

Chapter 8

Desert Island Discs and British Emotional Life

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1. Introduction

Any BBC programme that has been running nearly continuously for three-quarters of a century probably deserves the description of ‘comfortable and well-worn’ [1]. But it’s hard to imagine anything in the canon of British radio classics that attracts the epithet more often than *Desert Island Discs*. Tune into the programme, nestled as it is next to *The Archers* and other stalwarts of the radio schedules, and, according to Bill Schwarz, you will be eavesdropping on no less a thing than ‘the English past’. An English past, it is implied, with a specific, somewhat antiquated, emotional register: as Schwarz writes (2005: 176), in contrast to a plethora of other chat-shows on TV and radio whose commitments to the confessional ‘run deeper than Radio 4 could ever countenance’, *Desert Island Discs (DID)* is simply ‘very genteel’. It is an island in the output where there is ‘no hint of dangers ahead, or of troublesome natives’.

Such a description, of course, is not entirely complimentary. So ‘implacably, weirdly genteel’ has the series been over the years, Schwarz contends, that at times it has represented the quintessence of ‘BBC high camp’ (ibid: 176). In the twenty-first century, to be comfortable, well-worn or genteel is also, one might reasonably infer, to be unchallenging, anachronistic, or just hopelessly - perhaps even *harmfully* - restrained. Courteous, yes. But courteous to a fault.

Is all this fair? To some extent, yes. At its best, listening to the programme can be like eavesdropping on a polite but relaxed dinner-party conversation. Given that we live in a media age in which, as the American historian of the conversational arts

Stephen Miller points out, the default setting of broadcast talk is disputatious and bombastic, polite conversation is surely no bad thing (2006: 267–304). Yet at times, too, the programme’s conversational style has grated. It has sounded formulaic, rigid, cloying. Whichever of these two readings we choose to emphasise, there’s certainly an assumption, by all sorts of critics and commentators, that *DID* has basically been replaying the same routines and offering-up the same aesthetic style its entire life. True, Schwarz concedes that a whisper of modernisation has taken place: every so often it is now ‘determinedly frank about the personal tribulations of its guests’. Yet for him this only goes as far as making the programme a shade or two ‘less weird’ (2005: 176). It remains a long way from being *normal*.

But has the change in *DID* really been only as skin-deep as Schwarz implies? And should we not probe a little more the precise nature of the whispered modernisation - to explore a little more *when* exactly and *why* exactly it happened? Every broadcast programme tries to keep up with the times, to reflect the world in which it exists in some rough-and-ready way. That is in the nature of broadcasting. But can we be more specific? *Which* elements of the public mood are programme-makers examining when they contemplate change? And how exactly might they go about responding without destroying their programme’s enduring appeal – the essential identity that listeners seek?

In the case of *DID*, I would like to suggest that a few answers start to emerge if we focus on what we might call its *emotional* register. By this I mean its status as a programme that probes and reveals the inner life of its castaways: one that elicits not just the bare outlines of biographical information but something seemingly contradictory, namely a self-conscious ‘performance’ by the castaway of his or her ‘true’ self, and which therefore speaks – to varying degrees, depending on the

presenter and the guest in question – to the emotional norms of society. It indicates something of just how probing questions conducted in the public space of the airwaves are allowed to be, and something of just how candid public figures might allow themselves to be in answering them. As such, my focus will be on the spoken elements of the programme. Not exclusively, however: towards the end of this chapter, I will bring music back into the equation – at least as a programmable ‘ingredient’ of the series - for I want to argue that it, too, is a vital part of the emotional quality of the programme. In such an analysis, the crucial period is the 1970s and 1980s, when – I argue - a number of minor changes in its production conspired to make it altogether more confessional in tone. If the music and the speech are taken together, and set in the context of insights gleaned from the archival records of behind-the-scenes discussions at the BBC, they reveal a programme that has been carried along with the emotional currents of modern life, rather than standing apart.

2. Emotions and Broadcasting

To start, let me set out briefly what I mean by ‘the emotional currents of modern life’. In broad terms, these comprise a largely uncontested set of behavioural changes. In Britain, as in much of the western world, the decades either side of World War One witnessed a sharp reversal in Norbert Elias’s famed long-term ‘civilizing process’, characterised as it had been by a steadily growing regulation of emotional behaviour. By the 1920s, *informality*, not formality, was *de rigueur*. As Cas Wouters puts it, western society saw ‘manners becoming more lenient, more differentiated and varied for a wider and more differentiated public’ (2007: 3). One specific dimension of this ‘emancipation of emotions’ was what Mathew Thomson calls a ‘psychologizing process’ (2001:104). The Freudian notion of there being a huge hidden dimension to

consciousness, resonating as it did in Britain with pre-existing fascinations with theosophy, spiritualism and self-help, caught the public imagination and percolated widely through society. The fundamental lesson was that the human mind now had a mind of its own. In such circumstances, Thomson suggests, ‘understanding human consciousness was often an essential part of a sense of being modern’ (ibid: 101–2). With this opening up of ‘a more extensive internal topography of the self’, a premium was set on self-reflexivity – and, further, on demonstrating one’s self-reflexivity (ibid: 104). And all this revealed itself in the public sphere as well as the private one. In 1929, for instance, after Ramsey MacDonald had spoken in strikingly personal terms of his anxiety about the problems faced by ordinary citizens, we find *Vox* magazine writing of ‘the recurrent efforts of self-humanization in which Prime Ministers of to-day indulge’ [2].

