

# Cranks and Criminals: BBC music programming and British audiences, 1922–1939\*

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In England, in the early 1920s, if you tuned the cat's whisker on your crystal receiving set just right, once each week for thirty minutes you might be able to hear Marconi technicians sending their experimental radio broadcasts from a hut at Writtle. From these humble, impromptu beginnings, radio developed rapidly through the 1920s. In late 1922 the British Broadcasting Company was formed from an alliance of the six major wireless manufacturers. Daily transmissions of news, talks and music quickly captured a large audience, and within the decade broadcasting in Britain was transformed into an efficient, professional public service, an instrument of ever-increasing social and cultural authority.

Radio was one of several new sound technologies that changed the listening experience in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, together with player-piano and gramophone, bringing all types of music before a much wider audience. The BBC's programmes, which developed in complexity and professionalism during the 1920s, reached a vast number of listeners. We can estimate the size of radio audiences because a licence had to be purchased for each receiving set. Figure 1 shows the dramatic growth of licences at this time. Scholars have speculated that 'in the early years of broadcasting there were five times as many unlicensed as licensed sets in use ... After 1928 no programmes were heard by fewer than a million listeners and some attracted 15 million.'<sup>1</sup>

The development of the BBC in the interwar years has been documented meticulously in studies such as Asa Briggs' five-volume *History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom* and Scannell and Cardiff's *A Social History of British Broadcasting*.<sup>2</sup> One aspect of the BBC's early history has remained problematic, however; the reception of its programmes by listeners. Systematic listener research was not introduced into the BBC until October 1936. For the first

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Crisell, *An Introductory History of British Broadcasting* (London: Routledge, 1997) 13.

<sup>2</sup> Asa Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, 5 vols (1961; Oxford: OUP, 1995); Paddy Scannell and David Cardiff, *A Social History of British Broadcasting*, vol. 1, *Serving the Nation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

Figure 1: BBC Radio Licences and Staff Numbers, 1926–39 \*

Year	Radio licences	BBC staff	Year	Radio licences	BBC staff
1926	2,178,259	773	1933	5,973,758	1747
1927	2,395,183	989	1934	6,780,569	2031
1928	2,628,392	1064	1935	7,403,109	2518
1929	2,956,736	1109	1936	7,960,573	3350
1930	3,411,910	1194	1937	8,479,900	3676
1931	4,330,735	1287	1938	8,908,900	4060
1932	5,263,017	1512	1939	9,082,666	5100

\* Asa Briggs, *The Golden Age of Wireless*, vol. 2 of *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, 5 vols (1961; Oxford: OUP, 1995) 417.

fourteen years of its existence, the BBC appeared to be broadcasting into a void, with minimal feedback from its audience. Although the organization did receive many letters from listeners, these were not taken very seriously—letter writers were dismissed as ‘ego-maniacs, cranks, axe-grinders or the incorrigibly idle who can find nothing better to do.’<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, many of these letters have survived in various archives and, as I hope to show, they provide an extraordinarily rich resource in determining patterns of reception of BBC programmes prior to listener research.

The BBC’s lack of information concerning its audiences seems almost heinous in today’s market-driven environment. Significantly, it was not then considered to be problematic, because the BBC was guided not by audience response but rather by an overwhelming sense of public duty. The organisation claimed the highest standards of moral integrity, aesthetic authority and social responsibility, its management believing that they knew far better than the British public what was best for British ears. This approach was closely connected with the character of the BBC’s director general, Sir John Reith. Reith’s visionary principles were set out in his early book *Broadcast over Britain* (1924):

I think it will be admitted by all that to have exploited so great a scientific invention for the purpose and pursuit of entertainment alone would have been a prostitution of its powers and an insult to the character and intelligence of the people ... As we conceive it, our responsibility is to carry into the greatest possible number of homes everything that is best in every department of human knowledge, endeavour, and achievement, and to avoid the things which are, or may be, hurtful. It is occasionally indicated to us that we are apparently setting out to give the public what we think they need—and not what they want, but few know what they want, and very few what they need ... In any case it is better to over-estimate the mentality of the public, than to under-estimate it.<sup>4</sup>

The opinions of BBC staff on the quality of particular broadcasts carried infinitely greater weight than those of outsiders. At a 1935 Programme Board meeting, the Controller of

<sup>3</sup> Val Gielgud, memo to R. H. Eckersley, 18 Nov. 1933; quoted in Briggs, *History of Broadcasting*, vol. 2, 244.

