned in our last Newsletter and available from the Club at a discounted price, received a very enthusiastic 5 star review from the BBC Music Magazine ("brimful of attractive melodies...alert and strongly characterised playing"). You will also find Part 3 of Mary Lawson's musical memories which pick up in the spring of 1941, shortly after she was recruited to the BBC. With first-hand experience of the London blitz, her piece focuses on the technical expertise she had to gain at short notice. It makes for fascinating reading, and serves almost as a prequel to Graeme Taylor's piece in the Spring 2016 Newsletter about recording and live-broadcasting the BBC SSO from the City Halls.

The Management Committee needs YOU! We are currently a bit stretched and likely to find ourselves even more so in the near future. If anyone is interested, please get in touch. Similarly, this Newsletter depends on the articles provided by Club members, players and other colleagues in the BBC. I do hope that

more writers will step forward, whether members or players. Write a piece about your hobby, or even a favourite hobbyhorse – but please write! In the last edition, we even managed a letters page but, alas, there is nothing of the sort appearing in this edition. I think that is a pity. We want to hear from the members and the players about what interests you, what you like about the Club and ways we can improve. Perhaps Ian Robertson's piece (and Strindberg's comments – see below) will stimulate some correspondence!

Looking to the future, I'm happy to report that cellist Sarah Oliver, who joined the BBC SSO in May 2016, has succeeded Gent Koço as our new liaison with the Orchestra. We look forward to her programme for season 2017/18. Members will be advised of details over the summer.

Lastly, a minor correction – on page 3 of the autumn edition, the photo of Donald Runnicles was credited to Tom 'Roger'; that should have read 'Rodger'.

Thank you all for your continued support for the Club.

Jim McGrath

FRONT COVER: Thomas Dausgaard and the BBC SSO, Glasgow City Halls, April 2016 (John Wood)

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Bon mots et bonnes notes (occasional musical space fillers!)

This *bon mot* may be seen as a companion piece of sorts to Ian Robertson's article on Mahler (see page 9). Ludwig Wittgenstein also had firm views on Mahler: "I don't believe a note of Gustav Mahler. I believe every note of Anton Bruckner". (Quoted in the BBC Music Magazine, June 2011).

BBC SSO To Everything There Is A Season

The BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra's programme for season 2017-2018 combines the very familiar, albeit refracted through fresh perspectives, with introductions to the much less familiar (the neglected or the very new), all in keeping with the commitment that comes with the BBC, to inform, educate and entertain.

The 'Composer Roots' concerts will be the theme at the heart of the new Season. Chief Conductor Thomas Dausgaard has programmed and will conduct a series of evening and afternoon concerts exploring musical influences on Beethoven, Rachmaninov, Bartók, Nielsen, and Sibelius, including contributions by folk musicians from across Europe. So, we have another opportunity to hear Beethoven's much played Symphony No 9, but preceded in the same concert by works ranging from Palestrina to Haydn, works that Beethoven admired and studied. Similarly, it is intended to reveal how Rachmaninov's Third Piano Concerto and Symphonic Variations were influenced by Russian Orthodox Gregorian Chant, and how Sibelius's rarely performed *Kullervo* reflects traditional Finnish singing and playing. If the Beethoven and Rachmaninov are very familiar, opportunities to hear more of Nielsen, especially his rarely performed Third Symphony, and more of Bartók (including such rarities as his *Romanian and Transylvanian Dances*, and that eerie masterpiece, the *Music for Strings Percussion and Celesta*, which Stanley Kubrick used to such good effect in 'The Shining') are for this writer especially welcome.

Tippett's symphonies have been too long neglected, and Martyn Brabbins and the BBC SSO's survey of these will conclude with symphonies 3 & 4, plus the first professional performance of the early Symphony in B flat. Meanwhile, hiding away in the Thursday afternoon series, we find the evergreen *Appalachian Spring* of Aaron Copland alongside a real rarity on these shores, a symphony by Roy Harris, his Third, these under the baton of Associate Guest Conductor, John Wilson.

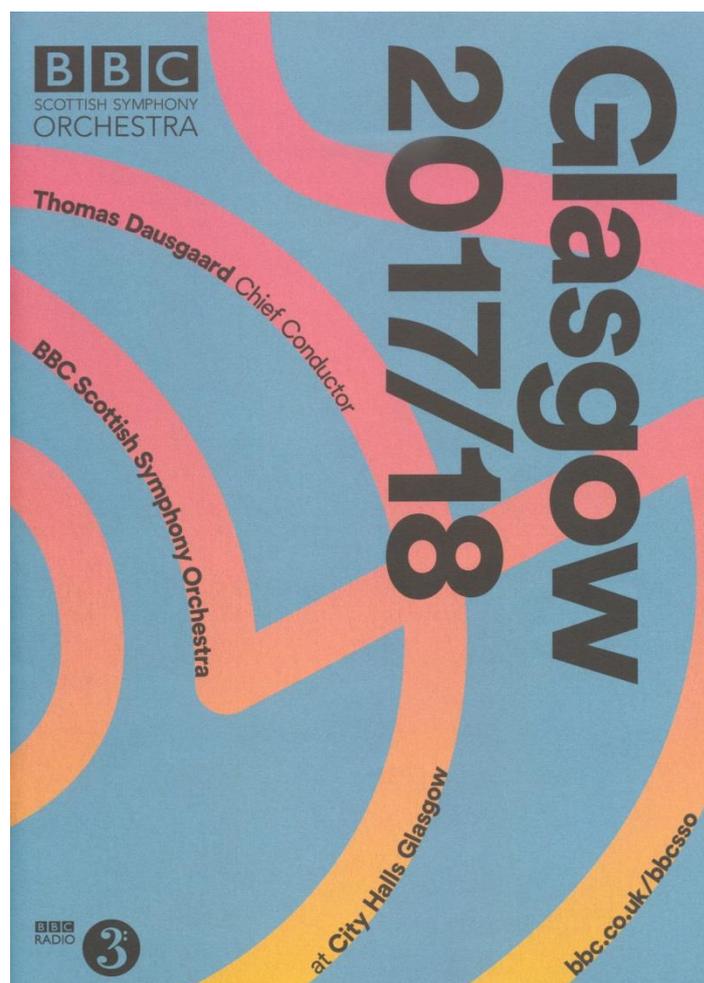
Another theme, 'Scottish Inspirations', returns for a second year of new BBC commissions showcasing the work of composers inspired by Scotland and Scottish identity. Thomas Dausgaard will conduct the world premiere of *Eòlas nan Ribheid (The Wisdom of the Reeds)* by Scottish composer William Sweeney, based on the pibroch, as well as new works by composers David Fennessy and Anna Clyne, the latter's new piece inspired by the ancient Beltane Fire Festival. Other contemporary music performances include works by Tenney, Maceda, Vivier, Jaehyuck Choi, Diana Burrell, Charlotte Bray, Cassandra Miller and Thomas Hyde. And of course there will be the Tectonics Glasgow festival, which returns in 2018.

An impressive roster of titled and guest conductors and soloists will be accompanying the ever-impressive BBC SSO on its musical explorations. While Principal Guest Conductor Ilan Volkov conducts Beethoven's magnificent 'Eroica' Symphony, Matthias Pintscher, in a novel departure, will be conducting an Asian-influenced programme with works by Hosokawa and Takemitsu, a

new piece by South Korean composer Jaehyuck Choi, and Vivier's *Siddhartha*. Conductor Emeritus Donald Runnicles returns to conduct Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, and the BBC SSO's leader Laura Samuel will be directing the orchestra in an afternoon performance of Mozart's *Jupiter* Symphony.

There will be family concerts too in Glasgow, with 'Christmas at the Movies' and 'Music, the Universe and Everything', the latter an exploration of music and science. Following the success of last season's 'Ten Pieces' events, there will be more 'Ten Pieces' concerts in Glasgow, Perth and Aberdeen. Indeed, while this survey has focussed on the Glasgow season, the Orchestra will as usual present concerts in Aberdeen, in Edinburgh, Ayr, Haddington, Inverness and Perth.