Vox, let it be said, did not approve of such stuff: ‘If a man reaches the dignity of Prime Minister, he does not require our compassion... and we should be spared these appeals to sympathize with him personally’ (ibid.) And indeed Wouters, in his grand survey of twentieth-century manners, detects something of a slow-down in emotional emancipation between the 1930s and 1950s – perhaps even a subtle move towards ‘reformatisation’. But the overall direction of travel was clear, and the 1960s and 1970s brought an intense second wave in favour of informality. Old-style reticence was out; being natural, open, relaxed - having what Hochschild called a talent for ‘the jazz of human exchange’ – was definitely in (Wouters 2007: 91). Again, self-reflexivity – and the need to confront repressed memories - was a dominant flavour in the mix. In the US, Tom Wolfe talked in 1976 of ‘The Me Decade’, while two years later the New York psychoanalyst Christopher Lasch wrote of a ‘culture of narcissism’. And if much of this counter-cultural froth might seem a

touch Californian, it's worth noting that Americans did not have a monopoly on feeling. Even among Britons, with their entrenched reputation as 'an emotionally constipated people', there was a marked shift in favour of getting in touch with one's feelings – a greater value being placed on naturalness, authenticity, *openness* (Mandler 2003: 137).

Within the BBC itself this drive towards openness is part of another, broader history, as long as the Corporation's own: a desire to somehow connect with 'the ordinary listener' and to move away from an overly-deferential approach to guest-speakers. From the start, it was a desire that informed production practice, modes of address, and the subject-matter of programmes (see Scannell & Cardiff 1991). Again, we can certainly say that the *pace* of change picked up noticeably from around 1960. A vivid example of the new emotional climate on display was the BBC television series *Face-to-Face*, first broadcast the previous year. Each half-hour programme featured John Freeman interviewing his guest live, with the camera throughout fixed remorselessly on the guest's face, lit as it was by the full glare of the studio lights. The process was described by more than one critic at the time as a form of torture; it was certainly akin to eavesdropping on a psychoanalyst with a patient (see Hendy 2011). At much the same time on the BBC's Home Service the folk-singer Ewan MacColl was busy collaborating with his fellow-singer Peggy Seeger and the producer Charles Parker on the so-called 'Radio Ballads', a series of documentaries which offered richly textured - if somewhat idealised - portraits of working-class lives. For MacColl it wasn't really the music he'd composed but the *voices* of those talking on tape that mattered most – and specifically how they conveyed with honest articulacy what he called 'the excitement of an experience relived' (1990: 313).

In their frankness and their talkativeness, *Face-to-Face* and the Radio Ballads were notable creations. This, however, was mostly because at the start of the 1960s they were still outliers. Ewan MacColl might have cherished the labourers in his programmes for their regular use of ‘the first-person singular and the present-historical’ (ibid: 317). But most programmes featured white-collar contributors: people, MacColl reckoned, who ‘made constant use of the impersonal pronoun’, who were vocally detached because they were emotionally detached, and who provided listeners with the impoverished experience of ‘a reasoned, impassive, uninvolved stream of sound’ (ibid; see Hendy 2004). A few years later, the producer of another BBC radio series, *The Time of My Life* – a series manifestly designed to convey the ‘real person’ behind the personality – moaned about how one (sadly not untypical) guest was ‘very good at talking about practical matters, but became inarticulate when asked about her own thoughts and feelings’ [3]. Other contributors would simply refuse to play the game at all, remaining resolutely indifferent to the probing of an interview, no matter how sensitively done. Gerald Priestland, for instance, wrote in his memoirs of how he regretted never getting beneath the skin of Margaret Thatcher when putting her before the microphone. The fault was hardly his, though: ‘she refused to listen to my questions and simply played the political gramophone records she had brought with her – I hadn’t the nerve to bully her’ (1986: 249).

