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Middle Eight

What has the BBC ever done for us?

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Until it was overwhelmed by Covid-19 Boris Johnson's government was on course to realise a long-held dream of the party's free market ideologues: to bring to an end the UK's unique version of public service broadcasting. It is possible that just as the NHS has become a 'heroic' state institution, even for those Tories who have been determinedly running it down for years, so the value of the BBC will now be sheepishly acknowledged by the Prime Minister. Don't count on it. In common with public service broadcasters across the globe, the BBC will continue to face demands to justify its existence within the increasingly globalised digital media landscape. And Britain's licence fee system, dependent on legally enforceable payments from people whether they use the BBC or not, is particularly vulnerable to attacks from populist politicians.

Is this of any concern to popular music scholars? In the classical music world no one doubts the importance of the BBC or the potential crisis for musicians and audiences if the BBC funding model were to change. However, in the popular music world attitudes to the BBC have been rather more mixed. The BBC's music policies have, over the years, been variously described as elitist and complacent, derided as being out of touch and, in general, naff. It is still assumed in most rock histories, for example, that the most significant developments in British popular music culture, from rock 'n' roll to grime, happened despite the BBC's best attempts to ignore them. In their autobiographies rock musicians routinely document the peculiarities of BBC policies: bands having to make live studio versions of the records they were on air to promote or being given a crash course in the arcane rules about miming on *Top of the Pops*.

The dire effects of the BBC concept of 'light entertainment' have long been mocked: think, for example, of Smashie and Nicey, the DJs from Radio Fab FM.[1] Less amusingly, the cosiness of the BBC's entertainment establishment can also be seen in its promotion and protection of the predatory children's entertainers

[1] Smashie and Nicey were characters developed by the comedians Harry Enfield and Paul Whitehouse.

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Jimmy Savile and Rolf Harris.[2] From these critical perspectives it is easy enough to agree with the free market view that as an overweening monopoly broadcaster with a reactionary cultural sensibility what the BBC needs is proper competition. Hence the familiar celebrations of 'pirate' broadcasters, whether those on the offshore boats of the 1960s or those at the top of London council blocks in the 1990s.

Our response to such arguments is: be careful what you wish for! For the last decade we have been researching British popular music history, looking in particular at the business of live music and at the Musicians' Union.[3] In both projects the BBC emerged as by far the UK's most important music institution – in positive as well as negative terms. Its importance reflects not only its monopolistic power, but also its public service ideology; and in order to address the questions now being raised about its role in the digital age we need to understand the BBC's historical role in shaping British popular music.

We must begin, though, with its monopoly position: until the launch of Classic FM in 1992 the BBC was Britain's only national radio broadcaster. It was thus the BBC that determined how the relationship between the radio and the record industries developed here (and its importance for popular music has been primarily as a radio broadcaster). The BBC featured popular music performers and popular music records from early in its history and its impact on the popular music industries and popular music listeners was immediate. In 1945, for example:

> The impact of George Webb's Dixielanders was suddenly multiplied ten-fold when the BBC Radio Rhythm Club engaged them for a broadcast, while [in 1956] 'Rock Island Line' became a hit … because three of the BBC's more conservative light music radio presenters, Jack Payne, Chappie D'Amato and Eamonn Andrews, played it repeatedly on their respective shows (Frith et al. 2013, p. 114).

The jazz trumpeter Humphrey Lyttelton even claimed that by constantly playing Bill Haley's 'Rock Around the Clock', 'dear Auntie BBC unwittingly launched the rock 'n' roll craze' (Lyttelton 1958, p. 68).

The BBC has long shaped careers in popular music, whether for dance hall bandleaders like Jack Payne and Billy Cotton or for dance club DJs like Pete Tong and Mistah Jam, whether for performers on BBC Scotland's *White Heather Club* in the 1960s or winners of BBC Radio 2's Folk Awards since 2000. The power of the BBC here lies in its audience *reach*. As Richard Morrison points out, 'more British people heard the London Symphony Orchestra play on *André Previn's Music Night* [which ran on BBC television from 1971 to 1979] in one week than in sixty-five years of LSO concerts'. And Lloyd Bradley comments that the launch of BBC 1Xtra in 2002 meant that:

> No longer did you have to be living on the Stepney estate from which [pirate station] Roll Deep was broadcasting to hear some authentic grime: suddenly kids as far removed as the Hebrides or Penzance could feel part of things.[4]

The BBC also had the power to decide what *not* to broadcast. Over the years it has banned records and performers on both political and moral grounds and has

[2] For a sobering account of the culture of the BBC's Light Entertainment department in the 1950s and 1960s see O'Hagan (2012).
[3] See Frith et al. (2013, 2019, 2021) and Williamson and Cloonan (2016).
[4] Quotes from Morrison (2004, pp. 179–80) and Bradley 2013 (p. 394).

