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A Mild National Emergency: Recording a feast with an unexpected outcome

Dr Tony Wakeford concludes his mini series linking British Council sponsored gramophone records in his collection with the documentary records in the collections at The National Archives.

At the twenty-ninth meeting of the music committee, held on Tuesday 14 April 1942, it was unanimously agreed that William Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast* would be the first recording undertaken by the British Council. The war had constrained the Council's ability to promote English culture overseas because of the inability of musicians to tour and hold concerts in mainland Europe and beyond. The switch to gramophone records was seen as an effective means of mitigating some of these constraints.[1]

His Master's Voice, C3330, Record 1, Side 1. (Photograph from the author's collection)

The choice of *Belshazzar's Feast* was an interesting one, it is a tumultuous and dramatic story with a score to match requiring a large orchestra, solo baritone, large chorus and brass bands. It was premiered in 1931 at the Leeds Festival to great acclaim.[2] The work portrays the famous story from 539 BC about a feast and the writing on the wall that leads to the fall of Babylonia. Osbert Sitwell compiled the text drawing mainly on the *Book of Daniel* and *Psalm 137*.

The story takes place in an atmosphere of barbaric and iniquitous prostration as Belshazzar, King of Babylonia, holds a great feast for a thousand of his lords, wives and concubines. They commit sacrilege by drinking wine from the Jewish sacred vessels and praising heathen gods. During the feast a hand appears and writes upon a wall. The written words translated that Belshazzar:

> had been weighed in the balances and found to be wanting. Thy kingdom is divided and will be given to the Medes and Persians.

Belshazzar is mysteriously slain, Babylonia falls, the Jews regain their freedom, and Darius the Medean takes the kingdom.[3]

The committee was very keen for the recording to be undertaken by the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Singers and enquiries were soon underway to organise arrangements for the recording. Oxford University Press, the publishers of Walton's works, agreed to contribute up to £500 towards the costs involved. Pamela Henn-Collins, the committee secretary, wrote to Arthur Bliss, the BBC director of music, to seek the corporation's interest and support for the project.

In his letter in early June 1942 Julian Herbage, the assistant director of music, replied that the BBC was very willing to assist with the project, but highlighted some constraints and made a counter suggestion. He pointed out that the BBC Singers were now less than 40 members and would not be adequate enough for the scale required for the recording. The BBC had collaborated very successfully with the Luton Choral Society for a recent broadcast and he suggested their inclusion. The recording would have to wait until after the upcoming Proms season.[4]

There was clearly a desire on the part of the committee to complete their first recording at the earliest opportunity, so the BBC's response was rather disappointing. Discussions continued but by the end of July no formal decision or agreement had been reached. Although there was an informal agreement with the BBC to record after the Proms season, there were issues around the availability of the Luton Choral Society. Walton suggested considering borrowing singers from either the Leeds or Huddersfield Choral Societies.

Henn-Collins decided to extend her enquiries and wrote to Philip Godlee at the Halle Concert Society in Manchester, seeking their interest and suggesting that a northern choir could be involved, with Walton conducting.[5] Godlee's reply was promising and agreed to seek a response from the society's committee as soon as possible. However, a month passed with no response and Henn-Collins wrote again to Godlee expressing a sense of urgency in reaching a decision.[6]

Godlee replied to Henn-Collins with a counter proposal that involved a public performance and BBC broadcast of *Belshazzar* with the Huddersfield Choral Society and the Halle Orchestra. The performance, in Huddersfield was to take place on 27 November and Godlee suggested a recording could be undertaken either before or after the performance.[7]

The Council's plans had been delayed and frustrated by circumstances and counter proposals and with no definite progress after nearly six months the music committee decided to postpone the recording until 1943, when it was hoped the BBC Singers would be up to strength and able to undertake this challenging work. The Gramophone Company would undertake the recording and estimated that it required two days to complete, so would not fit in with Godlee's proposal. Henn-Collins replied to Godlee explaining the reasons why the Council would not proceed with the project. However, she did suggest to Ernest Makeover, the committee chairman, that perhaps the Halle Orchestra could record a piece for the Council by way of softening the disappointment of the committee's decision.[8]

There then follows every historian's nightmare – a gap of over two months of missing correspondence, from 15 September to 30 November 1942. When the narrative resumes it is clear that there had been some significant developments that involved the Huddersfield Choral Society and the Liverpool Philharmonic Society. It is unknown how these arrangements came about but it is apparent that Henn-Collins had made every effort to ensure *Belshazzar's Feast* would be recorded sooner rather than later.

