

# Performance Practice Review

---

Volume 2  
Number 1 *Spring*

Article 4

---

1989

## Performance Practice Issues on the BBC Third Programme

Denis Stevens

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr>



Part of the [Music Practice Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Stevens, Denis (1989) "Performance Practice Issues on the BBC Third Programme," *Performance Practice Review*. Vol. 2: No. 1, Article 4. DOI: 10.5642/perfpr.198902.01.4  
Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/ppr/vol2/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Current Journals at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in Performance Practice Review by an authorized editor of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact [scholarship@claremont.edu](mailto:scholarship@claremont.edu).

## **Recollections of a Conductor-Scholar**

### **Performance Practice Issues on the BBC Third Programme**

---

**Denis Stevens**

The enchantment lent by distance is no less true of sound radio than of old recordings, which in various technological ways are still being reprocessed and reissued in forms that their originators would never begin to recognize. But whereas records, like nymphs, can be perpetuated (at least to some degree), broadcasts vanish irretrievably unless they have been purposely preserved in official archives or privately recorded off the air by irrepressible enthusiasts.

Although the musical output of the British Broadcasting Corporation has been mentioned from time to time, if not in musicological then at least in quasi-musicological literature, most of these accounts and descriptions are unfortunately second or third hand. They should not be passed over or neglected for this reason alone, but the fact remains that the resources, energy, and accomplishment of the much-admired Third Programme can be properly grasped only by an insider.

At the present moment I am one of the few survivors of those early years of a venture in cultural excellence the likes of which have not been seen

since. I began to broadcast on the Third Programme in 1947, continuing to contribute during the two following years.<sup>1</sup> I was greatly encouraged by (and owe a special debt to) Gerald Abraham, Alec Robertson and Sir Steuart Wilson, as well as Sir Hugh Allen, Heather Professor at Oxford.

Two broadcasts for which I was responsible, and which took place before I joined the staff in September 1949, illustrate the then-prevailing attitude towards performance practice. From a volume edited by Higiní Anglès on music at the court of Charles V of Spain, I devised a recital, with commentary, entitled "Cabezón and His Contemporaries." It was first heard on 21 May 1948, and the recording was repeated twice in the ensuing month. In this program, no particular "authenticity" was sought after, because the appeal as the planners saw it lay in the novelty and charm of the music, which I had arranged for solo harpsichord and a string quartet.

The music collected by Venegas de Henestrosa was designated for "tecla, harfa y vihuela," but since these instruments were not available to us we settled for what *was* available. I knew at the time that as the years passed more and more performers would acquire or have built for them an increasingly large number of early instruments, ultimately enriching the sound-image and approaching more nearly, perhaps, what the composer might have had in mind. But being without them we saw no point in depriving listeners of the joy of discovering hitherto unfamiliar compositions of notable quality. We were more concerned with accuracy of text than with the instruments involved. It was more important to me to correct, for example, a mis-transcribed hemiola (e.g. in the opening statement of a Cabezón *Pavana con su glosa*) than to spend hours over the difference between one reproduction of an ancient instrument and another. I also considered it of the utmost importance to read through a large number of compositions in order to choose and edit only the very finest.

In all my work for the BBC, first as a contributor, then as a producer, finally as a consultant and conductor — a total period of some 35 years — I regarded the patient reading and assessment of materials as a *sine qua non* of all program planning. This was certainly true of the

---

1. I was decidedly not an initiator, as is generously suggested by Harry Haskell in his comprehensive study of the history of the early music revival, *The Early Music Revival: a History*, (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 122. The inaugural broadcast of the Third Programme, on its own specially allocated wavelength, took place on 29 September 1946. It was about this time that I felt myself drawn to questions of performance practice, and the Third Programme seemed to offer ample scope for putting theory into practice.

second contribution which I devised and introduced, a program on the early Tudor composer John Redford. I came to know his organ music through my work on the Mulliner Book, published in 1951 as the first volume of *Musica Britannica*. But I knew little of his choral music since most of it was still in manuscript. I transcribed several motets, and two of these were performed by a small choir, the organ solos being played by Susi Jeans from whose country house in Boxhill this broadcast came. We chose this venue because Lady Jeans, widow of Sir James Jeans the Astronomer Royal, had a baroque-type organ installed in one of her music rooms. It was not what would now be called an "authentic" instrument (whatever that may mean) but it sounded very different indeed from the average church or studio organ. As in the Cabezon program, we took the best resources available at the time, concentrating on unfamiliar repertoire and historical background rather than wasting time on problems that were at that time impossible of solution.