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grown accustomed to acting as the arbiter of public taste and musical value.[5] In his autobiography, bandleader Ted Heath recounts how in the 1950s the band's singer Lita Roza twice failed the 'routine test' that any singer seeking to perform on the BBC had to pass because 'she possessed an insignificant amount of vocal talent'. This judgement, in Heath's view, reflected the BBC's 'anti-microphone complex'.[6]

As a public service broadcaster the BBC used its monopoly power not to maximise its income or profit or, indeed, its audience figures but to realise its cultural purpose, as formulated by its first Director General, John Reith: 'To inform, educate and entertain'. It is this slogan (and its positioning of entertainment last) that is held to account for the BBC's underlying disdain for popular music. In our research we came to a different conclusion. The BBC has, in fact, been a vital factor in both the economic and the cultural success of British popular music, particularly in the way the music has developed since the end of the Second World War. We will illustrate this argument under four headings: live music radio, listening communities, music investment, and broadcasting authority.

Live music radio

In its early days the BBC's commitment to supporting the existing music profession made it amenable to the Musicians' Union's argument that playing records on the radio meant fewer work opportunities for live musicians, an argument also initially accepted by record companies, who at that time believed that people would not buy records if they could hear them on the radio. The subsequent development of 'needletime' agreements, which limited the amount of space in the broadcasting schedule that could be taken up by the playing of records, is one of the most significant strands of the UK's twentieth century popular music history, and the policy least understood and most mocked in popular music histories.[7] This is, in part, because the emphasis is always on needletime as a *restrictive* measure, something that stopped BBC listeners from hearing records, but it is equally important to describe the musical experiences that needletime policy promoted.

First, the BBC quickly established the importance of *outside broadcasts* in its schedules, from relaying dance bands live from various London hotels in the 1930s to showing rock bands live on various Glastonbury stages in the 2010s. Such broadcasts not only celebrated the social experience of live music but were also a source of income (and publicity) for the venues, events and performers involved and contributed to the development of live sound technology.

Second, BBC schedules, on both its national and local stations, necessarily featured *live studio recordings*. This was not just a matter of getting the BBC's in-house musicians to reproduce the latest hit record or insisting that bands do this in the studio themselves; it also gave access to broadcasting time to musicians who might not even have a recording contract, providing a setting in which they could talk about their work, gain studio experience and develop their performing personae. Such opportunities were important for The Beatles, for example, in the early stage of their career as well as for the successive generations of progressive rockers, punks,

[5] For the BBC as censor see Cloonan (1996).
[6] Heath (1957), pp. 93–4.
[7] For a full account of the issues here see Cloonan (2016).

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post punks and general oddballs who participated in John Peel's live studio sessions.[8] Studio performances have been equally important for performers guesting on folk and jazz shows and have had a role in music television too: rock musicians have been recorded playing live in television studios for subsequent broadcasts on programmes from *The Old Grey Whistle Test* to *Later with Jools Holland*. Such appearances are not just marketing opportunities but for young musicians in particular are an important source of income and performing experience. For popular music historians the BBC's archive of live studio recordings is a wonderful resource.[9]

Listening communities

As a non-commercial broadcaster the BBC treats its audience not as a listening market share or as consumers to be sold to advertisers but as *the public*, the licence payers. Yet while some of its output is therefore aimed at the public generally (news programmes most obviously), many programmes are aimed at sub-publics. These may be defined demographically: the audiences for *Women's Hour* and *Children's Hour*, for example, or for the youth programmes like *Saturday Club* and *Easy Beat* that developed in the late 1950s. The BBC's youth policy eventually led to demographically defined BBC radio stations, Radio 1 and 1Xtra. Sub-publics may also be defined in terms of special interests, programmes for sports fans, for example, or for gardeners and farmers, or in terms of ethnic communities: the national Asian Network started out as a special programming strand of BBC Radio Leicester.