Dominic Parker, Director of the BBC SSO says, "This is a season that thrives on the infectious creative curiosity of our Chief Conductor Thomas Dausgaard to explore the roots and influences of a number of great composers. Along with shaking up the concert format, we are bringing musicians from around the world to help us in that exploration – great folk musicians from Hungary to illuminate Bartók, and the Danish String Quartet to highlight Nielsen's folk influences. At the same time we perform premieres and works by some of the most exciting living composers. We really hope that our audiences will explore these with us." Indeed, there should be something for everyone in the coming season. For further information visit www.bbc.co.uk/bbcso



Broadcasting during the War

Mary Lawson's Memoirs Part 3

At the end of the last instalment we left Mary Lawson as she stepped out of King's Cross station in London and sought directions to Maida Vale to take up her post with the BBC. It is May 1941.

On my way to Maida Vale I met another woman with the same purpose. We joined forces. She was Welsh and called Jane. All signboards had in those invasion-fearing days been removed. Eventually we found a grey two-storey building extending right along the main road. It looked like an industrial warehouse. At the sand-bagged entrance a Home Guard inspected our BBC letters and allowed us into a very small reception area. A uniformed man then took us along a long shabby corridor lined with small offices. Taken into one, we found three other women. One introduced herself as the Personnel Officer. There followed a bewildering sequence of form-signing. We learned what we would be paid, weekly in cash (cheques and bank accounts were unknown to us then) and that we would work a 3 shift system, including nights. Next day we were to report to Broadcasting House where we would start a one-month training course, at the end of which a small examination would decide in which branch of the Engineering Division we would work. We signed the Official Secrets Act. She asked where we were living. The other women were locals, living at home in towns near London. Jane and I were the only outsiders. She gave us a list of hostels and addresses of people who might take us in as lodgers. Issued with a flimsy street map of the area, we were told to go and find somewhere to live and to report to her later.

We two had had prolonged overnight train journeys, and only tea and toast in the station. We were tired and hungry and lugging suitcases with all our possessions, our gas masks over our shoulders and clutching our handbags (which held the most vital of all, our Identity Cards, Ration Books and Post Office Savings Bank books for money when needed). We emerged from the BBC building both anxious and homesick. Today, it is not easy to appreciate the impact which being 'called up' had on our generation. With little or no choice, most were told to report to some organisation far away from home, family and friends, with no personal contact phone or internet, no knowledge of the difficulty or danger of the task ahead and no option to reject or leave any employment. By today's standards, Jane and I, 21-year old young women, were quite unsophisticated. Jane, a GPO trained telegraph operator had never been very far away from her Welsh home town. Very few of us had ever been 'abroad'.

Exploring the streets near the BBC building we found tree-lined terraces of what, pre-war, must have been superior 4-storey town houses. In one street we spotted a notice advertising 'One room flats - vacancies'. Down some basement steps we found a landlady, Mrs. Clement, who showed us a 'one room flat' on the 4th floor. It had the same very basic furnishings as I had known in the college hostel, but the gas fire had a small gas ring on top. Suddenly, there emerged from the other flats two young men who worked in the BBC. This was our first stroke of luck. Their hobby had been wireless transmission and in

the previous six months the BBC had been recruiting young 18-year olds 'Hams' awaiting their allocation to the Services. Wireless Telegraphy was in those pre-war years what IT is now, a youthful obsession. Since the occupation of Europe in 1940, the BBC had become a vital source of news and urgently needed more staff. These knowledgeable ex-schoolboys were a ready source of new recruits. The BBC called them Junior Maintenance Engineers (JMEs). We were very grateful when these two offered to be our guides.

Jane and I paid a week's rent and became tenants of adjacent 4th floor 'flats'. Our two escorts took us back to the BBC building and now we were able to show our newly supplied BBC passes and badges to the Home Guard. We learned our escort's surnames, a universal practice then when forenames were used only by close family and not bandied about as they are today. I would be addressed always as 'Miss Lawson'. Introduced to the canteen we had our first meal of the day, vegetable soup. Nearby, through an open door, I glimpsed a very big space in which were scattered a few music stands. This was Studio One, the source of all the concerts which I had for years heard on the wireless, - where Toscanini and Richard Strauss had conducted the BBC Symphony Orchestra and the most eminent soloists had played.

Returning to our flats, the 'boys' made us familiar with essential tasks, such as how to feed the small gas meter with sixpences to get the gas fire and ring to supply heat. A small kettle could be boiled on the gas ring but we were advised to always have a thermos flask filled for use in air raids. Clothes washing could be done in the bath water with your once-a-week bath, if the gas pressure was high enough to get the geyser to light at all. Otherwise, an occasional one shilling visit to the Municipal Baths and Washhouses, taking one's own towel and soap, was useful. Timidly, I asked what to do if the siren goes? "Nothing much" was the reply, "unless it gets very noisy, then you can go down to the basement". This part of London had not been very badly hit. The real devastation was in the City and the East End. Our JME mentors then left us to go on their 4pm-midnight shift. Early evening, Mrs. Clements brought us a small battered tin kettle, a small enamel washing up bowl and mugs 'to start us off! Suddenly I was unable to stay awake. 24 hours earlier I had boarded a train in Newcastle Station! This had been my first day as a BBC employee.

Next morning, Jane and I found our way to Broadcasting House, past buildings swathed in sand bags, gaps surrounded by wooden boarding, tarpaulin covered roofs, boarded-up windows, rubble everywhere - Regent Street and Portland Place. The entrance to BH was fortified with sand bags, and guarded by a Home Guard who checked our passes. A person escorted us down to a basement room where we met Mr. Godfrey who was in charge of the newly established in-house Engineering Training School. There were eight women in our class and we were each handed a notebook and pencil for note taking.

A lecture by a senior staff member introduced us to acronyms of 'Who was Who'. For instance, the Superintendent Engineer (Recording) or SE[R], was the Head of all BBC Recording, but SREs were the Senior Recording Engineers in charge of the staff on each daily

shift. We were WOs, Women Operators! Next – ‘Who was Where?’ The Music Department and BBC Symphony Orchestra had been evacuated to Bristol in 1939 but had lost numbers of instruments and their library of scores in the heavy raids on that city in 1940. They had been hastily re-housed in Bedford, where they used the Corn Exchange for the weekly broadcasts of a Symphony Concert. The Drama and Light Entertainment Departments had had a similar fate and ended up in Bangor, North Wales. Bush House, acquired in 1936 to house the then new Empire Service, was now home to people of all nationalities and languages who were sending programmes to occupied Europe and other parts of the world. An Arabic section was housed in newly acquired buildings in the country at Caversham and Wood Norton. The French and German Sections were temporarily working in Maida Vale. This had been a logistical nightmare for BBC executives when in May 1940 all the carefully planned 1939 distribution of staff had been thrown into chaos by the German occupation of Europe, and by the Blitz.

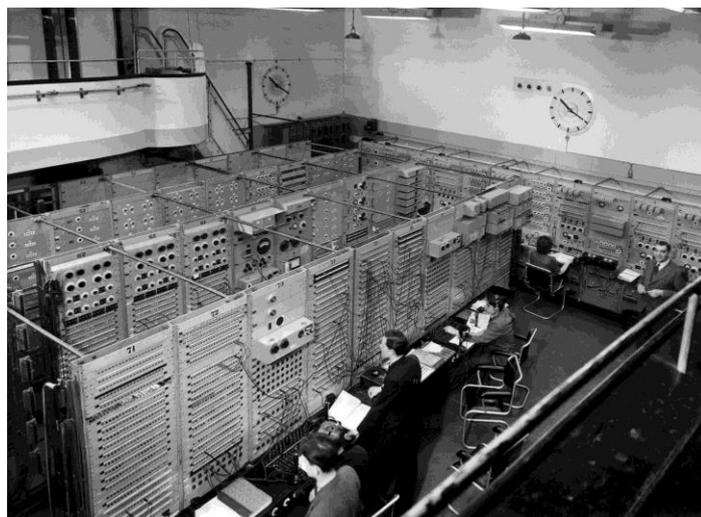
Next day the lectures became more technical. An engineer called Mr. Rantzen, (Esther Rantzen’s father), gave us a lecture on ‘Lines’, explaining terms such as ‘impedance’, ‘inductance’, ‘trap valves’ and ‘cross talk’. A massive General Post Office network of insulated copper cables above and below ground, provided the entire UK communications system, as the internet does today. The multiple lines supplying all parts of the BBC ended at a wall of racks of terminals in the Control Room where an operator would connect the appropriate lines to the studios, to other BBC units and to the major transmitters, many located in remote parts of Britain. Some of us would be trained for this work. We were told how, when on 8th December 1940 the upper storeys of Broadcasting House had been demolished by a land mine, teams of engineers had, in 24 hours, transferred the entire complex system to a basement area, without the loss of a single broadcast programme. An example to us all!