The Redford broadcast took place on 9 May 1949, and I joined the BBC Third Programme staff in October of that year. My immediate predecessor in office was Basil Lam, who left in order to make harpsichords, and he in turn had replaced Anthony Lewis, claimed as Professor of Music at Birmingham University in 1948. The bloodshot eye of the storm into which I flew, not quite unsuspectingly, was a series entitled "The History of Music in Sound," of which the General Editor was Gerald Abraham. Parts of these programs were later re-recorded and issued under the same title on commercial discs. But the broadcast programs led the way, and were heard at weekly intervals for a number of years.

The charter of the Corporation enjoined the BBC to provide education and entertainment, in fairly equal balance. There was no question of aiming at the largest mass audience available, or of deliberately lowering standards in order to achieve this dubious end. There was no question of advertising over the air. Programs were usually "live," and real flesh-and-blood musicians were regularly employed, including several fully-maintained symphony orchestras. Records could be played, but "needle-time" was strictly rationed. In consequence there was always a demand for qualified professional musicians, vocal and instrumental. World-famous star performers were rarely heard, unless in the context of a relayed public event.

The BBC provided employment for considerable numbers of artists, and "outside" orchestras and choruses were also frequently engaged. Top-ranking musicologists served in an administrative capacity to organize



and build programs as well as to provide dignified and intelligent presentation.<sup>2</sup> When a piece of music came to an end, the sound and the thought were allowed to die away before the back-announcement began. *Sonic wallpaper did not exist. A music program would be followed by a talk, a feature, a play, or a news bulletin, so that listeners could enjoy a variety of offerings.* The nature of the organization and its duty to the nation demanded the highest standards of taste, and these were summed up in the famous phrase of Lord Reith, the first Director-General: "We know exactly what British listeners want, and by Heaven they are not going to get it." It was precisely this attitude that led to the creation of the Third Programme, and its somewhat elitist and esoteric appeal to a limited audience.

High standards, originality of research, and accuracy of performance were part and parcel of broadcasting at that time. But in a series such as "The History of Music in Sound" it was not simply a matter of putting on gramophone records with a simplistic commentary. Each program had its own script-writer, always an acknowledged expert in the field; but as I soon discovered they were sometimes unaware of the logistics of a live broadcast. In writing an article, it is usually possible to mention a recondite work and add a few measures of music to reinforce the point being made. In a script accompanying a live broadcast, however, each illustration means a cue to a musical ensemble, large or small, under a responsible conductor whose task it is to play not a brief excerpt from the work in question but a sizeable portion of it, such as a complete movement of an instrumental work or a recitative and aria from a cantata, oratorio, or opera. Again, it might be a Magnificat, part of a Mass, or some other liturgical composition.

Now obviously since rare works were not readily available on records in the pre-LP age, and since in any event the musical part of the program had to be "live," it was necessary to find each piece of music either from published sources, or from early editions and manuscripts in the nearby British Library, have them transcribed and edited, then have parts copied and chorus scores prepared. A huge copying department was constantly kept busy, for we were living prior to copying-machine years. Everything took longer and mistakes were more easily made. Yet in spite of all the problems, artists welcomed and entered into the spirit of this bold and

---

2. A partial list of scholars on the BBC staff at various times between 1948 and the present day will give some indication of the role of musical and literary scholarship in the Third Programme: Gerald Abraham, Julian Budden, Deryck Cooke, Peter Crossley-Holland, Roger Fiske, Sir William Glock, Hans Keller, Basil Lam, Robert Layton, Sir Anthony Lewis, Edward Lockspeiser, Alec Robertson, Robert Simpson, Denis Stevens, Brian Trowell, Alan Walker.

unusual venture, and the public was able to hear a large number of hitherto unknown compositions of vital historic interest. Thus it was that we were able to draw upon the expertise of Edward J. Dent in early Italian opera, and of Sir Thomas Beecham in French opera of the early nineteenth century. Beecham, with his considerable knowledge of history and literature, as well as music, not only conducted the program but also devised it. The element of authenticity in this instance derived not so much from types of instruments as from the original editions used as a basis for the performance.