In terms of music radio this approach has been organised around the provision of entertainment for everyone during the day and the scheduling of specialist shows in the evenings and at weekends. The policy, as Radio 1's Stuart Grundy once put it, is 'ratings by day and reputation by night'.[10] The audiences for these shows are conceived not so much as taste markets (people who buy the same records) as members of musical *communities*, and specialist shows work both to celebrate such communities and to shape them. They share certain broadcasting conventions: presenters who are both enthusiastic and authoritative (their listeners are to be educated as well as entertained); the use of guests and interviews; space for listener letters and requests; announcements of upcoming events; and playlisting studio and concert recordings as well as records.

Such shows have played a central role in the development of British popular music culture since the Second World War. *As I Roved Out*, for example, which ran on the Home Service between 1953 and 1958, was a programme about folk song collecting, an activity led by Peter Kennedy and Séamus Ennis that was sponsored by the BBC.[11] On this show collectors would talk about their song-gathering journeys and introduce either the recordings they had made or performances recorded by in-studio musicians and in folk pubs and clubs. These broadcasts clearly fed into the 1960s British folk revival just as in Scotland the traditions of Scottish country dance music have been sustained by the BBC Scotland programme, *Take the Floor*.

[8] See Howlett (1996) and Garner (2008).

[9] The BBC's written archives are a wonderful resource for popular music history too: https://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/bbc-written-archives-centre/zdy9scw.

[10] Quote taken from an interview with Martin Cloonan (1996).

[11] The inspiration for this programme came from an earlier series, *Adventures in Folk Song*, broadcast in 1951 and presented by the American song collector, Alan Lomax. It featured studio performances or recordings of songs from the BBC's Permanent Library.

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This actually originated in *Scottish Dance Music*, a programme launched on the Scottish Home Service in the 1930s. It became *Take the Floor* in 1978 and began to feature not just interviews, reviews, a gig guide and live studio sessions, but also recordings from a road show.[12]

To give another sort of example, in his autobiography Police guitarist Andy Summers remembers his first steps towards becoming a guitarist:

> The great inspiration of the week is a radio programme called *Guitar Club*, which is on at six-thirty every Saturday night. It's hosted with dry English humour by Ken Sykora and features the best British guitar talent – players such as Diz Disley, Ike Isaacs and Dave Goldberg. (Summers 2006, p. 35)

Guitar Club ran on the Light Programme from 1957 to 1960 (it was briefly revived by the Home Service in 1966 to 1967, when Cream featured among the guests) and was a factor in the emergence of young guitarists at the fore of 1960s British beat music.

When Radio 1 was launched in 1967 it turned out to be an uneasy hybrid of commercial and BBC notions of music radio. One of the key changes was the move from announcers to DJs, which meant a move from scripts to DJ prattle. The continuing needletime restrictions, however, meant that DJs had to prattle *a lot* to fill up the time, which did little for the station's credibility. Much of the station's importance lay, rather, in its own range of specialist programmes, from Mike Raven's *Blues Show* through Tommy Vance's *Friday Rock Show* to Tim Westwood's *Rap Show*. John Peel's shows were particularly interesting – and particularly BBC – in this context. They were based not so much on kinds of music as on a kind of musical sensibility: Peel moved from the progressive rock of *Top Gear* through punk to post punk and beyond. The listening community he put together prided itself on its adventurous listening ideology; the Peel show audience was unusual in listening loyally to a programme in which they expected to hear something they loathed!

It is difficult to imagine that a commercial broadcaster could have developed a show like John Peel's, or that it could have had the impact it had, except on the BBC. At least two generations of popular music fans and performers in the UK were schooled by Peel's broadcasting approach, which still informs the way Radio 6 Music works.[13] The point we want to argue here, though, is not just that John Peel was an exceptional music presenter. He was exceptional because he embodied with such passion and intelligence the BBC belief in musical community, a belief expressed over the years by specialist popular music shows across the BBC's radio stations: in Peter Easton's *Beat Patrol* on Radio Scotland or Dean Jackson's *Beat* on Radio Nottingham, for example, or in Mike Harding's folk show on Radio 2 and Lucy Durán's *World Routes* on Radio 3. The history of the BBC's specialist music radio shows and their influence on British musical life is still to be written.

Music investment

In his history of the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra Hugh MacDonald observes that by the 1930s the BBC was 'the world's biggest employer of musicians – possibly

[12] *Take the Floor* was presented by Robbie Shepherd from 1980 to 2016; since then it has been hosted by Gary Innes, the accordion player in the Scottish band Manran.