Background and upbringing are unavoidable factors here, and they warn us not to get too carried away about the impulse towards emotional openness in broadcasting history. Ewan MacColl’s rather impersonal white-collar contributors performed precisely as they assumed society *expected* them to perform. For when Cas Wouters writes of the century’s sweeping historical shift towards informalisation, he is careful to stress an important caveat. Informalisation - and with it the need to avoid

overt displays of superiority - was *not* necessarily liberating. It demanded a new degree of *self*-regulation. There arose, he notes, an oxymoronic *need* to be at ease - a *constraint to be unconstrained*. As the saying goes, authenticity is the crucial thing; if you can fake that, you're made. Which is only a flippant way of expressing an historical truth of the late twentieth-century, namely that it remained difficult for people in the public eye (or ear) to be entirely *unself*-conscious when put before the microphone: they were fully aware of the new rules of etiquette by which they would now be judged. In order to avoid 'failure', they would either have to be brilliantly at ease – or, if they wished to play it safe (which for public figures with a reputation to protect would be highly likely), they would have to watch their words very carefully indeed. Being 'open' was a risky business. It needed managing.

Moreover, for anyone appearing not just 'on air', but specifically on BBC Radio 4, there have always been additional expectations of decorum to be considered. The network was forged in 1967 out of the old Home Service, which had itself been forged in 1939 out of the National Programme – which, in turn, traced its own ancestry back to Studio 2LO in London in the early 1920s. Indirectly, then, it was 'the rock on which all else was founded', as Asa Briggs puts it – part of the rootstock of British broadcasting and therefore somehow assumed in the public imagination to embody the high standards of its founding father, John Reith (1995: 577). In 1967, when the Sixties revolution in manners was perhaps at its high-water mark, a large part of the BBC audience thought of Radio 4 as 'the last yellow streak of a golden age' [4]. Many of its most devoted listeners would have been rudely displeased if 'their' radio station, as they thought of it, swam freely with the modernising tide. What they actually wanted was a safe haven in a stormy sea of change. Those at the BBC who controlled the station were only too aware of this limiting force. However

much they might want to move with the times, they knew they would have to move very gingerly indeed if they were to attract new, younger listeners without losing too many of the older ones.

If a particular Radio 4 series such as *DID* was ‘weirdly genteel’ for much of its life, then, it probably wasn’t entirely by accident. It was a response to the *demand* for such gentility. When researchers from the social research organisation Mass Observation Project asked a panel of several hundred correspondents to comment on the series in 2001, the replies were telling – and striking in their similarity. They enjoyed it precisely because it provided, as one woman put it, a ‘more controlled, less exposed environment’ than elsewhere in the media. Another described it as a place ‘where a personality can talk about his/her life within certain parameters.’ A third respondent suggested that it was ‘biographical without going into private aspects’, while yet another replied, ‘I feel certain it will be kept within bounds’ [5]. These were almost certainly the kind of answers that the BBC was picking up from its own audience research. In the calculus of broadcast production, such data could hardly be ignored. And indeed behind-the-scenes discussions about the programme were littered with calls from editors and experienced programme-makers for a degree of emotional restraint, and a fierce advocacy against sensationalism or prurience. Thus, for example, in 1971, we find the Director of Programmes for BBC Radio, Howard Newby, declaring in one editorial meeting that its unchanging formula was ‘necessary’. Radio 4, then busily introducing lots of new series, should, he explained, ‘retain a number of familiar landmarks which would provide reassurance’ for an audience a substantial proportion of which was ‘essentially conservative’ [6]. Six years later, we find the Head of Radio Drama, Ronald Mason, reminding a group of producers and senior editors that one of *DID*’s great attractions was ‘that it remained

unchanging in a changing world' [7]. And when Roy Plomley—the originator and first presenter of the programme—died in 1985, a radio critic commented that its 'singular success' had been due, as much as anything, to 'its host's calm, courteous and always kindly manner' [8].

In other words, *DID* was long required to maintain a somewhat restrained emotional temperature for three reasons largely beyond its producers' control. The first was the expectations guests themselves had of their own behaviour as a result of the still prevailing cultural norms of middle-class British life. Second were the expectations of decorum placed upon Radio 4 by its audience. And third, there were the expectations placed upon the programme by listeners who regarded the series itself as a particular beacon of reassurance in a sea of dubious social change.

3. Pressures for Change

Yet to stress *only* the forces for continuity would be misleading. The BBC's written archives also reveal strong counter-currents within Broadcasting House - and, in particular, throughout the 1970s and 1980s a growing pressure, despite everything, to force the pace of change. In time, this pressure became overwhelming.