Part of the catalyst may have been her invitation to Huddersfield to hear the work performed in late November and that had clearly made an impression on her as the exploratory letter to the Huddersfield Choral Society shows:

> I have been doing some more work on the recording estimate for Belshazzar's Feast which we are very keen to do, particularly after hearing the choir on Friday night. [..] pick 100 voices, which is the most we think we can take without blasting the microphone to pieces. [..] Would you be so kind as to give the choir the British Council's heartiest congratulations on its performance last Friday.[9]

A few days later Henn-Collins wrote again to the Huddersfield Choral Society with a formal proposal for one-hundred of their members to record with the Liverpool

Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Walton in early January 1943. She pressed the society for a prompt reply:

> I am sorry to hurry you and the choir into a decision, but this is in the nature of a mild national emergency.[10]

The Huddersfield Choral Society promptly agreed to join the project and provide one-hundred choir members to take part.[11] Arrangements were then finalised with the Liverpool Philharmonic Society, which were much more complicated than when the music committee had first decided to record Walton's work. It had been agreed that the work would be conducted by Walton and recorded in Liverpool. The Gramophone Company required two days to record and so arrangements were made to hold a rehearsal and public concert[12] on 2 January 1943, with the first recording session on 3 January and the second session on 10 January 1943. This involved a lot of travelling for the Choral Society, with overnight accommodation on January 2 and then returning to Liverpool again on 10 January.[13]

His Master's Voice, ALP 1089, long playing reissue. (Photograph from the author's collection)

Despite the complicated arrangements the recording was successfully completed, after many months of changing options and negotiations. Twenty-eight recordings were made, 14 on 3 January and 14 on 10 Jan 1943, from which ten were selected for the final issue.[14] There was an apparent muddle over which take was used for side 10 (record 5) and review and sample copies were recalled. However, it turned out that the correct recording had been used. There were also issues with the labels with the Huddersfield Choral Society wrongly identified as the Huddersfield Choir. Although this was apparently corrected, record 4 and 5 in my set attribute Huddersfield Choir.

The recording was released in March 1943 on five 12 inch records by HMV, C3330-34 (or auto-coupled C7572-76), with a retail price of 28 shillings and 9 pence. It was reviewed in the *Gramophone* magazine where the reviewer WRA, whilst praising the recording, appeared rather ambivalent about the work itself:

> Well, the whole thing is a curiosity, and a remarkable feat. I don't much like it, but there are those that do. [..] it's all astonishing, and at times stunning: my highest respects to the choir.[15]

By contrast, when the recording was released in the USA in November 1944, the response in praise of the performance was wholesome and effusive:

> The problems of recording these great masses of sound have been magnificently surmounted by the engineers of His Master's Voice. They are to be praised not only for achieving a most satisfactory balance between the various vocal and instrumental choirs, but also for capturing so vividly the most detailed instrumental touch [..]. As a technical feat *Belshazzar's Feast* is thrilling; as a musical experience it is tremendously exciting.[16]

The five 78 rpm 12 inch records were transferred to a single long playing record and reissued by HMV in November 1954 as ALP 1089, retailing at 35 shillings and 5½ pence. The reviewer IC, was more fulsome in his praise, in particular the scale of the choral challenges in the work.[17] The recording remained in the catalogue until the early 1960s when it was deleted, despite a concerted effort by the British Council to keep it, and other recordings, in circulation.[18]

Belshazzar's Feast has become an enduring popular work with numerous recordings and 35 performances at the Proms. The first performance was on 18 September 1946, with Sir Adrian Boult conducting the BBC Symphony Orchestra and Singers, with Dennis Noble (baritone), who had taken part in the earlier recording.[19]

A review of the British Council's recorded music projects noted that only seven of the 70 recordings made between 1942 and 1967 had returned a profit from the royalties raised through sales.[20] The recording programme was never intended as a commercial enterprise, but rather to help and enable the Council's remit in promoting British culture to a wider audience overseas. The gramophone record provided an effective substitute, with the record buying public becoming a keen and enthusiastic beneficiary of the Council's efforts, receiving much praise and numerous suggestions for future recordings.[21] The front cover of the July 1943 edition of the *Gramophone* showcased the first three British Council sponsored recordings.