We were escorted along a maze of BH catacombs and shown this vital Control Room. As the engineer in charge demonstrated the involved operational procedure, suddenly, out of a loud speaker came an intoned ‘Lord Have Mercy Upon Us’ from the ‘Evensong’ which was being broadcast at that moment. Our laugh seemed to surprise the engineer. From another corridor we overheard the unmistakable rich voice of Ed Murrow, the famous US war correspondent, broadcasting his daily news bulletin to the US networks.

Next subject was ‘Transmission’. Although qualified in theoretical physics, the technology of Wireless Telegraphy was for us a new subject. This was the thermionic valve era and we filled our note books with hastily scribbled circuit diagrams using diodes, triodes, pentodes, and rectifiers.

One lecture was concerned with the importance of air raid security measures. BBC transmitters might inadvertently be a source of direction-finding for enemy aircraft so, on receipt of an early warning signal from RAF Radar, main BBC transmitters in an expected enemy flight path ceased transmission. Simultaneously, the broadcast output would be immediately taken over by a network of small 1 watt transmission units. These ‘H’ transmitters had been secretly housed in suburban houses on the outskirts of the

main towns and cities so that local reception of programmes would continue unaffected. When in 1940, invasion was a very present threat, these transmitters were



Broadcasting House Control Room, c1946. (BBC, courtesy of Roger Beckwith)

tested daily to provide a possible ‘Underground’ BBC and staff were trained in Morse Code. Thankfully, with invasion now seeming less likely, we were to be spared this added burden. We were told, however, that some of us would be trained and sent to operate a little H transmitter ‘somewhere in the UK’.

Finally ‘Recording’ and ‘Integrity’: this lecture was given by the Superintendent Engineer [Recording]. He explained how, pre-war, recording had been used primarily to supply the Commonwealth with recordings of BBC UK broadcasts of talks, drama, music and the like. These could also be relayed by short-wave over 24 hours to the 5 Time Zones (Africa, India, North and South America, and the Pacific). In wartime, however, recording would play a much more vital purpose, relaying information. Prior to broadcast, all material had first to be censored for anything liable to be ‘of help to the enemy’. This was not a problem where a script was available, such as for talks, drama or comedy, but incoming news bulletins and Outside Broadcasts, for instance, must first be recorded and vetted by a chain of official bodies and, on their advice, suitably edited before broadcast. Even news from BBC war correspondents attached to service units whose scripts would already have been checked by their service censors, had to be recorded and re-checked before being broadcast. The lecturer then discussed ‘Integrity’. It was the principal objective of the BBC that all broadcast information should be accurate. Information was being edited for security and it was essential that the listener was always informed beforehand if a recording and not a live broadcast was being transmitted. The BBC now transmitted war reports to all parts of the world and had already acquired a reputation for trustworthiness. All staff and especially recording staff involved in the editing process must never discuss their work with family or friends or even outside their own section of the BBC. This lecture ended our first week in the school.

Saturday and Sunday being our free days, we first found a local grocer and butcher with whom we could register our Ration Books. We collected our small packet of tea, 4oz of butter, 2oz of cheese, one egg and a small ‘National’ loaf

of bread. We took our week's meat ration as four slices of corned beef as this had no waste and needed no cooking!

Jane had received an invitation to visit distant relatives of her mother and asked me to accompany her. They lived in NE London and we managed to find the correct Underground route and their house. We were shocked to see how much more devastation there was in that area than ours. The house we were visiting had had a 'near miss' and was damaged but, as proprietors of the adjacent grocery shop, her relatives had to remain there and continue to supply the local people with their rations. We were given a homely Welsh welcome and tea. As we were leaving, suddenly there was the wail of the siren. With the family we were ushered into the storage cellar under the shop. As well as large containers of the shop's vital grocery supplies, the cellar was equipped with cushions, blankets, old armchairs and air beds. Newly filled thermos flasks of hot soup and tea were brought down and Jane and I were told to 'make ourselves comfortable as it might be a long night'. In the subsequent quiet spell we talked about music and of course a sing-song followed with a younger member of the family keeping us in tune with a mouth organ accompaniment. We sang my favourite Welsh folk song which I had known since school, 'David of the White Rock'. Then it got 'noisy', though below ground one felt rather than heard the sounds. Then it got 'very noisy' and I was glad to be with this 'blitz-hardened' family who had already endured this kind of ordeal night after night for six months, and still seemed unconcerned. When the 'ALL CLEAR' sounded our hostess said quietly 'Wonder who got that lot?'

After a very early breakfast, as Jane and I left, we paused at the door and 'took in' the scene. It was a beautiful Sunday morning. No one was about and it was intensely quiet. When, years later, I read that Vaughan Williams had tried in his *Pastoral Symphony* to convey his own WW1 experience of the strange quiet at dawn which followed a night's activity, I remember thinking 'I know what he means'. When we emerged from our home stop on the Underground, we found the road barricaded. The BBC Maida Vale building had taken a direct hit. The worst damage was at the end of that extensive building some distance from our street, but I was thankful that I had not spent last night under Mrs. Clement's stairs. Later the 'boys' told us that luckily it was also their day off, but an announcer with the German Section, which occupied the damaged end, had been killed. Next day we learnt that the much loved Queens Hall had been burned to a ruin.

Back at school on Monday, a lecturer now explained 'Operational Procedures'. Accurate timing was essential. All broadcast material must begin and end precisely at the time allotted. The 'pips' and 9pm chimes of Big Ben were vital broadcasts for listeners in Europe and elsewhere. No silent gaps must occur between programmes to allow the nasal 'Gairmany calling' voice of the German broadcaster whom the country had named 'Lord Haw Haw' to intrude.

Further lectures included technical details of the different types of microphones used and the placement of these in studios and elsewhere. For a symphony orchestra, only three microphones were used, one above the conductor and the other ones mid-way above the left and right sides. Soloists did not have an individual microphone. 'Stereo' was then only being tried experimentally and was not in

regular use. 'Dynamic Range' was an important topic. The incoming sound level had to be reduced by a volume controller to a maximum of 45 decibels to prevent overloading the recording apparatus, producing sound distortion or 'cross talk' interference on adjacent lines. This was not usually a problem with speech, but loud passages in music or other incoming sound effects usually needed some reduction.

Some 'lecture notes', flimsy sheets of barely legible carbon copies of typed summaries of all the lectures, were given to us to help our own inaccurate scribbles. We, the class of 1941, were the guinea pigs. A year later the BBC established a proper text book-supported training school at Wood Norton which I believe existed until recently. The 'examination' was a fairly gentle ordeal intended to find which topics we had liked most and what our own interests were, drama, music, sport, or other. The verdict: Jane, my friend, was to go to a 'transmitter' and, she hoped, back to Wales; I was to join the Recording Section and would, over the next two weeks, be taught all the technical 'know-how'. Jane was to be trained at the main London transmitter at Brookmans Park, so she prepared for a possible move to a new billet in North London. My base would be Broadcasting House, so I could remain living where I was. The JMEs reported that Maida Vale was being rapidly repaired, with new reinforcement and safety areas installed. Studios and the recording section were again operational and it was likely I would work there after training.

Next day I reported to the recording section in Broadcasting House. The SRE told me I would be trained on disc recording and replay. I was shown a row of turntables, each with the usual pickup arm and stylus for playing records, and two unusual machines, placed side by side, which were for making new records. The BBC used disc records very extensively but they differed from the familiar commercial records in that they had to be able to be played back immediately. The commercial record cut a sound track on soft wax and this was electroplated to make a matrix from which thousands of copies could be pressed. The BBC process used a 12 inch aluminium disc which was coated with a layer of acetate varnish, thick and soft enough to enable a sapphire cutter to trace a sound track and also tough enough to allow instant playback with a very light weight stylus. Usually only needing to be played a few times, the disc could then be stripped, recoated and reused, a necessity at that time of shortage. Discs destined for the archives could be preserved by the electroplating process.