The host's role was one early area of concern. Whenever Roy Plomley's reluctance to probe coincided with a guest equally reluctant to open-up, the result was palpably awful – the trigger for a bout of behind-the-scenes hand-wringing. In 1981, for instance, Princess Margaret was the castaway: a coup for publicity, to be sure, yet by all accounts terrible to behold. After the broadcast, when senior producers gathered for their weekly review of output, the judgment was near unanimous: 'it had sounded a bit tense', 'Princess Margaret was clearly unaccustomed to ad-libbing and had seemed frightened by the questions', 'not an easy person to interview', 'some of the

answers were almost mono-syllables' [9]. Perhaps it was naïve to have expected a member of the Royal family to speak in anything other than the most emotionally constipated way. But many inside the BBC were already wondering if the programme itself was now too far adrift from the shifting emotional tides of the time. They also wondered whether it might not be precisely the 'calm, courteous' manner of Plomley that lay at the root of the problem. In 1978 a senior manager complained that he 'felt frustrated when tantalising statements in the interviews were not followed up' [10]. Two years earlier, the Head of 'Gramophone Programmes' – the BBC department responsible for *DID* – had written to his Controller with a note of barely-concealed exasperation: Plomley, he grumbled, 'is always very loathe to introduce changes.... It took many weeks, for example, for me to be able to banish "Ladies and Gentlemen" from his opening sentence' [11]. And in 1977 *DID*'s producer, Derek Drescher – clearly already on the defensive – explained that the programme had indeed changed: as early as 1975, he told a meeting, Plomley 'had begun to vary his questions, instead of always asking the same questions in the same order' [12].

That this miniscule concession could be regarded as progress spoke volumes about how painstakingly slow it was to make changes of any kind. Yet it also spoke of an underlying determination among editorial staff to keep edging forward, even if only at a glacial pace. In the mid-1970s, for instance, the Director of Programmes was pushing forward across a broader front. The radio schedules as a whole, he said, 'needed revitalising': 'some programmes' might be 'becoming rather stale', output had 'an old-fashioned feel' about it. No specific programmes were accused directly of this failure – but, rather pointedly, the editorial meeting at which such thoughts were raised soon turned to discussing Plomley and his castaways [13].

Part of the difficulty for *DID* was that by this stage, even on Radio 4, there were programmes offering discussion of such a strikingly frank character that – like it or not - the centre-ground of acceptable disclosure for guests (and, equally, the centre-ground of acceptable probing among interviewers) was shifting. As early as 1971, for instance, a now largely forgotten series, *If You Think You've Got Problems*, had offered what the *Sun* newspaper called an 'agony column of the air' [14]. It invited people before the Radio 4 microphone to discuss such matters as how to deal with teenage children who wanted to have sex, how to deal with lonely widowers, the case for abortion, rows with relatives, transvestism, alcoholism, phobias, paedophilia. Several senior programme-makers in BBC Radio were distinctly uncomfortable with what they heard: there was, they claimed, too much 'self-display', an 'element of "ecouterism"' that was 'embarrassing'. The Head of Radio Drama, Martin Esslin, complained at one point that he simply 'found it distasteful and disturbing to listen to a woman condemning her in-laws before an audience of around a million' [15]. Yet, significantly, the Controller of Radio 4 urged the series' producers onwards, asking them to stick with 'nasty' problems wherever possible, rather than just 'nice' ones [16]. He also declared his broader policy on frankness:

We should not allow ourselves to be put in the position of having to demonstrate that broadcasting a certain programme does no damage of any kind; with the implication that if it creates one pennyworth of harm it should therefore not be transmitted. This is an utterly false proposition. *Not* broadcasting certain types of programme is also damaging and the good that we do by airing certain subjects in a responsible way, though it may well be immeasurable, must be set in the balance against any incidental harm... A

broadcasting service which avoids difficult subjects because they create difficult questions of public relations or because they can be shown to have damaging effects in some ways, may be shirking its public responsibilities. Certain questions need to be aired and discussed in a responsible society if that society is to grow in a healthy way [17].

This expressed the value of airing ‘certain questions’ in stunningly Reithian terms. And it gave a kind of blanket permission for producers throughout the network to go further. By 1982, with the launch of *In the Psychiatrist’s Chair*, Radio 4 listeners were able to hear a succession of guests submitting to intense close-questioning by a practising psychiatrist, Anthony Clare, and being required to discuss in considerable detail the private experiences that had shaped their public behaviour. Some were quite willing to be frank: Sir Michael Tippett on his homosexuality; Arthur Ashe on the death of his mother; Clare Rayner on her childhood traumas. Others, through their very evasiveness, revealed themselves unwittingly: Jimmy Savile, for instance, who signally failed to dispel an air of oddness and misanthropy despite a great deal of stone-walling; or Ken Dodd, who rapidly changed topic whenever asked about his family life (Clare 1993: 1–41; 184–235). Nor was this intense focus on the hidden depths restricted to the narrow confines of the confessional chat show. Even news, which was traditionally supposed to exude an air of detachment and objectivity, caught the mood. Gerald Priestland, who presented *Newsdesk* during the 1970s, had himself suffered a nervous breakdown, and decided – as he later recalled - that ‘the franker I was about personal feelings, particularly when rooted in some experience of the subject, the readier listeners would be to take them in the spirit in which they were

offered: as a contribution towards understanding' (Priestland 1986: 249). No wonder he found interviewing Thatcher frustrating.