[13] Radio 6 Music 's slogan is 'the best place for Alternative Music'.

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the biggest in history' (2010, p. 4). If nothing else, this makes the BBC an extraordinary contributor to musical life. The employees that MacDonald refers to were classical musicians and today the BBC still runs four classical orchestras, a concert orchestra, a classical choir and a classical chorus, as well as promoting for eight weeks every summer the world's largest classical music festival, the BBC Proms.[14] In 1928 the BBC also started the BBC Dance Orchestra, followed by dance orchestras in Manchester and Scotland, and over the next 30 years the corporation ran a variety of light music bands under a variety of names – the BBC Revue Orchestra, the BBC Variety Orchestra, the BBC Showband, etc. In 1964 the surviving light orchestras were reorganised into two ensembles with overlapping membership, the BBC Radio Big Band and the BBC Radio Orchestra. The latter was disbanded in 1991; in 1994, following public objections to BBC plans to dissolve the former too, it was agreed that it would continue but be managed independently of the BBC: its musicians would be employed on a freelance basis rather than as members of the BBCs staff. The Radio Big Band would continue to perform exclusively for BBC radio.

One might conclude from all this that the BBC treated its classical musicians as more important than their popular colleagues whenever it had to make financial cuts. Yet this outcome is a reflection less of BBC managerial ideology than of the power of the Musicians' Union. In 1980, in response to BBC plans to cut its number of classical orchestras and greatly reduce classical musicians' employment opportunities, the Musicians' Union organised a highly effective strike. The Union understood both the devastating effect of the withdrawal of musical labour on broadcasting schedules and the galvanising effect on the BBC's board of governors of the mobilisation of the cultural establishment.[15]

What the 1980 strike made clear, in other words, was not just the amount of BBC money that went into maintaining orchestras and paying musicians' salaries, but also how much BBC programme policy depended on musicians' work. The steady decline of investment in the BBC's light music orchestras from the 1960s certainly reflected changing public tastes, but BBC entertainment programming continued to involve the large-scale purchase of musicians' services. It is still the case, for instance, that for London's session musicians a seat in the orchestra for *Strictly Come Dancing* is the best job going, in terms of both the skills demanded and the commensurate fees on offer.

The BBC's importance for the live music economy is not just to be measured by the money it pays musicians for studio sessions and outside broadcasts or by its exemplary commitment to Musicians' Union rates or by its provision of free publicity for performers on a national scale. The BBC is also a crucial player in the economy of music festivals. Successful festivals have long depended on the BBC for financial support, whether in terms of sponsorship or in contracts for recording festival performances for broadcast. This is obviously true for the longest established classical music events like the Three Choirs Festival and the Edinburgh International Festival, but it is equally the case for the Sidmouth and Cambridge folk festivals, for WOMAD and Celtic Connections, for the Huddersfield Contemporary Music

[14] Most members of BBC Concert Orchestra are classically trained although it specialises in film and show music and features regularly on Radio 2. The BBC Singers, originally established in 1924, is Britain's only full-time professional chamber choir.

[15] See Williamson and Cloonan (2016), pp. 193–200.

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Festival and the London Jazz Festival.[16] The BBC's financial commitment to the Glastonbury Festival is apparent; what is less obvious is that this has spill-over effects for other rock and pop festivals too. In the words of Steven Corfield from the festival staging company, Serious Stages, 'when Glastonbury is on, it's on the news the whole time, the BBC is pumping it out, and everyone thinks … festivals!'[17]

Broadcasting authority

Commercial radio stations measure their success in listening figures and advertising revenue. The most important objective of their programme policy is simply to keep listeners listening. This is to subject the broadcaster to the authority of the audience's listening tastes and choices, and this is obviously an element of BBC decision making too, particularly since the launch of Radio 1. BBC popular music programmers use playlists, pore over weekly audience research figures, take note of the rise and fall of listener numbers, and adjust schedules accordingly.

However, the public service model involves other just as important measures of success, in terms of audience development and engagement: have listeners been informed and educated as well as entertained? And this leads to concern for the intrinsic quality of what is broadcast; for the expertise and professionalism of the broadcasters; and for the *expansion* of the cultural horizons of the listeners. With reference to broadcasting quality Mark Percival has shown persuasively that BBC music radio sets the standards across the whole of British music broadcasting, in matters of both sound technology and presentational skill (Percival 2008); with reference to expertise, the BBC's specialist music programmes remain true to the idea that a popular music broadcaster should be a guide to new music experiences and not just come across as a chum, indulging embedded tastes.