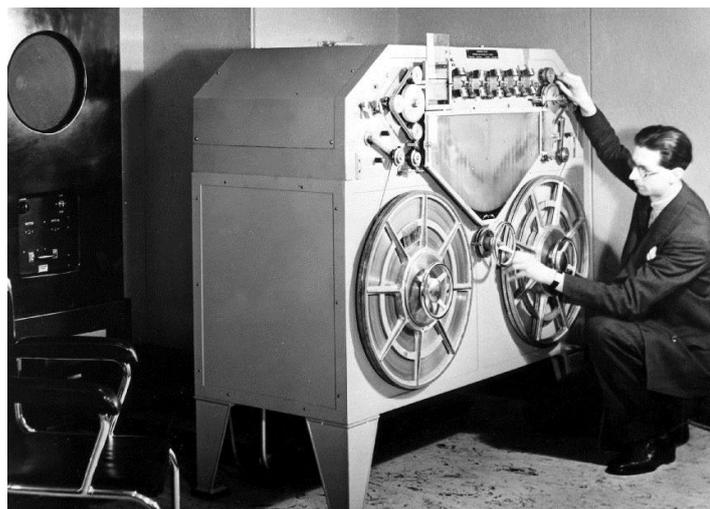
When making a recording, the blank disc had first to be examined for evenness of the coating. In a recording studio, one of the terminals in the ubiquitous wall rack supplied a constant 1000 cycles per second 'tone' at standard loudness. Connecting this to the cutter head using a newly installed sapphire cutter, a trial sound track was recorded. This track was then played back through headphones.

Listening, I was told, was our most important task, as any distortion in the sound might mean that the cutter had cut too deeply into the coating, or lost its edge and must be replaced. A pickup following a freshly cut sound track allowed the operator to compare incoming and outgoing recorded sound throughout the process. If any

deterioration in sound quality was detected, the flick of a switch transferred the incoming sound instantly to the second recording machine.

Today, a CD can contain over an hour of recorded content. The 12 inch 78 revolutions per minute (rpm) commercial record of 1941 might contain 8 minutes' worth. To increase this, the BBC was ahead of its time in introducing 'slow speed' at 33 rpm, so our discs could perhaps record 12 minutes of decent quality. However, most broadcasts lasted either 30 minutes or an hour. This introduced the 'change over' challenge. As the cutter approached the centre of the disc, an appropriate moment was chosen to switch the incoming sound to a pre-prepared and running second machine. Hopefully, when recording speech, this could be done during a break or a pause at the end of a sentence. Disc recording could be used for popular songs, dance music, and comedy, but for classical music, two other forms of recording were used, 'tape' and 'film'.

The tape system, like the cassettes of recent times, used a magnetic system but this tape was a thin strip of high quality steel $1/8^{\text{th}}$ of an inch wide. The Marconi Stille machine wound a mile and three quarters of tape from a full to an empty reel, each about 2ft in diameter and weighing 30 lbs, a fact we would come to know only too well when having to heave these reels into position. About 30 minutes of content could be accepted before the 'change over' to a second machine was needed. The advantage of this system was that a recording could be played back immediately or later 'demagnetized', removing the content, and re-used (assuming the content was not to be archived).



A Marconi Stille machine. (BBC, courtesy of Roger Beckwith)

The Phillips 'Miller' film system did not use cinema type of photographic film. Instead, the film, narrow in width like the steel tape, was made of flexible plastic with a very thin dark surface coating which made the film opaque. To record, a specially shaped sapphire cutter cut away part of the coating, continuously producing an area of transparent sound track along the film which was being wound at a steady rate on to an empty spool. The film was then rewound on to the original spool. To convert to sound, a light was shone through the transparent track and scanned by a photocell. The quality of sound recorded by this system was better than tape or disc and the system had some of the advantages of both in that it could be played back straight away or preserved for archives. It was thus

used for the most important broadcasts. Finally, it was essential that the recording medium moved at an absolutely constant speed, and each of the systems had complex mechanisms to achieve this. Any speed variation produced a 'wow' in the heard sound.

Both the tape and film machines were kept at Maida Vale which was regarded as the main recording centre, so my training in these two systems would have to wait till later.

In each recording room was a cubicle with a desk fitted with a manually operated volume control unit for limiting the incoming sound level. A red line on the dial indicated the 45db level which must not be exceeded. An automatic system was still to come, so at present this was a WO's job. Music levels could unexpectedly go 'over the top' so the operator had to follow the score, if available, and reading ahead of what was being played, gently ease back the control before the expected *ff* passage. *Sfs* were a problem! Finally, pencil and forms at hand, both operators must immediately note down in minutes and seconds, the exact time of everything which occurred! The resulting log would accompany the recording everywhere until it was no longer needed.

In the first week in June, my Recording Supervisor told me I was ready to go 'on shift'. I would in two days' time start on the morning shift at BH, from 8am to 4pm. I spent those free days back to everyday living. I wrote a long letter to my parents. I said 'Goodbye' to Jane who was moving to her next 'home'. Happily, the two JMEs were still my neighbours and always helpful. I prepared myself for the very early morning 'start'. There had been a number of night siren wails recently but none needing a descent to the basement so I think I had begun to 'get used to them'.

The SRE who welcomed me on my first day 'on the job' introduced the other staff - two REs and a WO, one of the first recruits who had completed her training a month earlier. We two would work as a pair, one in the cubicle and the other doing the cutting. I found that the morning shift could be busy but very dull. For use on the Home Service we recorded the daily sheaf of Government Regulations - talks about how to save fuel and food etc, and chatty interviews - nothing of interest. Somewhere else in BH an announcer was reading this stuff into a microphone, and at the start of every session a disembodied voice in our headphones uttered the phrase "We are going ahead in ten seconds from Now" which, time after time in the months ahead, would activate our robot-like response: start the recorder, lower the recording head on to the disc, 2 second run in, quick look at the clock, log exact time, nod to cubicle, "Recording"! There then would follow about 5 minutes of manic manual dexterity and 'keeping your wits about you'. In this brief time between every machine 'change over' I had to stop the machine, remove and correctly label the completed disc, test and install a fresh cutter and blank disc, log any comment on sound quality, then warn the cubicle when the active recording head was nearing the centre of that disc, so that she could decide the next moment to flick the next 'change-over' switch. Now I understood why we were called 'Operators'. Finally, the log, with three carbon copies, was written up, checked by the SRE and signed by us two WOs. This document went everywhere with the recording to assist the person who would have to play it

back during a broadcast. Days later, in the canteen one could be accosted by someone unknown who would say "I had a lot of trouble with that rotten change-over you saddled me with."

One morning we two were given a roll of 'mutton cloth', a sort of knitted cotton mesh, and asked to do some cleaning of the equipment but we did not sulk. Roads outside were a mass of rubble. Ever-present dust could blunt the edge of the cutter and penetrate the disc coating causing 'surface noise'. Cleaning was all part of the job.

Our male colleagues were recording the usual morning batch of reports from the BBC war correspondents who were located wherever British service men were in action. News from the Middle East was not good. The vital port of Tobruk was besieged. At midday, a courier collected all their recordings and whipped them off to 'Somebody Important'. Later in the afternoon they came back with a list of editing instructions. The discs must be ready for the 9pm News. The SRE decided that we WOs should help with editing.

Editing a disc recording was not easy. First, two copies were made of the original disc, the original then being carefully put aside should anything go wrong! A row of turntables played back these copies, each with a very lightweight pickup arm and head and tiny sapphire stylus to prevent damage to the thin acetate coating. Armed with the editing instructions, a playback of one copy was stopped abruptly before the first word of the passage to be removed. We put a tiny mark on the groove at that point beneath the stylus, with a yellow wax crayon. Similarly, the second copy playback was stopped after the last word of the same passage and the groove marked. A new recording of the contents of the first disc as far as the mark, followed by that of the second disc after its mark, eliminated the unwanted passage. Sometimes the process went smoothly, but more often with difficulty.