In this way, new aesthetic styles bled across the generic boundaries of Radio 4's output: drama, news, comedy, religion, current affairs, and debate. But of course, none of this was really the result of centralised planning or fully conscious effort. As one historian of the BBC reminds us, the Corporation has always been a 'Zeitgeist broadcaster' (Webb 2014: 30). Change was organic, proceeding incrementally alongside a collective, ongoing sensing by broadcasting staff of the public sentiment, and a desire to be in rough alignment with that sentiment at all times. That's why, when in 1975 the BBC's most senior figures gathered to spend a weekend asking themselves a deceptively simple question - was it their job to reflect or to lead? – the only possible answer to emerge was that it should both reflect *and* lead. 'There is no consensus,' one of the executives added, 'but you ignore it at your peril' [18]. When it came to the nuts and bolts of making programmes such as *DID*, the unspoken injunction was therefore to ensure that while a series might indeed represent the last yellow streak of a golden age, it also had to avoid falling too far behind current public attitudes. This classic fudge evidently left a great deal to individual interpretation, so even the most incremental of adjustments provoked disagreement and anxiety. Nevertheless, evolution there always had to be.

For *DID*, the single most obvious change came in 1985, with the death of Roy Plomley. As soon as Michael Parkinson took over as host, a more abrasive style was apparent. Parkinson was obviously not to everyone's taste. One early assessment of audience reactions concluded thus: 'those who liked him had liked him very much, and those who had not were vociferous in their objections to his radio manner' [19]. It was also thought Parkinson was 'obtrusive and inclined to steer the programme

towards a pre-planned formula'. Worst of all, one insider reckoned, the new host 'saw the programme primarily as a vehicle for himself, rather than the castaways or their choice of music' [20]. Nevertheless, the general feeling among senior executives was that 'Parkinson was getting more out of his subjects than Roy Plomley had done' [21]. The trend became still more pronounced when Sue Lawley succeeded Parkinson two years later. On her arrival she announced that the programme would remain 'a conversation' rather than a place of 'penetrating interviews or sensational revelations' (Lawley 1991: 1–3). But the interviews certainly became more probing.

This was due less to Lawley's own journalistic style than to a raft of procedural changes behind the scenes. For instance, whereas Plomley had wined and dined his guests at a London club before each recording session, Lawley adopted a more business-like approach. 'I dislike talking to an interviewee in advance,' she explained: 'I worry that it will spoil the spontaneity of our exchange' (ibid: 3). One of the more memorable outcomes of this technique was her questioning of the then Labour Shadow Chancellor, Gordon Brown, in 1996. She asked him several times why he had never married – prompting Plomley's widow, Diana Wong, who still retained partial copyright over the programme, to complain publicly that the host was being 'impertinent and rude' [22]. Another organisational change instigated by Sue Lawley - less obvious to the public but perhaps more profound in its implications – was that responsibility for making the programme was transferred from the BBC's 'Gramophone Department' to its 'Current Affairs Magazine Programmes' department (known internally by the acronym CAMP). Here, a different sense of purpose prevailed. Topicality was a central concern: insights, revelations, gossipy morsels – all the stuff that might cast fresh light on contemporary life in a not-too-heavy kind of way. In practical terms, the shift meant the series had its own researcher for the first

time – someone charged with digging deeper into the past life of each guest. It meant a greater willingness – and a greater ability – to make waves.

Back in 1967, it had been decreed that *DID* should ‘steer clear of politicians and if, exceptionally, they are used to keep them off matters of current controversy’ [23]. By 1989, the roster of politicians appearing went so far as to include the unrepentant fascist Lady Diana Mosley – though not, as originally planned, on the eve of Yom Kippur. The Controller of Radio 4 rebuffed criticisms of her invitation by explaining he thought it vital that the generations born since the 1930s ‘should recognise the kind of thinking that endorsed the rise of Nazi Germany’. If that proved controversial, so be it. ‘In the last few years,’ he added, ‘the brief of the programme has changed’ [24]. Even if *DID* was seen by Mass Observation diarists a decade later as a programme that still kept firmly ‘within bounds’, it was a subtly more muscular, probing beast compared with what had gone before.

4. Music and *Bildung*

What of the discs on which the series was supposedly based? What role did *they* now have in this new emotional regime? By implication, certainly, the BBC’s decision to shift the series sideways into a current affairs production department downgraded the importance of the musical element. Or rather, downgraded it *further*. For its role was evolving anyway. In 1986 an editorial meeting concluded that it ‘had become much less important’. At that point, the reason given was that Michael Parkinson’s own interest in music ‘was minimal’ [25]. But this was much more than a matter of personality. From a producer’s point of view, the length of a musical track was always conveniently extendable – or, of course, squeezable – in order to ensure a programme ‘comes in on time’, as the jargon goes. By the 1990s, the general rule-of-

thumb was that each edition would include about 28 minutes of talk and 12 minutes of music. But it's not hard to see that a long-term trend towards revelatory interviews put more pressure on those 12 minutes of music than on the chunks of speech surrounding them. At the very least, there was an increasing danger they would be seen – even by those who made the programme – as inconvenient boulders in a stream of sustained questioning.