As a music broadcaster, then, the BBC acts as both curator and editor, framing and recommending music and not just handing over listening choices to an algorithm. It is precisely the BBC's *authority* that makes it an essential counterweight to the faux populism of social media.

Conclusion

BBC radio programmes have long been record companies' most important marketing tools; the ways in which the BBC has played this promotional role have, in fact, been the target for much of the criticism the corporation has had. Our research suggests, in contrast, that the corporation has been more important for the economy and culture of live music-making and live music-makers than for the record industry. In a technological era in which record companies have lost their dominance and the live music business is the centre of attention, it may therefore be beside the point to dismiss the BBC as irrelevant for music fans who have now got Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube. It is certainly ironic that after many decades in which the American

[16] In her history of the Glasgow International Jazz Festival Alison Eales shows how its problematic dependence on commercial sponsors was an effect of its *lack* of support from BBC Scotland. See Eales (2017).

[17] The BBC's extensive coverage of the Glastonbury Festival began in 1997. Quote taken from 'Supporting stars', *Festival* December 2012, p. 20.

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commercial radio industry tried in vain to get a significant share of the UK's entertainment market, it was a Clear Channel spin-off that succeeded, in the guise of Live Nation.

In summary, we would argue that the popular music world is just as reliant as the classical world on the BBC for its economic survival. Further, the licence fee model is essential: a subscription system would be as damaging as straightforward privatisation. It would bring in a much smaller income and mean the BBC having to devote even more of its resources to marketing itself; it would turn a public service broadcaster into just another supplier of commodities in the media marketplace. It could be argued that in its reorganisation of radio services since the war – into the Home Service, the Light Programme and the Third Programme in 1945–1946, into Radios 1, 2, 3 and 4 in 1967 – the BBC has long shaped its output to meet the demands of particular radio market segments: the highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow; the young and the old, the serious and the casual listener. Yet licence fee payers were still encouraged to listen to programmes on all BBC radio stations, and certainly the specialist music programmes, wherever they were on the dial, drew their audiences from across these broad cultural divides. The BBC went on providing its most important service: serendipitous listening. People still became engaged with music they previously knew nothing about.

The problem is how to make this argument in the current political environment. It will be important, to begin with, to clarify what's meant by 'a public service'. Presently we pay for the BBC, as we pay for the NHS, the outer reaches of the road network, and the public library system, not just because we *do* use them but also because we *might*. The BBC offers cultural access and opportunities to everyone, whoever they are, wherever they live, *whether or not they take them*. It should be easy enough, for example, to gather material from musicians about the ways in which their careers were shaped by hearing something inspirational, something unexpected, on the BBC. We've already quoted Andy Summers on this and we could add Bryan Ferry's testimony: 'the first thing I ever heard on the radio that I liked was a blues singer called Leadbelly … that's when a lot of blues singers were getting played on the radio, in blues programmes, and that's when a lot of people discovered those singers'.[18]

A more difficult problem is how to move the focus of the debate away from television entertainment and the BBC's approach to news, and it doesn't help that it is presently a *television* licence that pays for BBC radio and the corporation's live music activities. At the beginning of this paper we summarised a popular view that the BBC is elitist, complacent, out of touch and naff, and at times it has certainly been all these things. It has had to deal with hostile governments and attacks from its media competitors and has, in recent years, lacked decisive leadership, developed an increasingly unwieldy and unintelligent bureaucracy, and too willingly subjected itself to the inanities of management consultancy and marketing speak.[19] It has too often been complicit in undermining its own unique character. Yet that character still matters. The question to ask is not whether BBC music programmes are providing 'audience satisfaction', but whether they are still sustaining, diversifying and

[18] Quoted in Frith et al. (2013, p. 115).
[19] We could make much the same argument about the British university sector.

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enriching British musical culture.[20] The coronavirus has vividly illustrated the importance of the public sector and the inadequacies of leaving the provision of essential goods to the market. Music is an essential good and if we value music then we must value the BBC and we must ensure that both flourish in the post-corona world. Now, more than ever before in its history, the BBC needs critical friends.

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[20] One aspect of this worth noting is the BBC's international reputation, not simply for the trustworthiness of its factual output but also for the authority of its music programming, something which is indisputably relevant to the success in the international market of British musicians.

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