Some sessions which tested our skills and tempers to the utmost were for the French Section. Directed by one of the French staff, we had to record on discs successions of very short bands. On every alternate band was a little tune carrying the words '*Radio Paris ment!*' (Radio Paris lies). Even with only school French we could understand that these were replies to the propaganda being broadcast by the Nazi-controlled French Radio. Another curious set of bands had to have very precise timings. In 1944, we learned that these were the coded messages to the French Resistance.

After 12 days which seemed never-ending, I remember I had a vague feeling of disappointment. This job was not what I had expected. It was repetitive and dull, yet with a constant fear of making a mistake at a crucial moment. I had my two free days ahead but with the departure of Jane I felt very much alone. A letter arrived from my old school

friend. It told me how much she was enjoying life in the Army. It also told me that the two Merchant Navy sailors who, so long ago, had escorted us to the Queens Hall, had been 'lost at sea'. Feeling low, I did what everybody did to survive those dark days. I went to the cinema. My spirits were lifted by the antics of Bob Hope, Bing Crosby and Dorothy Lamour in the first of the series of 'Road to' films. This was 'The Road to Singapore'. Throughout the war years the US film industry churned out light comedy films and musicals packed with singable songs which did much to boost morale. The BBC also did its bit, continuing a number of comedy programmes which already had a following, 'Band Wagon' 'Hi Gang' and 'Music Hall' and, of course 'It's That Man Again' - soon to be known as 'ITMA'. With Tommy Handley, the master of rapid repartee, a host of zany characters and catch phrases which became everyday parlance, the series was compulsory listening on Thursday evenings. Though complete with jokes about the 'Man with the Moustache', nothing was at all jingoistic.

I began my next 12 days on evening shift, 4pm to midnight, on June 20th. On June 21st Germany invaded Russia. Suddenly there were incoming reports from all parts of the world, commentators all giving their assessments of the 'Implications'! Churchill spoke! This needed non-stop recording. We WOs were each made an assistant to an RE, doing all the support jobs. Sent to collect supplies of blank discs, I lost my way in the BH maze and blundered into a room where a middle aged lady was sitting in front of a microphone - it was Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands.

The German army was, in no time, on the outskirts of Leningrad, Moscow and Kiev. Relations with the Soviet Union, which had been guarded since Stalin's 1939 pact with Hitler, suddenly became 'cordial'. Daily goodwill messages to 'our dear friends and allies' were recorded and transmitted. The weekly concerts by the BBC Symphony Orchestra seemed to include a lot more Tchaikovsky, Glinka, Borodin and Rimsky Korsakov, and especially Mussorgsky's 'The Great Gates of Kiev'.

My next spell was on night shift, midnight to 8am, mostly playing back to the world what had been recorded during the day, a much easier job than recording. The 'change over' between successive discs could be practised in advance. Eating a canteen meal at 3am was the worst ordeal. Home at 9am, sleeping in daylight took some time to get used to. So passed July and August.

On the last day of my shift I received an internal memo - my next 12 days would be the day shift at Maida Vale. This was the beginning of a period that I remember as the happiest time of my war time job with the BBC.

The next part of these memoirs will chronicle Mary's involvement in recording music and other major events during war time.

Bon mots et bonnes notes (occasional musical space fillers!)

"Even **Beethoven** thumped the tub; the Ninth Symphony was composed by a kind of Mr Gladstone of music." (Sir Thomas Beecham, quoted in Beecham Stories, eds Atkins and Newman)

My Problem with Mahler by J. Ian S. Robertson

I have a problem with Mahler's symphonies. I do not enjoy them. Mahler's songs are a different matter - I am very fond of most of these. I know well that mine is nowadays a minority view. Mahler's symphonies sell readily at the box office; instrumentalists enjoy playing them; two eminent orchestral conductors, Richard Armstrong and Donald Runnicles, both of whom I hold in high esteem, are outspoken advocates for Mahler.

The reason for my displeasure is that Mahler's symphonies are shapeless or, to express the matter more urbanely, lacking in architectural form and structure. Mahler's weaknesses in this regard (plus some strengths) are starkly presented in *Das Lied von der Erde*. This is not an orchestrated song-cycle; rather it is to be regarded as a free symphony, comprising symphonic and vocal variations on fundamental motifs. The six sections are allocated between tenor and low voice (the latter usually contralto; more rarely a baritone). Yet the tenor is given a total of only 15 minutes of singing, as against his colleague's 55 minutes. The final section, *Der Abschied*, at 35 minutes, lasts for as long as the whole of the rest of the work.

The present widespread enthusiasm for Mahler's symphonies is a phenomenon of the late 20th century. Earlier, it was fashionable to denigrate Mahler the symphonist and to contrast him unfavourably with Sibelius. There was a well-documented meeting between these two in 1907, wherein Sibelius stated that the essence of a symphony is its severity and style, and the deep logic that creates an inner connection between the motifs. Mahler dissented: "No, a symphony must be like the world. It must embrace everything".

Paul Rosenfeld was severely dismissive, asserting that "there is not one of poor Mahler's nine symphonies...that exists as fresh, new-minted, vivid music...his scores are lamentably weak, often arid and banal. Mahler's five latter symphonies...are monsters of ennui, and by their very pretentiousness, their gargantuan dimensions, throw into relief Mahler's essential sterility. They seek to be colossal, and achieve vacuity...And the first four...though less utterly banal and pedantic, are still amorphous and fundamentally second-hand."¹

Geoffrey Sharp, who contributed the chapter on Gustav Mahler in Ralph Hill's once very influential book *The Symphony*, had this to say: "As a composer [Mahler] seldom knew where he was going and neither can we... Mahler's music alternately fascinates and appals, with its peculiar kaleidoscopic confusion of the ridiculous and sublime, often on the same page...childish platitude and vulgarity do not justify vast pains being taken in their expression, either individually or, horror of horrors, both together".² Those words, it should be noted, were written by an ostensible apologist for Mahler's symphonies.

The very influential musicologist Gerald Abraham wrote in 1964 that Mahler's titanic worlds "have an unfortunate resemblance to the planet Jupiter, whose mean density is

little greater than that of water...Mahler is romantic, long-winded and spendthrift."³

Let me re-emphasize that my discomfort is a consequence of the architectural imbalance of Mahler's symphonies, that instability not lessened by their duration. Wagner, in contrast to Mahler, nearly always achieved elegant proportions in his compositions. The prelude to *Lohengrin*, which reaches a musical climax at bar 51 of its total of 75 bars, has been much admired in this respect. Yet even across much longer spans, Wagner's music attains structural equipoise. Thus, Act II of his *Tristan und Isolde*, if played as written, runs for some one and a half hours. Yet for me that is satisfyingly pleasurable. Length as such does not necessarily imply musical disproportion. However, when that Act II suffers cuts, as too often it does, I can be given the uneasy sense that something is wrong. Of course Wagner was to an extent constrained by his having to conform compositionally to his pre-existent text.



Gustav Mahler (photoprint copyrighted by the studio A. Dupont, N.Y. [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons)

Notwithstanding those observations and speculations, the second half of the 20th century saw a wholesale change in perceptions and opinions concerning Mahler's symphonies, which are now unquestionably very popular. It would be difficult nowadays to find criticisms such as those quoted above. Possibly the advent of the long-playing gramophone record and their consequently more ready availability has been a factor, but that is unlikely to be the whole explanation. Whatever the reasons, I now find myself in a small minority, excluded, to my evident

misfortune, from what many find to be an uplifting experience.

I have a final, to me surprising, observation. The composer Alban Berg's architectonic mastery of large-scale musical relationships is I think unsurpassed. Pre-eminent therein is his opera *Lulu* in its definitive, fully-orchestrated three-act manifestation. Just one of a myriad of relevant instances from that supreme work is the musical palindrome across the middle of bar 687 of the total of 1326 bars. It is at this point that the underlying narrative changes from Wedekind's play *Earth Spirit* to his

Pandora's Box and Lulu's personal and social decline begins. Of all people, I would have expected Berg to be most disquieted by Mahler's music. But he was not; Berg revered Mahler, and that reverence was evident and fervently expressed more than a century ago. I am left to rue my own contrasting interpretative defect.