So clear was the direction of travel during the 1980s and 1990s, we might reasonably wonder why the music wasn't dramatically pared back, or even dispensed with altogether. But it wasn't. Indeed, there had in the recent past been a shift towards *enhancing* the profile of the music within the programme: in 1977 it was extended by several minutes, explicitly to allow each piece of music to run longer. This merits some explanation, since it also speaks to the emotional ethos of *DID*.

One obvious justification for the endurance of the musical selection is that it has always been the discs that provide the 'prompt' for disclosing various episodes in the life of the guest: the aural equivalent, perhaps, of flicking through a photo-album to recall and talk about the past. Music, John Sloboda reminds us, is an especially powerful 'evoker of other times and other places'. The ability of guests on *DID* to use music to 'illustrate appropriately his or her life story' is therefore 'no accident', he concludes. When the selected music is heard, the key questions that might arise in the mind of the guest are these: 'When have I heard this music before? How was I feeling at the time I experienced this music? What personal events, feelings, reactions am I reminded of by this music?' (2000: 111–13). These, naturally enough, are the same basic questions that any programme presenter would wish to hear answered – though, thanks to the presence of the music, they need not be articulated verbally, and

repetitively, episode after episode. The questions can, to some extent, remain unspoken.

So far, so good. But it's worth pointing out that for much of *DID*'s history, guests would be talking in the studio without actually hearing the records being played: music was only edited in *after* the recording of the conversation. Which meant, of course, that 'other times and other places' were not really being evoked by the music at all – at least, not in the psychological or emotional sense that Sloboda identifies. In this respect, the decision in 1985 to change the programme's recording procedures, so that guests henceforth heard the music they had chosen while they were being interviewed, is highly significant. It marked a subtle but important shift in the programme's ability to induce in its guests a more spontaneous, more emotionally-charged series of responses. If the programme has become, in Bill Schwarz's words, more 'determinedly frank', it is in part the consequence of seemingly banal production decisions such as this: small but accumulating tweaks in technique that allowed the BBC to translate a more general climate of emotional honesty into something detectable on the nation's airwaves.

That's not the end of it, though. For the music on *DID* has always been more than an acoustic prompt for its guests. I would like to argue that it plays a role, too, in nurturing a sense of what it is to be a good citizen – something the BBC has historically regarded as its core mission. By this I mean not so much that old Reithian and somewhat forbidding notion of 'Uplift', but rather a less sharply-defined version of what the Germans call *Bildung*. The notion of continuous self-cultivation through the harmonious combination of rational and artistic impulses lay at the heart of Reith's conception of broadcasting back in the 1920s (see Hendy 2013). And it comes through loud and clear, over fifty years later, in a 1982 internal memo in which

Monica Sims, the Controller of BBC Radio 4 – and thus the woman ultimately responsible for *DID* – argued against plans by the Corporation’s journalists to turn her mixed speech network into a rolling-news service:

The amount of music on the present Radio 4 is very small... A few listeners would prefer no music at all but the majority enjoy the small amount provided... Achieving sufficient variety of mood to sustain interest on a speech network requires careful scheduling and music can be a great asset in achieving variety. Radio 4 appeals to the ‘all round’ cultured human being... The Reithian principle of introducing listeners to areas they would not choose for themselves infuses the whole idea of Radio 4. [26]

Underlying this is the idea that Radio 4 was not just *for* the ‘all round’ cultured human being: Sims also noted that it ‘broadened the span of interests’ and ‘showed us that the world is wider than we’d thought’. The clear implication is that it actually helped *create* that ‘all-round cultured human being’ in the first place [27].

Music in Radio 4, then, has had a small but significant role in re-balancing the overall, somewhat talk-heavy, news-heavy flavour of its output. Indeed, the aim of achieving a ‘balanced’ output in order to nurture ‘balanced’ citizens has always dominated the thinking of those who run the network, those who are paid by the national press to review it, and those of us who habitually listen at home. I have already mentioned the senior BBC Radio executive talking in 1971 of the need to retain ‘familiar landmarks’ as a counterbalance to change. But in 1973 we also find the *Daily Telegraph*’s critic Sylvia Clayton worrying at the effect of too much speech and not enough music in the then relatively new Radio 4 schedule. The real problem, she suggested, was that so much of the speech on air was relentlessly concerned with

various malaises in the world at large. ‘I am not suggesting that radio should avoid programmes about problems,’ she wrote. But ‘the recently imposed new pattern of listening, which separates the spoken word of Radio 4 completely from the music to be found elsewhere, can produce a claustrophobic effect’: the listener, she complained, ‘now has to switch between channels if he wants a balanced diet’ [28]. She was writing just a few years after the Home Service had been re-launched as Radio 4, and memories of just how much more music there had been on the older network were still fresh in her mind. Of course, she was quite wrong to claim the new Radio 4 had *no* music at all, for as we know there was still, at the very least, the eight tracks regularly heard on *DID*, as well as a smattering of music on occasional series such as *These You Have Loved*, the *Daily Service*, and the odd concert programme or documentary. Even so, by the 1970s the network’s total *was* small, and smaller than it had been – which is precisely what made defending the continued presence of the music that remained all the more important.

