Musicianly Lives Musically Told: Oral History, Classical Music and *Desert Island Discs*
Stephen Cottrell

1. Introduction

It is notable that of the 3,000 or so episodes of *Desert Island Discs* (*DID*) listed on the BBC's online archive, nearly two-thirds are with castaways categorised as being 'Musician' or 'Stage, Screen, and Radio'. Add a further 700 for those categorised as 'Writers' and it is clear that castaways drawn from what we might now describe as the creative industries form the overwhelming majority of those appearing on the programme.

What might we infer from this? Naturally, successful creative individuals generate a high degree of public interest in their work and thus have a concomitant media profile. As others in this volume have observed, their celebrity status makes them prime candidates for inclusion in a programme that is–in addition to its other qualities–a marker of social and/or cultural distinction. While creative individuals can measure commercial success through sales of recordings, artworks, books, etc., as Andrew Blake notes in Chapter 6, inclusion in the *DID* 'hall of fame' is not dissimilar to the artistic recognition offered by the award of a Grammy, an Oscar or the Man Booker prize; there may be no tangible reward for appearing on the programme, but it similarly functions as a mechanism for cultural legitimation in those contexts where such legitimation is understood to be meaningful.

But another reason for the public fascination with creative individuals arises from the presumption that by listening to their narrations of their own life stories, and particularly through the exhibitions of personal musical taste by which those stories are embellished on *DID*, we might gain some insight into what drives the individuals themselves. Perhaps part of our continuing fascination with the *DID* format arises from an implicit expectation that the

musical selections of these creative castaways will reveal insights into artistic creativity that spoken dialogue, or indeed even the creative outputs themselves, may not.

These interests in individual creativity build on long-standing European fascinations. If the ancient Greeks had some ambivalence about the nature of creativity–believing it to reside only in poetry (*poiesis*) whereas art (*techne*) was subject to rules that reflected the order of the natural world–by the time of the Renaissance, and particularly during the Romantic era of the nineteenth century, the creative artist and his (occasionally her) particular individuality had become an 'ideal type' in which there was increasing public interest. The growing number of biographies and critical appraisals this provoked has been augmented in our own times by biopics and documentaries, specialist programmes on television and radio, 'celebrity' magazines and websites, television and radio programmes such as *DID*, and an increasing body of scholarly literature.[1] All of which apparently seek answers to the question: What is it that fuels the wellsprings of this individual's creativity and from whence does it come?

Musicians are in some ways the most enigmatic artists in this respect. Perhaps because of music's capacity to move us emotionally in ways that are qualitatively different from other arts, musicians in many cultures around the world are accorded a particular status. Not one that is necessarily high-ranking in terms of local social hierarchies but one that is always distinctive (Merriam 1964). This sense of difference, of musicians being seen as idiosyncratic and slightly mysterious, is perhaps a consequence of personality traits that arise from the development of very high levels of sensitivity and imagination, albeit that such traits are internalised and therefore generally obscured from people around them. Thus, as

[1] Examples of more recent work in this area which specifically consider creativity in relation to musical composition include Dahlhaus (1989) and Kinderman (2012).

psychologist Anthony Kemp (1996: 84) puts it, musicians 'conceal the very thing that motivates them most highly, thus obscuring their *raison d'être* and rendering them somewhat enigmatic to others'.

Musicians therefore form an interesting and notably large subset of castaways on *DID*, and in this chapter I will examine what some of their interviews reveal to us of the musician-type in those classical music cultures from which most of the castaway musicians are drawn, and what the autobiographical narratives they construct reveal about the lives, livelihoods and musical practices that sustain them.

2. Musicians on *DID*

Although musicians constitute a significant proportion of castaways on *DID* (approximately 22% in total), there is some evidence that their participation in the programme was originally resisted. A 1942 memo in the BBC Archive at Caversham from a BBC executive to Roy Plomley, the programme's creator, suggests that 'our final decision, if you remember, was that "Desert Island Discs" would be much more attractive as a programme if contributed [to] by people who have no connection with the arts–or at any rate none with the musical arts'. A further memo in 1943 broadened the proposed categories for exclusion by suggesting that only 'people not connected in any way with entertainment' should be invited to appear.[2] Clearly these reservations were soon left behind; as already noted, people 'connected with entertainment' have provided the majority of the programme's castaways during its life span.

[2] Memos from James Langham (then Assistant Director of Programming) to Roy Plomley, 26 December 1942 and 22 March 1943. I am grateful to Julie Brown for generously providing this information.