1. Rosenfeld P. *Musical Portraits*. Harcourt, Brace and Howe, New York, 1920, 135-6.
2. Sharp G. *Gustav Mahler*. In Hill R. (Editor) *The Symphony*. Penguin, London, 1949, 300-2
3. Abrahams G. *A Hundred Years of Music*. Third edition, Methuen, London, 1964, 263-4.

BBC SSO Recordings – New and Recent Releases

Here are two recently released or soon to be available CDs recorded by the BBC SSO on the Hyperion label. We hope to have copies available at our concerts at a discounted price.

Beach, Chaminade & Howell: Piano Concertos

Danny Driver (piano), BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Rebecca Miller (conductor)
CDA68130 (released in March). This is Volume 70 of The Romantic Piano Concerto series and the first to include women composers. Warmly received by the *Gramophone* and other reviewers, it showcases Piano Concertos by Amy Beach, Cécile Chaminade and Dorothy Howell. All are works and composers deserving of much wider exposure, and all receive committed advocacy.

Ravel: Piano Concertos; Falla: Nights in the Gardens of Spain

Steven Osborne (piano), BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Ludovic Morlot (conductor)
CDA68148 (for release in June)

Orchestra News



Congratulations to Stephanie Jones (4th Horn) and Hedley Benson (3rd Trumpet), pictured with their son Arthur, who were married in Altrincham Town Hall on 29 December 2016. Both Stephanie and Hedley are well known to the Club. Congratulations also to Gent Koço (Tutti First Violins) and his wife Jennifer Stephenson (freelance clarinet) who welcomed a baby boy, Josif, in January 2017. Gent has only recently stood down as liaison between the BBC SSO and the Club, and both he and Jenny have played often for the Club. Best wishes to them - and welcome to young Josif.

Rosemary Lock (Principal Piccolo and Second Flute) has retired from the Orchestra and we wish her well for the future. Meanwhile we welcome Charlotte (Charli) Ashton who joined the BBC SSO in March 2017 as the Orchestra's new section Principal Flute, simultaneously becoming the Orchestra's youngest member!

CLUB CONCERT REVIEWS: SEASON 2016-2017

Barry Deacon and Friends, Monday 26 September 2016

Barry Deacon (Clarinet), Jamie Shield (Horn), Kirstie Logan (Oboe), Laura Samuel, Gill Risi, Lise Aferiat and Alex Gascoine (Violins), David McCreadie (Viola) and Harold Harris (Cello)

To launch the 2016-17 season Barry Deacon assembled a distinguished roster of colleagues and friends and presented a programme of by no means entirely familiar music. The unfamiliar part consisted of two serenades by the 20th century Czech composer Bohuslav Martinu. Nos 1 and 3 were played before the interval, but in reverse order. They are both scored for unusual combinations: No 3 for four violins, cello, oboe and clarinet and No 1 for three violins, viola, horn and clarinet. Barry Deacon declared an interest, as it were, before the start of the concert, confessing that Martinu is his favourite composer. He and his colleagues certainly made a very convincing case for him, which was not at all difficult, given the immediate accessibility of the music, which was by turns jaunty, wistful, lyrical and happy. Serenade No 3 included pizzicato effects, duetting winds and, in the second movement variations, an eloquent cello solo, beautifully played by Harold Harris. No 1, in which there were prominent parts for clarinet and horn (why does the inclusion of a horn so often give music an outdoor feel?) included a lyrical slow movement and a jolly quadruple-time finale. There was a hint of neo-classicism about both works, though other influences were also evident, including a touch of Frenchness in some of the harmonies. Smile inducing music!

Following the interval we were treated to one of the supreme masterpieces of the classical chamber music repertoire, the Clarinet Quintet of Mozart K. 581, in which Barry Deacon was joined by Laura Samuel, Lise Aferiat, David McCreadie and Harold Harris. Barry mentioned that the year of the Quintet's composition (1789) had not been a good year for Mozart, to say the least of it, but there is little if any sign of that in the Quintet, which is one of his most serene and sunniest works. The fact that the ensemble was led by Laura Samuel, a chamber musician straight out of the top drawer, playing moreover on a Stradivarius once owned by Siegmund Nissel of the Amadeus Quartet, was a guarantee of the highest Mozartian credentials. From the very start, everything seemed right about this performance: the perfect pacing of the first movement; the poised delivery of the heavenly melody of the slow movement, in which the clarinet is accompanied, most unusually in Mozart's chamber output, by muted strings; the minuet with its two

contrasting trios, the first rather cerebral and the second like a piece of Austrian dance music; and, finally, the series of brilliantly contrasting variations which bring the Quintet to such a satisfying conclusion.

The first violin and the clarinet have the lion's share of the limelight in this piece and both Laura Samuel and Barry Deacon proved more than equal to the demands of the score. Barry played throughout with a wealth of golden tone and admirable breath control. The others seized their moments when they came, before slipping back into the texture in their more supporting rôles. The evident enjoyment of the players communicated itself to, and was shared by, the members of the audience. Yet again the members of the BBC Scottish Symphony Club are indebted to the musicians of the Orchestra for an evening of rare delight.

Daniel Divers



Above: The Clarinet Quintet (Jim McGrath)
Below: Almost all of the evening's ensemble, at the end of the evening. (Norman McGadie)

Kanako Ito and Family, Monday 24 October 2016

Kanako Ito (violin), Liana Storey (piano) and Martin Storey (cello)

'Kanako Ito and Family' said the publicity material for this evening's concert and that turned out to be literally true. The BBC SSO's Associate Leader was accompanied by her husband, Martin Storey, the Orchestra's Principal Cellist, and by their teenage daughter Liana, a pianist of no mean accomplishment; and the last named was assisted by her brother Leo, who, from time to time during the evening, acted as page-turner. Rumour has it that he is studying the trumpet, so perhaps Mark O'Keeffe and Hedley Benson should look to their laurels!

The programme which they presented was a very varied one and contained music from the 18th century to the 20th. The evening began with the earliest piece, the Sonata in G major by the prolific Jean-Marie Leclair, whom Kanako in her introductory remarks described as "a contemporary of Bach, but more charming." The music itself vindicated that view. The first movement was a constant flow of melody, the second a lively gigue, the third virtually a song without words – perhaps in anticipation of things to come. Kanako Ito's marvellous legato playing was much in evidence here. The finale, by contrast, had something rustic about its foot-stamping accompaniment, but its conclusion was witty. The sonata was very much a violinist's piece, but cellist and pianist played their part in supporting the more demanding rôle assigned to the violin. Unfortunately the composer's charm seems not to have worked its magic on his nephew, by whom, according to the Oxford Dictionary of Music, he was murdered outside his Paris house in 1764.

Liana Storey now performed the first of two piano solos in the programme, the Impromptu in E flat D 899 by Schubert. It is one of the trickiest of his Impromptus, with its *perpetuum mobile* outer sections and a more stormy central section. In a sense, a Club concert is the ideal place for a piece of this kind, as Schubert himself would almost certainly have performed it in a relatively informal setting at a similar gathering of friends and family at one of the famous Schubertiades. Liana showed herself entirely comfortable with the idiom of this late Schubert mini-masterpiece, and indeed throughout the evening, in the course of which she played in all but one number, she acquitted herself with remarkable composure and musicianship.

The Schubert was followed by Mendelssohn's *Song Without Words*, Op 109 for cello and piano in which, for the first time, Martin Storey had the chance to shine. At times his *legato* playing was reminiscent of some golden age Italian tenor, let's say Beniamino Gigli, but without the over-emotional sobs which became a characteristic of his singing in later years. The piece showed Mendelssohn's phenomenal gift for melody. Not that that was his only gift: he is said to have played at sight the piano part at the premiere of the Schumann Piano Quintet, because of the indisposition of Clara, the composer's wife, for whom it had been written. If anyone would like to investigate

further Martin Storey's prowess as a Mendelssohnian, his recording, made in 2000 as a member of the Gould Trio, of the two Piano Trios can be warmly recommended. Marvellous music and performances to match!