As for the listeners, it’s noticeable that those same Mass Observation respondents who commented in 2001 on how *DID* avoided being voyeuristic often spontaneously drew attention to the importance of music to the programme’s appeal. ‘I usually like their choices’, one woman wrote: ‘usually we hear varied music and some surprises’. Another commented, ‘I enjoy hearing about the lives led by gifted, interesting people’ – before adding ‘and also their choice of music’. A third respondent enjoyed the programme not just for ‘the things people are prepared to discuss’ but also very specifically for ‘their idiosyncrasies of choice’ [29]. For listeners, then, the music was not just incidental or marginal to the talk: it spoke emotional truths of its own. That is the context in which, in 1977, the then Controller

Ian McIntyre ruled that *DID* be extended by at least five minutes specifically ‘to fit in more music’ [30].

I would suggest that this extra temporal space for music on *DID* was not being protected editorially by BBC apparatchiks in a cynical attempt to respond dumbly to audience pressure, nor was it merely an attempt to create the *impression* of variety in Radio 4’s schedule. Rather, it reflected a genuine recognition among public service broadcasters that life is ‘a blend’, as the *Daily Telegraph* put it in a 1992 review of *DID*, of ‘the extraordinary and the ordinary - of gardening as well as politics’. People’s life-stories make sense when they, too, are seen (or in this case, heard) ‘in the round’, articulated in terms of both virtue and pleasure, work and play, words and music [31].

5. Identity-formation

To pull some of these threads together, let me draw on some work by the British psychotherapist Susie Orbach. She has argued that insufficient attention has been paid to the workplace as a site of our emotional identity-formation. Therapists scrutinise our private worlds and our moments of rest or play. But in terms of hours spent and relationships forged, she reminds us that work ‘is where many of us live’ (2008: 14). As Orbach suggests, the reality of Freud’s notion that labour and love combined are the ingredients for a life that ‘manages ordinary unhappiness’ is neatly revealed in the simple act of listening to *DID*. When guests talk about themselves, she writes, ‘we notice that the balance of their passions runs quite evenly down pathways of work, hobbies and intimate life... they conceptualise their whole life, their scientific endeavour, their acting, their writing, their political activity and its relation to the rest of their lives’ (ibid: 15).

How exactly does this melange of passions, this conceptualisation of a ‘whole life’, actually manifest itself on air? Sometimes – when a guest is hopelessly buttoned-up and the questions she faces utterly banal – it is revealed only unwittingly. Take this exchange from 1978, between the presenter Roy Plomley and Margaret Thatcher (see Tia DeNora's chapter in this volume for a contracted interpretation of this interview):

Plomley: You were born in Grantham, in Lincolnshire. That’s quite a small town, isn’t it?

Thatcher: Yes, a small town, and very much a community. I loved living in a town where everyone knew everyone else.

Plomley: And you lived in a flat above your father’s grocer’s shop – right on the Great North Road.

Thatcher: Between the Great North Road and the Great North Railway. The lorries used to rumble past at night, and if we went for a weekend in the country with friends, I used to stay awake – it was too quiet.

Plomley: You weren’t an only child, were you?

Thatcher: No, fortunately; I have an elder sister, for which I am eternally grateful. When you've got problems, there's nothing like close relatives.

Plomley: Your forebears had been craftsmen and tradesmen: one was an organ maker.

Thatcher: Great Uncle John! As a great treat, we used to go and stay with him at weekends sometimes...

(Plomley 1982: 187).

And so it goes on, with Plomley asking the future Prime Minister about what subjects motivated her at school, where she went for holidays, her hobbies as a student... It's teeth-grinding stuff – a classic example of what Bill Schwarz would call the 'weirdly genteel'. Yet, no matter how excruciating this might have been to witness, it certainly revealed *something* of the way her political outlook was inseparable from her background and upbringing: a taste for self-reliance, a small-town mind-set, even a hint of insomnia – all tantalisingly suggested in three minutes or less. In a format such as this even the most emotionally ungenerous of guests, it seems, can offer a few emotional truths, despite themselves.