It may be appropriate to add at this point that although the program content was directed towards intelligent and cultivated listeners, we had to bear in mind that this was by no means an audience exclusively made up of musicologists. The approach, therefore, was scholarly and literate, but never dull or academic. After all, a modicum of persuasion is not out of order when serving up a lengthy musical offering of largely unknown excerpts. We were extremely fortunate in having as our regular weekly commentator the then Director of Music Talks, Alec Robertson, whose engaging manner and ability to convey the essence of a musical message helped the series to become nationally admired and warmly accepted. Later, as is well-known, it was issued on gramophone records and served for many years as an adjunct to teaching.

The term authenticity is so frequently misunderstood and abused nowadays that a corrective attitude is called for, if only to assist in dispelling the unfortunate illusion that the movement is inextricably bound up with the cult of early instruments in reproduction. Although as far as the BBC was concerned such matters were of marked importance (and consequently much use was made of harpsichords, clavichords, positive organs, viols, lutes, and recorders), various other kinds of authenticity came into the sound-picture. In broadcasting, the music is audible but not visible, so it relies on acoustic and spatial elements for its maximum effect. Whenever possible a church composer was linked with the cathedral where he spent the greater part of his working life. For a Mass by Fayrfax, the choir (after preliminary rehearsals) was transported, no matter what the weather, to St. Alban's Abbey, from which aurally superb coign of vantage the music was duly transmitted. Similarly the music of Weelkes was performed in Chichester, motets from the Eton Choirbook in the college chapel at Eton, and the Worcester fragments in the cathedral there, even though the leaves may not all have come from that one location. The same principle was applied to secular music, as in the series "Music from Historic Houses," when the musicians recorded in the great hall or drawing-room of the

house chosen for each program. Audience reports indicated that the sound was well worth the extra effort.

In studio broadcasts, as well as in churches, a form of acoustic deception was not only permitted but actively encouraged, since much early music depends for its impact upon the listener's perception of depth and width of ambience. This of course was long before the days of stereo. The divided choirs, vocal and instrumental, were therefore suggested by deploying ensembles of different size at varying distances from the microphones, and if the result was certainly not stereophonic, it usually gave a lively impression of space. The pragmatic solutions of a constant problem anticipated, oddly enough, the results of quite recent research into the so-called *cori spezzati* tradition, which is now shown to be not so much an equal division of opposing choirs but rather a tonal contrast between a group of soloists (as in the *bigonzo* at St. Mark's, Venice) and the other musicians set further back towards the altar.

It goes without saying that in the performance of church music the closest attention was paid to liturgical requirements. From 1950 onwards works formerly thought of as "motets" were identified, recognized, and performed as *alternatim* hymns, canticles, or responsories; and organ music hitherto considered as collections of brief instrumental pieces were broadcast as Organ Masses or hymns as the case might be. Couperin's Masses were given in this way from Downside Abbey, the monks participating and wonderfully transforming these misunderstood masterpieces of the French baroque. In countless instances listeners would write in and comment on the fact that this particular kind of *authenticity in performance brought home to them the beauty and balance of much early music*, as in hearing (from the chapel of King's College, Cambridge) some of the verse-anthems of Orlando Gibbons with a consort of viols, or a fourteenth-century Mass sung by outstanding soloists and a plainchant schola, or one of Monteverdi's later madrigals with a rich and full-sounding continuo complement.

