

# EXPERIENCES OF A MUSICOLOGIST

By Liveryman  
Professor Denis Stevens

**OUR ILLUSTRIOUS COMPANY INCLUDES AMONG ITS MEMBERS VARIOUS EMINENT MUSICIANS, instrument-makers and teachers. I have had the pleasure of working closely with many of them, since a musicologist's career can cross many paths. At the age of 14 I published a somewhat derivative and highly selective Dictionary of Organ Stops, yet in that pre-computer era the margins of each type-written page were somehow justified. A few years later when I joined the RAF Intelligence Branch I was officially styled a computer and posted to India.**

Between those events I played in two orchestras, one of which, liberally besprinkled with young ladies, I led for some time. Thus teaching myself form, I felt it possible to produce a reasonable programme note for a concert featuring Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto. A great point was made of the pivotal B which (as a brief bassoon solo) leads from the first movement to the second. At the concert, however, the bassoonist fell asleep, and the only audible bee was the one in my bonnet which persistently hummed 'No musicology'.

Since my service in the east wrapped me regularly in lengthy monsoons, I would spend my leisure hours transcribing early notations by the light of a hurricane lamp. In Calcutta, I occasionally played in its multinational symphony orchestra, whose president, Sir Henry Richardson (a member of our Company) persuaded me when we returned home to join the Livery. I have never regretted it.

At Oxford Sir Hugh Allen, a sometime governor of the BBC, asked about my career plans, and learning of my admiration for Auntie he growled 'She will bleed you white and throw the empty shell away'. Thus forewarned I began broadcasting as a music presenter, while the first-fruits of my scholarly endeavours saw the light as Volume 1 of 'Musica Britannica'. I had transcribed it not on roller-skates but on skis, for my violin teacher had taken me to the Swiss resort of Adelboden. Meeting me on the homeward journey via Montreux Dr Percy Scholes asked what I was in real life. 'A musicologist', I replied with some enthusiasm. Totally unperturbed, he asked only one further question: 'Have you got a private income?'

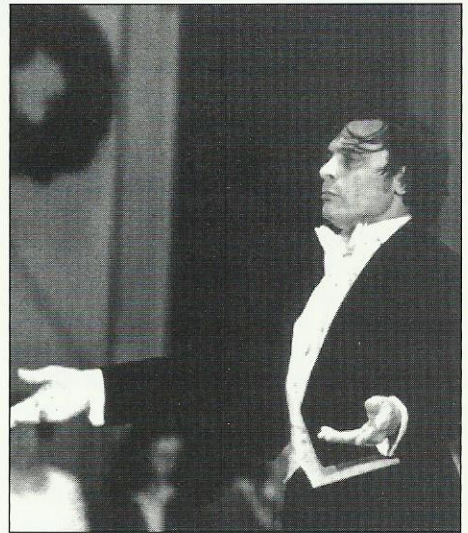
This I subsequently succeeded in arranging. After playing for a short

time in the Philharmonia Orchestra I moved to the BBC as senior producer of pre-classical music, and had the good fortune to employ many excellent musicians and musicologists, foreign as well as English. I stayed for five years and left before they could bleed me white. In fact I bled them, for on programme contract I could range over the entire corporation network including Transcription and Television.

There was invariably something to amuse one, as when my dear friend Alec Robertson found himself in violent altercation with the rebarbative Professor Dent, who referred to Broadcasting House as 'a vast and labyrinthine public convenience'. Sir Thomas Beecham, contributing to the 'History of Music in Sound' asked at what epoch the series began. 'Byzantine neums, Sir Thomas'. 'Oh really?' came the laconic repartee. 'And why did you not begin with Jubal?'

I pursued my career by sedulously avoiding office work and disappearing regularly into the British Library, from which I coaxed untold (and then unknown) treasures of the past. By 1952 I began to produce Vivaldi concertos, not perhaps by the score (for they were all in parts) but certainly by the dozen, and the world heard for the first time the complete sets of Op. 3, Op. 8 and Op. 9, thus anticipating the modern CD. There I arranged to be accompanied by a full eighteenth-century continuo section, led by the organ as Vivaldi intended. Other gems scintillated from centuries afar and from distant nations. They were introduced by experts, with infinitely more variety than one hears in today's sad-sack apology for broadcasting. Although there are one or two clever dicks on the air, it is usually just hot without being in any way refreshing. Formerly the problem was dog-eared leaves, but now it is one of bent pages and pragmatic pratfalls.

Invited to teach in America I developed what was for me a new aspect of musicology: a production-line of PhDs. But life was never dull, for I returned to Europe every summer and continued with my recording, concert and festival work. Deeply involved in both academe and conducting, I may well have had the best of both worlds. Many have made more records, but nobody, to the best of my knowledge, has approached my historical range, for I cheerfully dealt with anything from about 1200 up to 1850 or so. Sir William Glock asked me to introduce



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early music to the Proms, von Karajan brought me to Salzburg, and Dr Walter Strebi to Lucerne. Sought out regularly as a consultant, I demonstrated that musicology could be of help in many ways

Sensing a certain lack of familiarity with bibliography in the recording industry, I set up a company of my own. My secret was the same as it always has been. For every hundred scores I read, only one is selected, and this assists in maintaining standards which in early music are often on very thin ice indeed.

There were demands for television and film music: a medieval epic needed some of the 'Laudes regiae' and other dainty morsels from the past. The scores reached London in good time, and my forty singers rattled the chimères of the Château de Chinon in some of the most exciting title music ever heard. The time-link between my pioneer stereo recording in 1956 and the the recent 'Messiah' with the Mormon Tabernacle Choir could not have been achieved without my friend and colleague the late John de Sola Mosely, surely one of the most musical and brilliant sound engineers we have known.

I am happy to say that two of our Honorary Freeman have given me notable help: Sir Michael Tippett, who contributed a valuable chapter to my 'History of Song'; and Lord Menuhin, whose friendship and encouragement have spurred me on to constant service. If I have been able to help musicians in their own questing careers, I must admit that there was always a slightly selfish and curious element in my planning. I simply wanted to know what the music sounded like! Only by performing can one be absolutely sure.