Although *Belshazzar's Feast* only recouped around 60 per cent of the Council's costs to produce,[22] it was a tour de force in artistic endeavour and technicality, with a large 72 piece orchestra, a choir of one-hundred and two brass bands.[23] It was an early success in the Council's newly established recording programme. The recording did not shatter the microphone to pieces as feared, and a mild national emergency was averted.

Notes

1. For an introduction of the British Council's sponsorship of British music and culture see Tony Wakeford, 'There is a severe slaughter of pianists: The perils of the recorded music industry' in *Magna*, May 2015, Vol.26, No.1, pp.20-23, and 'The British Council: Promoting British composers through music recordings', in *Magna*, November 2020, Vol.31, No.2, pp.8-11.
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belshazzar%27s_Feast_(Walton) (Accessed 15 September 2023).
3. BW 2/174: The Victor Trade Letter, November 1944, *The most thrilling choral work ever recorded.*
4. BW 2/74: Letter dated 8 June 1942.
5. BW 2/74: Letter dated 21 July 1942.
6. BW 2/74: Letter dated 3 September 1942.
7. BW 2/74: Letter dated 7 September 1942.
8. The Halle Orchestra did record the first British Council sponsored recording. The work chosen was Moeran's *Symphony in G Minor*, conducted by Leslie Heward at the Houldsworth Hall in Manchester, on November 25 and 26, and 1 December 1942. It was recorded by the Gramophone Company and released by HMV as six 12 inch records, C3319-3324.
9. BW 2/74: Letter to Frank Netherwood, president, Huddersfield Choral Society, 30 November 1942.
10. BW 2/74: Letter to Frank Netherwood, president, Huddersfield Choral Society, 2 December 1942.
11. BW 2/74: 30 soprano, 23 contralto, 22 tenor and 25 bass.
12. BW 2/74: The concert programme comprised Arthur Bliss' *Piano Concerto*, William Walton's *Wise Virgins Suite, Spitfire Prelude and Fugue*, and *Belshazzar's Feast*. The Bliss *Piano Concerto* had been commissioned by the British Council for British Week at the 1939 World Fair in New York. The British Council sponsored a recording in Liverpool a few days after *Belshazzar's Feast* with Sir Adrian Boult and the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra with Solomon at the piano. See 'Analytical Notes and First Reviews', *Gramophone*, July 1943, p.25.
13. BW 2/74: Special arrangements with made with London, Midland and Scottish Railway Company (LMS) for reserved coaches and discounted fares between Huddersfield and Liverpool.
14. Kelly online database: https://www.gramophonecompanydiscography.com/advanced_search (Accessed 13 November 2023).
15. 'Analytical Notes and First Reviews', *Gramophone*, March 1943, pp.141-142.
16. See note 3.
17. Analytical Notes and First Reviews', *Gramophone*. January 1954, p.299.
18. See note 1, 'There is a severe slaughter of pianists: The perils of the recorded music industry'.
19. The most recent performance was on 4 August 2023 with Klaus Mäkelä conducting the BBC Symphony Orchestra, BBC Symphony Chorus and Thomas Hampson (baritone). See: https://www.bbc.co.uk/proms/events/works/3e196f7e-a370-4228-a193-60e343da2d5c (Accessed 18 September 2023).
20. BW 80/4: Analysis of music recording costs and royalties for period 1943 to 1967 (as at 31/3/68). Part of the reason may have been the terms of the recording contract which divided the royalties between the recording company (90 per cent) and British Council (10 per cent), or where a publisher contributed then 6 and 4 per cent accordingly.
21. The British Council relinquished their recording sponsorship role, passing the responsibility to the Arts Council in the late 1970s, and instead focussed their funding and support on world-wide tours by British artists and ensembles. See BW 80/5.
22. BW 80/4: The cost to the British Council was £915, of which £540 was recouped from royalties.
23. The brass bands involved were not identified in the original or later reissue of the work. Their identity, Foden's Motor Works Band and the Fairy Aviation Band, are only mentioned in correspondence between the Liverpool Philharmonic Society and the British Council.