<sup>4</sup> J.C.W. Reith, *Broadcast over Britain* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1924) 17, 34.

Programmes, Alan Dawnay, commented that favourable reports of the Silver Jubilee broadcasts by the press and public were 'not the final test. The real criterion is what we ourselves round this table think of our work.'<sup>5</sup>

Maurice Gorham, editor of the BBC's *Radio Times* journal (1933–41), reflected that self-satisfaction reigned supreme in such a climate. Gorham later recalled:

Nobody knew what listeners liked, or even which programmes they listened to... In programme-planning circles they talked easily about contrasts and alternatives, this kind of audience and that kind, successes and failures, good programmes and bad; and it was all based on what the BBC officials themselves thought, plus various odd impressions gathered from correspondence (which is a notoriously unreliable guide), Press comment that nobody in the BBC was supposed to read or at least to take seriously, and occasional *obiter dicta* from friends, charwomen, and people met in the train.<sup>6</sup>

In the absence of reliable listener research until the mid 1930s, the BBC maintained a very particular, high-minded conception of its listeners which reflected its own ideologies of culture and class.<sup>7</sup> A 1930s Labour politician told Parliament that the BBC was 'run very largely by people who do not know the working class, do not understand the working class point of view, but are seeking evidently to mould the working class.'<sup>8</sup> A vignette 'The Man in the Market Square,' which appeared in a 1930 edition of the *Radio Times*, picturesquely conjures the BBC's imagined listener:

Saturday night in a Yorkshire market town ... An enterprising wireless merchant has set up his stall on the outskirts of the market, and a symphony ... is 'coming over.' Hardly the fare for a Saturday market night audience ... Reception, on the cheap set, is poor as well. Yet, close to the stall, half hidden in its canvas folds, a man lingers; a little man, down at heel, shabby, such as one might see by hundreds at the bars of country taverns or outside the employment bureaux of industrial towns ... He has been there for the past hour, motionless lest he should attract the unfriendly attention of the stall-keeper. Last Saturday night he was there also, and probably will be there next week ... He is absorbed in the music. The crowds jostle him, but he does not notice them. He is far away, in the studio, or the great hall, or wherever the symphony may be in progress. His head sunk on his shoulders, his ears strained to catch every note from the cheap instrument, he is for the moment completely happy ... Tonight, through the medium of a cheap wireless set in a public market, he has walked in Elysium.<sup>9</sup>

Enraptured by a symphony; walking in Elysium—our Yorkshire listener was well on the way to becoming a highbrow.

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Gorham, *Sound and Fury: Twenty-One Years in the BBC* (London: Percival Marshall, 1948) 52.

<sup>6</sup> Gorham, *Sound and Fury*, 59.

<sup>7</sup> What the BBC officials themselves thought reflected the particularly upper-middle class backgrounds of most BBC staff. BBC announcers, complete with evening dress and Oxbridge enunciation, projected a powerfully upper- and upper-middle-class identity. Maurice Gorham noted the ubiquity of recruitment from Oxford and Cambridge between the wars, and commented that BBC employment depended largely on 'where you were at school, your religion, your politics.' He emphasised that by the mid-1920s 'respectability had already stamped the BBC ... Dark suits were the rule and many of the staff wore black jackets and pin-striped trousers with black or neat check ties' (see Gorham, *Sound and Fury* 16, 50).

<sup>8</sup> Ien Ang, *Desperately Seeking the Audience* (London: Routledge, 1991) 108.

<sup>9</sup> C.H., 'The Man in the Market Square,' *Radio Times* 22 Aug. 1930: 384.

How far was the BBC's attempt to cultivate the 'man-in-the-street,' to enable listeners to appreciate good music, effective? To explore this, it is necessary to look more closely at these terms 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow,' because they are of particular significance in examining the audience for BBC radio. These terms were derived 'from the phrenological terms "highbrowed" and "lowbrowed";' and by the turn of the twentieth century, had come to refer to the presence and absence of intellectual or aesthetic superiority and refinement. They were strongly value-laden terms, which 'defined and distinguished culture vertically'; highbrow was an honour, and lowbrow a reproach.<sup>10</sup>