The first part of the concert ended with Kreisler's *Prelude and Allegro in the Style of Pugnani* for violin and piano. Kanako Ito's playing was rich in tone and in the *allegro* virtuosic. Liana matched her all the way. When this piece first saw the light of day, the phrase '*in the style of*' did not appear in its title. Kreisler was in the habit of passing off his own compositions as the work of lesser baroque composers. When his deception became known, there was a fearful fuss made by the music critics of the time, probably because they had been fooled. The pieces themselves remain popular with violinists all over the world.

The second part of the evening began with the delightful early *Miniature* for piano trio by Frank Bridge, a wonderfully melodic and attractive piece, which will probably have been a discovery for many members of the audience. The days when Bridge was known mainly as the teacher of Benjamin Britten are fortunately in the past and his music is increasingly recognised in its own right. Not all of it is as accessible as this, but it repays repeated listening.

It was followed by the meatiest item of the evening, the mighty Chaconne from the Partita No 2 in D Minor by JS Bach, one of the cornerstones of the solo violin repertoire. It has been arranged for other instruments but here we heard it in its original form in a performance which rose to its many challenges in an absolutely magnificent manner: faultless intonation and richness of tone even in the multi-stopped passages - a real *tour de force*. What a marvellous space the recital room is for showing such music to its best advantage.

Liana Storey followed her mother's solo with one of her own: the Prelude from Debussy's *Pour le Piano* of 1902. Three years earlier at the Paris Exposition of 1899, the composer had been fascinated by the sounds of Javanese gamelan music, and its influence can be clearly felt in this piece, which received a stirring performance. Its idiom is worlds away from the Schubert which we heard earlier in the evening, but once more Liana showed her musical maturity and sense of style. We stayed in France for the penultimate item, Saint-Saëns's famous *Swan* from the *Carnival of the Animals*, yet another song without words, and a piece whose over-exposure has perhaps dulled its impact, but not here. Wonderful legato playing from father and daughter! The evening ended with a favourite of Liana's, the *Libertango* for piano trio of Astor Piazzolla. With its *sul ponticello* and *pizzicato* effects on the stringed instruments and its, in places, almost minimalist-style piano part – all performed with passion and ardour - it brought the proceedings to a rousing conclusion. The success of the evening was easily gauged from the almost palpable sense of enjoyment and the smiling faces of the audience, which had been given privileged access to the music making of this very gifted family, to whom we were all greatly indebted.

Daniel Divers



Leo, Martin, Leana and Kanako at the close of the evening (Norman McGadie)

Scott Dickinson and Friends, Monday 14 November 2016

Scott Dickinson (Viola), Greg Lawson, Fiona Stephen (Violins), Rhoslyn Lawton (Viola), Sian Bell (Cello) and Susan Frank (Piano)

This evening's concert presented to the audience yet another fascinating programme, which will have contained discoveries for almost everyone present, in some cases even for some of the performers themselves.

The evening began with Liszt's *Romance Oubliée*, his only work for viola and piano, based on an earlier romance for piano, in turn based on a song "Ô Pourquoi Donc?" The piece is not a mere transcription of the earlier versions but contains new music, including a nod in the direction of Berlioz's *Harold in Italy* in the arpeggiated writing for viola just before the end. Scott in his introduction described Liszt's later music as being "poetic, spare, serene" and these qualities were all in evidence in the performance, in which Scott was ably accompanied by his wife, Susan Frank, who is perhaps more familiar as a flautist. The consolatory ending, in which the viola aspires heavenwards, brought the piece to a rapt conclusion.

The next item provided a considerable contrast both in style and in sound. Vaughan Williams's *Phantasy Quintet*, composed in 1912, was an indirect result of the enthusiasm of Walter Wilson Cobbett, a businessman and amateur musician, for chamber music and Elizabethan music. He established a prize for single movement Phantasies, which attracted successful entries from Bridge, Ireland and Howells among others, and commissioned this four movement piece from RVW. As in the string quintets of Mozart, the additional instrument is a second viola, which gave Scott the opportunity to welcome Rhoslyn Lawton, the newest recruit to that section of the orchestra. The *Phantasy*, which consists of four relatively short movements, contains music which is by turns rhapsodic, energetic, original and good-humoured. The third movement has no part for the cello, which resulted in a most unusual texture. One of Greg Lawson's moments in the limelight was briefly reminiscent of *The Lark Ascending*. Vaughan Williams uses the sonic contrasts afforded by the five instruments to magical effect, especially in the first movement. Throughout the piece there were well-taken solo opportunities for all five players, but they also knew how to merge back into the texture when that was what the music required. For many of its hearers, the piece was a most welcome discovery, and few of them will have had the opportunity to hear it live, or in a performance of such tonal lustre.



The Quintet of Greg Lawson, Fiona Stephen, Scott Dickinson, Rhoslyn Lawton and Sian Bell (Norman McGadie)

The concert continued with Lutosławski's *Bucolics* – five pieces originally written in the 1950s for piano. This version, for viola and cello, was created in 1962. In his introduction Scott said that they were great fun to play. They were great fun to listen to as well. Folk influences abounded. Lutosławski created an astonishing variety of texture from the two instruments, the cello sometimes effectively taking over the top line. Dance music, serenade, wistful melody and rumbustiousness all had their part to play. The stomping throwaway ending guaranteed a warm response from the audience. Yet another worthwhile discovery in a top notch performance by Scott and Sian Bell.

The first part of the evening came to a more restful end with Schubert's song "Litany for All Souls' Day" arranged for viola and piano by William Primrose. Primrose, who was one of the most outstanding violists of the last century, was Glasgow born, but had an international career which included playing in the viola section, but oddly not leading it, in Toscanini's NBC Symphony Orchestra. He also played chamber music with Jascha Heifetz and Gregor Piatigorsky and had music written for him by Bartok and Britten. The original song is strophic and has three verses. Primrose's arrangement, not unreasonably given the absence of words, has two. A singer performing the song has perforce to sing all the verses at the same pitch, but the viola is under no such constraint, so we heard what was effectively a verse for tenor, then one for mezzo-soprano. Oddly, one might think, Primrose does nothing else to enhance the role of the solo viola, but he does flesh out the piano part in the second verse and allows the viola a share in the postlude, bringing the song to a peaceful end.

Following the interval we heard Britten's *Elegy for Viola Solo*. It was written just after he left Gresham's School at the age of sixteen, but not performed, publicly at least, until the 1984 Aldeburgh Festival (by Nobuko Imai). Britten had only been at Gresham's for two years and hadn't much liked it, but found that, when he left, he missed it more than he had expected. This *Elegy*, which he probably wrote to play himself, is a mirror of how he felt at the time, but it is in no way maudlin or sentimental.

It is an extraordinarily mature piece for a teenager to have written. If he could also play it, he was no mean violist!

The most substantial item in the programme was Schubert's Arpeggione Sonata D.821, written in Vienna in November 1824, but not published until 1871, by which time the instrument, which had been invented only the year before the composition of Schubert's piece, was obsolete and Schubert himself long dead. The Sonata is the only substantial composition for the arpeggione (essentially a bowed guitar) which remains extant today. It belongs to the same period as the 'Death and the Maiden' Quartet. Despite the eccentricity and short-livedness of the instrument for which it was composed it is, in the opinion of many, Schubert's finest work for a solo string instrument and piano. Nowadays it is the preserve of cellists and violists and a valuable addition to the repertoire for either instrument. Its first movement, in sonata form, is notable for its fertility of invention and its mood swings, perhaps a consequence of the state of the composer's increasingly worrying state of health. Yet the *adagio* second movement has one of Schubert's most heavenly melodies and the rondo finale is predominantly buoyant and optimistic. The affection of both performers for the piece was self-evident and it was warmly received by the audience.

Another elegy rounded off the evening, this time the *Élegie* by Henri Vieuxtemps, the 19th century Belgian violinist, teacher and composer, whose playing career was cut short when he suffered two strokes, but who continued to be an influential figure, nor least in Russia. It is a strong piece in ternary form, with a very fine melody, accompanied in the opening section by the deep tolling of a funeral bell in the piano's left hand. Following a passionate climax, its return is differently "orchestrated". The closing pages required and received considerable virtuosity from both players and brought the musical part of the evening to a stirring conclusion.

