ART FOR ‘EM

Haley’s was also the first voice heard on the station when it launched in 1946, previewing (albeit in the rather halting tones of the proverbial “unaccustomed to public speaking”) the Programme’s forthcoming broadcasts, musical and otherwise, “none of it...background listening”. Names like Szigeti, Kodály and Charles Münch featured heavily. This was Radio Enlightenment. It didn’t play by the old rules, and it barely had any of its own. Haley had decreed that himself: the golden rule, the bedrock of the Third’s broadcasting policy, was freedom.

Programmes would go on as long as they needed to, and not a second less. If that meant overrunning the schedules, then so be it; schedules, for the Third Programme, were mere guidelines. At least in theory; in practice, everything - even supposedly spontaneous talks - was carefully scripted and timed. However, it was ensured that everything absolutely *did* run exactly as long as it needed to at all times, with no interruptions, no enforced rushing for the finish line. Where the other stations had news updates on the hour, and fitted the programming around them, the Third worked the opposite way: news updates showed up, but only when they happened to fit around the programming. If programming ran late, so be it. If it *underran* - which happened more often than the BBC would like to admit - they would tend to just broadcast an empty silence until they caught up with the Radio Times listings. This could be an eerie experience, and gave rise to the caricature of the station made famous by the Goon Show and others:

WALLACE GREENSLADE: And now on the Third Programme…[silence]

The schedulers were also encouraged to be as creative as possible - no restrictions on what could be broadcast of an evening (the Third Programme only broadcast in the evenings), no specific slots for one thing or the other, as unpredictable as possible.

As an example, take the station’s first two Tuesdays. Tuesday the 2nd of October 1946, day three of the Third Programme,, was given over to a complete adaptation of Bernard Shaw’s “Man and Superman”, seeded throughout the evening, with interludes between Acts 2 and 3 (consisting selections from Bach’s Well-Tempered Clavier) and 3 and 4 (a performance of Michael Tippett’s then-relatively new Boyhood’s End). A week later, it was three hours of Mendelssohn’s Elijah followed by Laurie Lee’s The Voyage of Magellan and a talk about James Joyce. Anything went, as long as it was highbrow.

As far as Haley and the rest of the Third Programme’s creators were concerned, it was a success.

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Enough of a success that the Director-General immediately made it as clear as possible that it was his idea, much to the chagrin of people like Controller George Barnes (who, along with his deputies Etienne Amyot and Leslie Stokes, were the more direct architects of the station), not to mention Senior Controller Basil Nicholls, who claimed at various points to have been dead against the Third (and in particular its disregard of John Reith’s vision) from the start, and at others to have originally come up with the whole idea himself and suggested it to Haley, only for Haley to usurp the credit.

Of course, as with all history, it all depended on who was talking to whom. It wasn’t always a question of credit so much as blame, because the Third wasn’t seen as a success by everyone. The print media constantly carped about the tiny ratings. Inevitably, the Third Programme’s audience was small. That was both inevitable and the whole point; it was the narrow apex of the pyramid. The newspapers, still on the lookout for sticks with which to beat the BBC, argued that the low ratings failed to justify the cost. Haley believed otherwise, that the cutting edge of art needed an outlet, a place where those who sought it could easily find it, or else it would be forced further and further underground until art itself began to atrophy. To save art itself was worth any amount of licence payer’s money.

And always there was the stick of “elitism”, that the Third Programme was inherently exclusionary and based on certain class-related assumptions. This was harder to deny - the Programme was made by upper-middle class people, essentially for upper-middle class people, if only through a complete naive incomprehension of anyone lower than that on the social ladder. Oddly enough, however, a third of the station’s initial listenership was apparently working-class, although even if they learned this at the time they did nothing about it, and failed to hold onto those listeners beyond the first few months.

But those who loved it really loved it. Peter Maxwell-Davies - latterday Master of the Queen’s Music and associate conductor of the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra - remembered a blissful Third Programme childhood:

“*[..]every evening, more or less from the moment it started till the moment it shut down, while I was doing my homework. And it was the best education I could ever have got.”*

For Haley - and Barnes, Amyot, Stokes and possibly even Nicholls - that was justification enough.

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