Within the BBC, these terms took on more specific and limited associations, and their hierarchy of value was redefined. Lowbrows were still the subject of criticism, even disdain, from the BBC Music department. Many listeners proudly reclaimed this label, however, asserting their unaffectedness and honesty. In his article 'The Lowbrow Menace,' Edward Crankshaw reflected that 'as a term of abuse "lowbrow" could hardly be bettered, yet large numbers of enfranchised English men and women delight in using it in self-description.'<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, 'highbrow' remained a designation to aspire to, but simultaneously took on connotations of fraudulence, snobbery and pretension. 'To prefer Mozart to Gilbert and Sullivan ... is regarded as deliberate wickedness,' one commentator wrote in 1929.<sup>12</sup>

Richard Church offers a useful analogy in his *Radio Times* article 'Tar-Babies and Common Sense':

The highbrow is a person who insists upon a restricted diet of caviare; who scorns brown bread and bacon fat. Or he may be even more of a purist, fasting for three-quarters of the year until the autumn dews commence, when he goes barefoot down to Ditchling or Welwyn, and gathers mushrooms, picking them with his toes, and eating them raw ... On the other hand, the lowbrow is a fellow who cannot digest caviare, and to whom the virginal flavour of mushrooms is insipid. He becomes very sulky when he sees the other man enjoying these viands; and very ostentatiously he orders, and doggedly continues to order, sausage and mashed potato and porter.<sup>13</sup>

The BBC entertained hopes of enabling all listeners to appreciate superior types of music and drama, thus becoming highbrows. In a key *Radio Times* article, the BBC music critic Percy Scholes insisted that 'It pays to become a highbrow! ... The enjoyment of Highbrow music once gained is a lifetime's possession.'<sup>14</sup> And, indeed, the BBC had not entirely missed the mark in its vision of a highly disciplined, self-improving audience. Many listeners wrote of their hope of learning to understand 'good' music, and their gratitude for the BBC's educative slant. 'I think it is wonderful what the BBC is doing for us—not only in music but in many other directions—and they deserve nothing but our highest praise,' wrote G. Hutchinson to Scholes in 1924.<sup>15</sup> 'Why shouldn't the BBC educate us?' a Hertfordshire listener demanded. 'I

<sup>10</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1988) 222.

<sup>11</sup> Edward Crankshaw, 'The Lowbrow Menace,' *Radio Times* 7 Apr. 1933: 6.

<sup>12</sup> Raymond Mortimer, 'Pity the Poor Highbrow,' *Radio Times* 2 Aug. 1929: 227.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Church, 'Tar-Babies and Common Sense,' *Radio Times* 1 Nov. 1929: 318.

<sup>14</sup> Percy Scholes, ' "Highbrows" and "Lowbrows": A Frank Discussion,' *Radio Times* 14 Dec. 1923: 439.

<sup>15</sup> G. Hutchinson, letter to Scholes, 3 Jan. 1924, File 'Highbrows and Lowbrows II,' Scholes Collection, National Library of Canada [hereafter NLC]. Regrettably, it has not been possible to locate the copyright holders of these letters to Scholes.

ask the BBC to help us to acquire a knowledge of all things so that we may look upon life with that sense of fitness that will enable us to rise ever above ourselves, and in doing so we shall have lived to some purpose.<sup>16</sup> Critic Basil Maine labelled this group the 'conscience-stricken listeners,' troubled by guilt at their inability to understand the requisite classics.<sup>17</sup> Bach was a particular stumbling block for some, one listener confessing, 'I can appreciate Wagner's music almost without exception, Chopin, and most of Schumann ... I have a conscience, however, about my inability to care for Bach. I feel the fault is mine. How can I remedy it?'<sup>18</sup> It was this earnest, self-improving segment of the audience which bolstered the BBC's self-confidence in its policies of musical enlightenment. The highbrows were also antagonistic towards lowbrows and popular music. This was at its strongest in a letter from J. Sellers of London:

If you are really asked to perform the frightful trash which has been the main feature of the musical art of the programmes lately it is very obvious that you should take not the slightest notice of such requests. People asking for such are not the people to have any say whatsoever in the musical programmes. They know nothing of music, neither do they know what is good for themselves, and to pander to them is to throw away a glorious opportunity of giving real enjoyment and edification to millions.<sup>19</sup>

Members of the opposing camp were resentful of attempts to educate them, and believed the programmes were too heavily weighted towards serious 'highbrow' works. The first edition of the *Radio Times* in September 1923 included a letter from a Birmingham listener criticising programmes from a 'lowbrow' perspective:

Do [the BBC] think the majority of their 'listeners' are really interested in such lectures as The Decrease of Malaria in Great Britain; How to Become a Veterinary Surgeon; the New Rent Act? ... Would it not be sufficient to have only one thoroughly classical night a week? ... Frankly, it seems to me that the BBC are mainly catering for the 'listeners' who own expensive sets and pretend to appreciate and understand only highbrow music.<sup>20</sup>

A London listener protested at the 'tendency among some of the "superior" officials to "educate" us,' and insisted 'We shall resist forcible feeding.'<sup>21</sup> Mr. Pickard of London agreed. 'Cannot all classes have something to their liking nearly every night in the programme, instead of this 80 per cent classical, secular & general high brow stuff? ... We don't like it and don't wish to be forced to like it.'<sup>22</sup>

Complaints persisted about the amount of broadcast time devoted to serious music. Chamber music was deemed particularly annoying. 'Nowadays we get too many "high-brow" programmes, and I have not yet met a person who would listen to chamber music. In spite of detailed descriptions, we are unable to understand it,' wrote one listener,<sup>23</sup> while another

<sup>16</sup> A.F.L., letter to editor, 'What the Other Listener Thinks,' *Radio Times* 17 Aug. 1928: 283.

<sup>17</sup> Basil Maine, *Reflected Music and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1930) 131.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Maine, *Reflected Music*, 131.

<sup>19</sup> J. Sellers, letter to Scholes and L. Stanton Jeffreys, 27 Dec. 1923, File 'Highbrow & Lowbrow II,' Scholes Collection, NLC.

<sup>20</sup> Letter to editor, *Radio Times*, 28 Sep. 1923: 12.

<sup>21</sup> A.B., letter to editor, 'What the Other Listener Thinks,' *Radio Times* 13 July 1928: 59.

<sup>22</sup> A. Pickard, letter to Scholes, 19 Jan. 1924, File 'Highbrow & Lowbrow II,' Scholes Collection, NLC.

<sup>23</sup> Letter to the editor, 'What the Other Listener Thinks,' *Radio Times* 13 July 1923: 59.

insisted that 'the average listener has little fancy for broadcast opera, and less still for high-class music. And, deplorable as these facts may appear, they nevertheless represent the views of a majority.'<sup>24</sup>

Percy Scholes was BBC Music Critic for much of the 1920s, and developed a large following through his lively weekly broadcast talks. The highbrow/lowbrow dichotomy was one of his main concerns. Scholes was severe towards intolerance, from both sides, yet believed there were clear standards of musical quality—represented best in the works of the Austro-German masters from Bach to Brahms—which remained indisputable. To the listener who wrote that people had 'wit enough to understand what they like,' he responded with the BBC party line:

Of course people understand 'what they like.' But that is not to say that they always like the right thing. Many people like ugly, vulgar dress, and make themselves hideous therewith ... There is good taste and bad taste in dress and jewellery and pictures and novels, and in the same way there is good taste and bad taste in music ... Broadcasting is giving everybody a marvellous opportunity of listening to heaps of music—good, bad and indifferent. And in listening to it they should, if they are intelligent people, not seek simply to be amused, but also to distinguish between what is good and true and beautiful, on the one hand, and what is merely ear-tickling and sentiment-moving on the other.<sup>25</sup>

In a further effort to encourage musical tolerance, Scholes proposed to remove the stigma of the highbrow and lowbrow labels by abandoning these terms. He conducted a contest in which listeners were to suggest new designations free of insult. Tolerance was the key, he counselled his audience:

Remember that sensible Highbrows, do not at all object to simple, tuneful music, provided it is good; but are prepared to listen to less simple music also. Remember that the so-called Lowbrows do not at all object to good music provided it is simple, but (at present) are prepared to enjoy simple, tuneful music, whether it is good or bad.<sup>26</sup>

Listeners responded enthusiastically to Scholes' challenge, and over several weeks, a variety of terms was suggested:

Cranks	Criminals
The Chosen	The Philistines
Bachers	Offenbachers
Tyrants	Tolerants
Dryasdusts	Grovellers
Percys	Johns
Classical	Homely
Rolls Royces	Fords

<sup>24</sup> Letter to the editor, 'What the Other Listener Thinks,' *Radio Times* 13 July 1923: 59.

<sup>25</sup> Percy Scholes, 'Weekly Musical Criticism,' 20 Dec. 1923, t.s., BBC Written Archives Centre (WAC) microfilm, reproduced by kind permission of the BBC WAC.