In his opening remarks, Scott had very generously paid tribute to the work and support of the BBC Scottish Symphony Club and said that his colleagues shared his feelings. It seems only fitting to put on record that the

members of the Club are conscious of their good fortune in having in the BBC SSO so many outstanding musicians who are prepared to devote their time to providing such imaginative, accomplished and enlightening evenings of

chamber music for the Club and its guests. They fill what would otherwise be a regrettable gap in the rich tapestry of the city's musical life.

Daniel Divers

Mark O'Keeffe (Trumpet) and Julia Lynch (Piano), Monday 19 December 2016

The musical content of this evening's recital (a late change in the advertised programme) was drawn in the main from four trumpet concertos, three from the 18th century and one from the 20th, in arrangements for trumpet and piano. This inevitably means that the pianist takes on the demanding role of substituting for an orchestra, often having to play fistfuls of notes. Early on in the evening, Mark O'Keeffe paid tribute to Julia Lynch for agreeing to undertake such a demanding programme at pretty short notice, but there was no sign that she had had only a short time to prepare and she dispatched the fistfuls of notes with aplomb and, where necessary, sensitivity.

A notable feature of the recital was the easy rapport which both performers established. Indeed, they made no formal entrance, but were already mingling with and chatting to audience members before the start of the performance. All the musical numbers were preceded



Julia Lynch and Mark O'Keeffe (Norman McGadie)

by recitations of poems on a Christmas theme, some of them with a light-hearted touch. The best known of the poets were e e cummings and Walter de la Mare, but there was food for thought throughout the anthology.

The musical part of the evening began with the opening movement of a concerto for trumpet by the splendidly named Johann Baptist Georg Neruda, a Bohemian predecessor of Haydn. The piece, Mark explained, was originally written for the *corno da caccia* (the French horn), but is now the exclusive property of trumpeters. The music was immediately attractive. Mark O'Keeffe's playing was notable for its skilful command of clear articulation and of legato, supported, as was the case throughout the evening, by admirable breath control. Following Julia Lynch's recitation of 'Mistletoe' by Walter de la Mare, we were treated to what is probably the best

known item of the evening, the central movement of Haydn's Trumpet Concerto, for whose song-like outpourings Mark proved himself a more than capable advocate. Only a few minutes after the start of the concert, it occurred to your present correspondent that the virtues required of a trumpeter and, say, a really classy tenor singer are the same: breath control, beauty of tone and accurate intonation for starters.* The final item before the interval, during which refreshments were served, was the concluding movement of the concerto by Johann Nepomuk Hummel - another splendid name! Hummel was a younger contemporary of Haydn. Mark explained in his introduction that this movement is very difficult to play, but there was no sign in his performance that it held any terrors for him. The music has more than a whiff of hunting calls and the virtuoso tonguing effects which it involves from the very start were executed clearly and without, it seemed, the need to break sweat. I suppose that is another of the characteristics of trumpet players and tenors: given that they are both high-wire acts, nerves of steel are a necessary component of their kit bag.

The discovery of the evening was the Trumpet Concerto by the 20th century Armenian, Alexander Grigori Arutunian, who died as recently as 2012. The concerto dates from more than a half century before. It is in a single movement with contrasting sections and has a limited amount of recapitulation. Immediately we were in a different world from the first half of the concert. The music was by turns dramatic, jaunty and lyrical, the last quality being in evidence in an extended melody for muted trumpet just before the cadenza and bravura coda which rounds off the piece. We were hearing it in a piano reduction of the score. The original is for quite a large orchestra with plenty of percussion and brass. Were it to be programmed by the BBC SSO, it would be a certain crowd pleaser - in the best sense of that expression. Perhaps the powers that be would like to consider that option for a future season? They need look no further than their own doorstep to find an ideal soloist.

A most enjoyable evening was rounded off by the poem 'Twas the night before Christmas' by Major Henry Livingston Jr. which Mark recited to the accompaniment of "The First Nowell", following which the players and the audience joined in a communal rendering of the same carol, which sent us all off into the night in festive mood.

Daniel Divers

** These musings about trumpeters and tenors were prompted by my reflecting during the opening number that the great German tenor Fritz Wunderlich, the 50th anniversary of whose untimely death occurred in September 2016, financed his vocal studies by playing trumpet in night clubs. He subsequently studied horn as well as voice, but, fortunately for posterity, settled on voice. If you haven't heard him, you must! Mark is also a fan, it turns out.*

The Whistlebinkies, Monday, 16 January 2017

Alastair Savage (Fiddle), Rab Wallace (Lowland Pipes), Eddie McGuire (Flute), Stuart Eydmann (Concertina and Fiddle), Peter Anderson (Scottish Side drum) and Mark Hayward (Fiddle)

The line-up was not quite as advertised, as Iain Crawford, the bass player, was indisposed, but the programme seemed to be unaltered, and a very full programme it turned out to be. The evening may be thought of as the Club's unofficial contribution to the Celtic Connections festival. Certainly almost all of the music played had Celtic roots.

It is easy for non-experts (like the present writer!) to suppose that folk or traditional music emanates from the mists of time, but the music played this evening included a number of pieces of much more recent origin. So we heard music which ranged from the 16th century to our own; music for dancing; music which commemorates sad or tragic events; music which is unfailingly tuneful and often rhythmically exhilarating. It was performed with enormous expertise and commitment by a group of musicians who are, one senses, also friends – united in their love for what they do and in their desire to share their obvious enthusiasm with others.

Not all of the players played all the time, so there were constantly changing and varied musical textures, including even some impressive vocal contributions in the opening set! Some of the most special moments of the evening occurred when the forces were reduced, as in Alastair Savage's peerless fiddle solos, or when he was duetting with Eddie McGuire in the *St Andrew's Lament*, Alastair's own commemoration of the Clutha Bar helicopter tragedy. For this number, Eddie, who appeared to have left the hall, played from the back – to absolutely magical effect.

Elsewhere Eddie's contributions on flute and piccolo were by turns poignant, as in the *Farewell to St Kilda* or

exuberant, as in *The Whistlebinkies' Reels*, which concluded with a tune by the group's piper, Rab Wallace, clearly a potent force in the ensemble, who also acted as compere for most of the evening.

Stuart Eydmann showed his versatility by playing not only concertina and fiddle, but also a castanet-like instrument during *Farewell to St Kilda*. Mark Hayward on fiddle and Peter Anderson on drums and bodhran also made their mark effectively when their turn came. Although the evening was characterised by informality and there were many moments of humour in the introductions and a certain amount of badinage among the players, they performed with all the finesse of a string quartet. Tuning and ensemble were impeccable, balance faultless and the palette of 'colours' used enormous. The sheer prodigality of melody to which the audience was treated would be inconceivable in a programme of classical works in which the composer's art is often to make a little go a long way.



The Whistlebinkies (Norman McGadie)

In the final number of the evening all the players joined forces, while the audience was invited to provide some rhythmic clapping, which they did more expertly than has sometimes been the case with their counterparts in the Golden Hall of the Musikverein on New Year's Day. An evening to remember. Roll on the next appearance of the Whistlebinkies!

Daniel Divers

Edinburgh International Festival August 2017

Some dates for your diaries! 2017 sees the Edinburgh International Festival celebrating its 70th anniversary and the BBC SSO will be giving three performances to mark this significant milestone.

Thomas Dausgaard will conduct his first Festival concert as BBC SSO Chief Conductor with a programme of Schubert, Schumann and Richard Strauss (8 August). Sir James MacMillan will conduct three pieces which received their premieres at the International Festival, namely Tippett's *Fantasia Concertante on a Theme of Corelli*, Walton's Symphony No 2 and his own *Epiclesis* (19 August). Martyn Brabbins concludes the Usher Hall series (27 August) with a concert including music by Bliss, Shostakovich, Mahler, Vaughan Williams and Ravel in a special programme celebrating 70 years of the Edinburgh International Festival. For further information, please visit: www.eif.co.uk

Bon mots et bonnes notes

Railway travel has long had its frustrations. Here's W S Gilbert's oft-quoted and much-loved comment to a hapless station master on the Metropolitan Line, presumably after a scheduled train had failed to appear one weekend: "Sir, Saturday morning, although recurring at regular and well foreseen intervals, always seems to take this railway by surprise".