Here is another essential area of authenticity which is often grossly neglected in present-day performances and recordings. There has been a regrettable tendency to oust the organ and the harpsichord, or to relegate them to a position of virtual inaudibility, and supplant them with a lute or theorbo, whose thin and evanescent sounds do little or nothing to support the all-important waist-line of a continuo part, whether figured or not. Our ideal continuo for smaller ensembles consisted of a chamber organ, a harpsichord, a lute, a viola da gamba, and a small bass, and the differing figurations played by the keyboard players and the



lutenist would ensure an adequate realization of the bass line, supplying both *ictus* and *sostenuto*. I find it strange that those carefully established principles are now frequently forgotten, as in recent recordings I have heard of Charpentier's "David et Jonathas" and of Purcell's "Timon of Athens." There is little use in having authentic instruments if the essence of the texture is almost entirely lacking in body and purpose.

But to return to the Third Programme, much of the credit for so many successful broadcasts is due to the unusually large staff of associates in so many areas and disciplines: the administrators, balance-and-control engineers (all of whom were obliged to have a knowledge of music — indeed several were composers or instrumentalists), the librarians, copyists, announcers, and producers. Some idea of the extent of this unique support system can be gained from the billing form for a broadcast of music by Giaches de Wert recorded in 1969:

From: Mr. Basil Lam, via Chief Asst (M.P.O.)

1st October 1969

411 Yalding

PABX 3265

To: Music Programme Routine

GH

Copies: Ch. Asst. (Ch. Mus.)	Clerk (Ch. Mus.)	Mr. Lam
X.S.M.O.	Clerk (Overseas Mus.)	Clerk (Mus. Costing)
Mr. Cooke	Miss Bowling	Mr. Stock, 16 Lang St.
H.G.P., Egton	Prog. Acct., Cav. Sq.	Miss Phillips, Cav. Sq.
Prog. Index, Cav. Sq.	Mus. Trans. Org., KH	Org. Pres. Duties, BH
Asst. to C.T.P., BH	Miss Moss, BH	Mrs. Blunt, BH
Data Hdq. Unit, BH	P.O.S.N., 5074 BH	Prod. Ed., RT
Sub. Eds., RT (2)	Prog. Reps., LR5 BH	Lib. Sups, 529 BH
Org. Stereo, BH		

WEEK 46

BBC Radio 3 (Third Programme)

Tuesday 11th November 1969: 9.25-10.25 p.m.

GIACHES DE WERT

STEREO BW832D

*Accademia Monteverdiana*

Patricia Clark (soprano)

Ursula Connors (soprano)

Shirley Minty (contralto)

Edgar Fleet (tenor)



Leslie Fyson (tenor)

John Frost (bass)

*Jaye Consort of Viols*

Francis Baines (treble viol)

Elizabeth Baines (treble viol)

John Isaacs (tenor viol)

Jane Ryan (bass viol)

*Ambrosian Singers*

*Conducted by Denis Stevens*

Kyrie (Mass: Transeunte Domino)	MS, ED. CAROL MACCLINTOCK	3.13
Felice piume	"	2.30
Cara la vita mia	"	2.20
Ecco ch'un altra volta	"	3.25
Hoc est praeceptum meum	"	8.20
Canzonette:	"	
J'ai trouvé ce matin		2.10
De que serven ojos morenos		1.05
Tis pyri pyr		1.15
Donna, tu sei si bella		3.20
Misera! non credea	MOSELER	4.10
Dialogue: In qual parte	MS, ED. CAROL MACCLINTOCK	3.15

*Introduced by Denis Stevens* 35.55

BBC Stereophonic recording

(Basil Lam)

Recorded: 16.6.69 SLN25BW832

To sum up, I should like to quote from a letter written on 16 May 1948 by the Rumanian pianist and composer Dinu Lipatti to his former teacher Florica Musisescu: "The BBC is a marvel of precision, seriousness and inventiveness. They have wonderful Steinways in every

studio, and the care which they take with every broadcast, whether a recital or a symphony concert in the studio, amply rewards an artist for all his efforts."<sup>3</sup> It is partly due to the BBC's conscientious support of true authenticity in performance that we now have more enlightened ideas about "early music" (or "pre-classical music" as it was then called) and a greater respect for the importance of quality in our choice of repertoire.

---

3. Tanasescu and Bargauanu: *Lipatti* (London and White Plains, 1988).