<sup>26</sup> Percy Scholes, 'Weekly Musical Criticism,' 21 Feb. 1924, BBC WAC microfilm, reproduced with permission.

The winner, selected by Scholes, was an offering much less witty, although certainly inoffensive to both factions:

Complexors

Simplexors<sup>27</sup>

The BBC persisted gamely with its policy of cultural enlightenment through the 1920s and early '30s. Yet sources both within and outside the BBC make it clear that many questioned the policy's effectiveness and took exception to its inherent paternalism. As D.L. LeMahieu notes in his book *A Culture for Democracy*, it was increasingly apparent that the BBC's programmes were 'based more upon the audience it hoped to discover, than the one it feared actually existed.'<sup>28</sup>

For critic Basil Maine, the culture-seeking man-in-the-street was a figment of the BBC's imagination:

If the man in the street is still in the street, he certainly does not greet his friend with 'Hullo Bill, what did yer fink of the Idun Kwortett lorst nah-it?' Nor was ever a street-corner brawl begun through a divergence of view as to the merits of Hugo Wolf as a song-writer. Imagine the dismay and the embarrassment of a Hyde Park crowd on being addressed on the subject of 'The Tyranny of Sonata Form.'<sup>29</sup>

Not surprisingly, BBC audiences never took to the terms complexors and simplexors, instead ending the interwar era with as great a mutual dislike and highbrow/lowbrow intolerance as they had begun it. By 1930, some BBC staff had begun to challenge the organisation's lack of empirical evidence about the public's response to broadcasts. Val Gielgud, as head of the Drama department, complained 'It must be a source of considerable disquiet to many people besides myself to think that it is quite possible that a very great deal of our money and time and effort may be expended on broadcasting into a void.'<sup>30</sup> Director General John Reith, among others, was reluctant to engage in listener research, fearing, perhaps, that the public would drag the BBC down to its own, lower, level. Director of Talks Charles Siepmann, responding to Gielgud's challenge, emphasised that 'However complete and effective any survey we launch might be, I should still be convinced that our policy and programme building should be based first and last upon our own conviction as to what should and should not be broadcast.'<sup>31</sup>

It became clear, nevertheless, as programme complexity and sophistication increased, that reliable information on listener's tastes and habits was necessary to programme planning. In October 1936 the Listener Research department was established, led by R.J.E. Silvey. Unhappily, for those who had seen in the BBC the chance to bring the man-in-the-street to Bach, the figures proved that they had laboured largely in vain. Variety, which included musical comedy, revue and vaudeville programmes, claimed the largest audiences by far, between forty and sixty-eight per cent of listeners in January 1939.<sup>32</sup> In 1937-38, seventy per cent of listeners

<sup>27</sup> [Percy Scholes], [Mar. 1924], t.s., File 'Highbrow & Lowbrow I,' Scholes Collection, NLC.

<sup>28</sup> D.L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain between the Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) 152.

<sup>29</sup> Maine, *Reflected Music*, 143-44.

<sup>30</sup> Val Gielgud, memo, 'Listeners' Reactions to Programmes,' 12 May 1930; qtd. in Briggs, *History of Broadcasting*, vol. 2, 241.

<sup>31</sup> C. Siepmann, memo, 26 May 1930; qtd. in Briggs, *History of Broadcasting*, vol. 2, 242.

<sup>32</sup> Figures apply to listening during peak times. General Listening Barometer, Jan. 1939, file R9/5/5, BBC WAC.

surveyed wanted Variety to occupy a greater proportion of the programmes. Serious music, by comparison, attracted only a small proportion of the listening public; in January 1939, opera attracted between eleven and twenty-three per cent of listeners, and chamber music only three per cent.

As a result of this evidence, from late 1938 programme planners worked towards a noticeably lighter style of transmissions, reducing the output of serious music and exercising restraint in the broadcast of challenging experimental works. The influence of music appreciation on BBC programming entered a slow decline around this time. Reith's departure in 1938 can be seen as a signpost pointing away from the moral zeal of the early BBC and towards an increasingly pragmatic understanding of radio's role. In the late 1930s and beyond, cultural authority came to be seen as vested in the market. 'The new moguls would be the sociologists, economists and market researchers, not the taste-makers,' Banfield writes.<sup>33</sup> It may be posited that, by 1939, despite the most fervent attempts on the part of the BBC to place him in finer surrounds, the man-in-the-street remained, by and large, in the street.

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<sup>33</sup> Stephen Banfield, personal communication, 7 Apr. 2000.