When a *DID* guest comes along who is considerably more reflective and articulate, the self-conceptualisation of his or her whole life through the musical choices being made – and the narration that accompanies them – becomes all the more audible. In 2000 the cultural theorist Stuart Hall spoke of his admiration for

Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Henry James and George Eliot, and selected music from Bach, and Puccini, as well as Billie Holiday, Bob Marley, Marvin Gaye, Wynton Marsalis and Miles Davis. As Bill Schwarz points out, there's plenty in that particular mix which testifies 'to the historical experience of servitude in the making of the modern world': the musical choices are 'black, both in the sense of the particularity of the history they articulate and more directly in terms of their authorship'. But, Schwarz continues, they are not 'exclusively, racially black – black in the blood.... They possess a greater reach and mobility than that'. Hall said of Miles Davis that 'he put his finger on my soul', and that his compositions 'matched my own feelings'. As Hall himself had explained through his eloquent comments, the music had fully shaped his imagination across the years of his life (2005: 199).

Schwarz chooses the example of Stuart Hall because he wants to take issue with an earlier published analysis, which had suggested Hall's appearance on *DID* proved him to be 'more accepted and honoured by the establishment than he would wish to recognize' (ibid: 177). Instead, Schwarz asserts, Hall is skilfully using the occasion to convey something of the complexity of his cultural affinities. But I would go further than that. For Schwarz implies that the achievement in conveying this complexity is entirely Hall's – that it comes *despite* the programme, rather than because of it. The 20 minutes or so allowed for 'chatting about life, music, one book and one luxury', Schwarz writes, offers a format ill-disposed towards the idea of serious, discursive conversation. If Hall does briefly become serious and discursive, the effect is 'unsettling', an intrusion. Hall is breaking through.

Without denigrating the guest's own performance here, I would suggest – contra Schwarz - that Hall's achievement actually comes *because* of the programme format, rather than despite it. It is in the fleeting references, the passing hints, the

lightly-worn commentary on the musical choices – all of which constitute the programme’s essential style - that we find the emotional and intellectual self being revealed with remarkable delicacy and efficiency. To borrow Orbach’s psychotherapeutic phraseology, we hear the multiple aspects or ‘pathways’ of a whole life being woven together before our ears. The music is not just punctuating episodes or prompting memories; it is the means through which the guest conceptualises his or her life (Orbach 2008: 15). In this respect, the format of the programme – with its evolved balance of music and speech, of gentle parrying and uncomfortable interrogation - provides a striking example of what Paddy Scannell and others, taking their cue from the psychologist J.J. Gibson, refer to as the ‘communicative affordances’ inherent in modern mass media (Scannell 2007: 141-142). By this I mean that the particular form of the medium in question does not fully constrain or brutally force participants to respond in one predetermined direction or another. Rather, it provides a palette of ‘useful, usable properties’ – features that are discoverable by those who experience it. The range of ‘usable’ properties might be narrow or wide; they might not always be fully utilised. But they are always there. And in this particular broadcast – with its misleadingly simple architecture of ‘easy’ conversation woven around music - they surely provide the basis for programming of genuine, if under-appreciated, cultural value.

6. Conclusion

A final thought. It’s possible that *DID* would still have survived on the British airwaves even if it remained to this day locked firmly into the weirdly genteel mode in which it largely operated under Roy Plomley’s stewardship. As some of those extracts from *Mass Observation* remind us, we should never underestimate the British

public's taste for drawing a veil over difficult emotions or thoughts. Yet it is more likely that without BBC Radio making the subtle yet significant changes that it did – less scripting, more spontaneity; less chumminess, more friction; requiring guests to respond to their chosen music while on air, and so on – the programme would have died sometime in the 1990s, along with that generation of listeners who were first hooked in 1942.

These are the kind of subtle changes media historians often grapple with when faced with the nature of broadcasting. As Scannell has observed, it is through the retuning and repositioning of programmes that we sense that most elusive of historical phenomena at work: 'generational time, the regenerative work of generational change and renewal'. Programme titles – indeed whole network schedules – remain exactly the same. They do so precisely in order to hold everything else in place. For there *is* something going on. Broadcasting cannot repeat itself completely. It is also always defined by assumptions about the audience for whom it is conceived. And audiences do not themselves stay still across the decades. So new wine gets poured into old bottles. And we witness the fundamental temporal dialectic of radio, 'the interplay of the noisy bustle of event-driven present times, with the silent motionless, unchanging time of *longue durée*' (Scannell 2009: 89-95).

Broadcasting, if it is to remain meaningful to its audiences, always needs to sense (and *make* sense of) the tiniest shifts in public mood, in standards of behaviour, values, and tastes – not simply to replicate them, but to do something infinitely more complex. It metabolises the full range of opinions and dispositions, combines them with the instinctive insights and values of the broadcast professionals, and finally returns them to the public in subtly different, but still recognisable, shape. It's not really a linear process, since it happens ceaselessly, always feeding back on itself.

That is how programmes evolve yet remain true to themselves. As with many other Radio 4 series of a certain age – the *Archers*, say, or the *Today* programme – *DID* survives not because it is set in aspic but precisely because it *has* moved forward with the times, albeit slowly, organically, almost imperceptibly

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