Indeed, during the Plomley era musicians constituted more than a quarter of the overall number of castaways invited on to the programme, as shown in Table 1.[3]

	Roy Plomley 1942–85	Michael Parkinson 1986–88	Sue Lawley 1988–2006	Kirsty Young 2006–15	Total
Total castaways	1787	96	773	379	3035
Musicians	473	15	115	53	656
%	26	16	15	14	22

Table 1: Percentage of musicians as *DID* castaways, 1942–2015, by presenter

Notwithstanding the initial reservations about the desirability of musicians appearing on the programme expressed by the BBC executive noted above, Roy Plomley himself obviously retained considerably more enthusiasm. In 1958, for example, the 28 musicians

[3] The numbers used here have been generated from the *DID* online archive as at 28 September 2015. They should be treated with caution and are only intended to demonstrate general trends. There is a degree of taxonomic flexibility in the manner in which certain castaways have been described in the archive as 'Musician' while *also* being categorised as 'Stage, screen and radio' (e.g. Dudley Moore, Marti Caine, Charles Aznavour, etc.). The 'Musician' category also includes a number of music administrators. But I hope these variables are consistent enough across the years to demonstrate broader patterns.

who appeared on the programme comprised more than half of the annual total, suggesting that the particular insights musicians might provide about their musical lives played an important role in his original conception of the programme. Plomley's personal tastes, as well as those of his producer in the 1970s and '80s, Derek Drescher, undoubtedly explain the high proportion of classical artists invited during his time as presenter. In the first of his various books about the programme, published in 1977, the chapter devoted to musicians comprises reflections largely on his interviews with classical musicians, together with just four jazz musicians, three of whom–Count Basie, Stan Kenton and Louis Armstrong–were by this time mainstream artists of international repute. Similarly, the chapter devoted to singers contains only recollections of his interviews with opera singers. His own thoughts on pop/rock music and its musicians are entertaining, if very much of their time; they certainly reveal why classical musicians were favoured during his time as the programme's presenter:

> One can imagine the despair of a castaway who is isolated for years with nothing but the bashing of electric guitars and the frenzied shouting of tin-eared vocalists who, by the time he is rescued, are probably out of the music business and back on their milk rounds. Pop music as cheerful noise is fine, but for a lifetime's listening–no! (Plomley 1977: 25)

Figure 2 shows the actual numbers of musicians appearing on the programme each year:

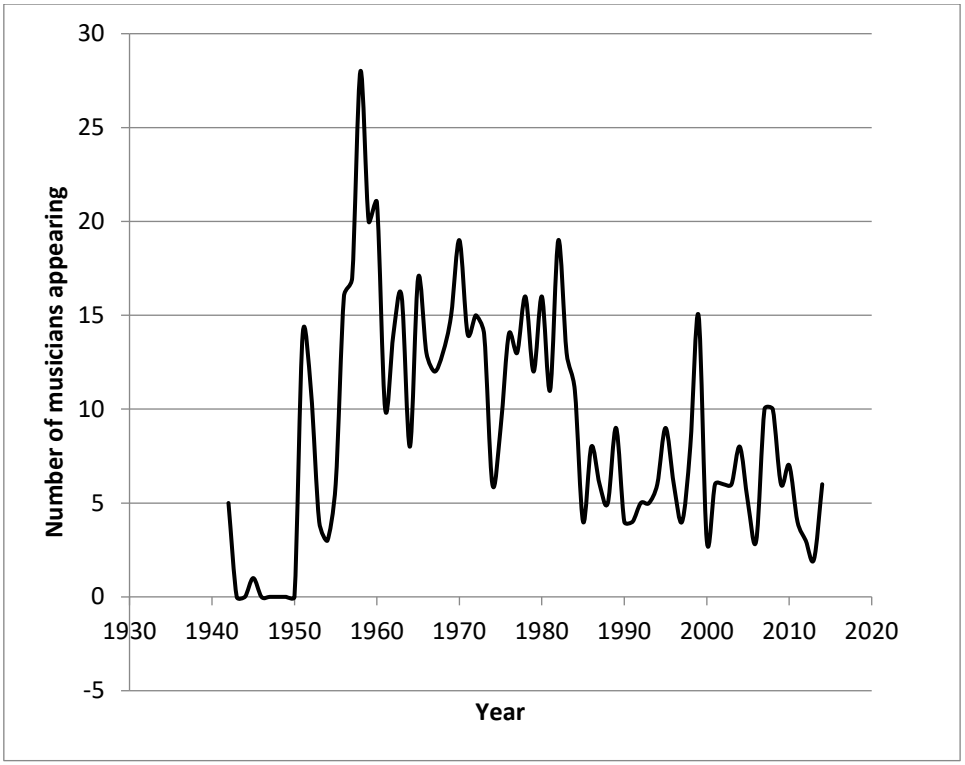

Figure 2: Numbers of musicians appearing on *DID* 1942–2014

As Figure 2 illustrates, there has been an overall decline in the number of musicians appearing on *DID* since the Plomley era, when numbers regularly reached double figures annually. No particular reasons appear to underlie specific peaks or troughs, with the exception that the sharp drop in 1985 reflects the significant decrease in the overall number of *DID* programmes made that year following Roy Plomley's sudden death. But there has been a notable change in the proportions of different types of musicians appearing on the programme, as Figures 3 and 4 illustrate:

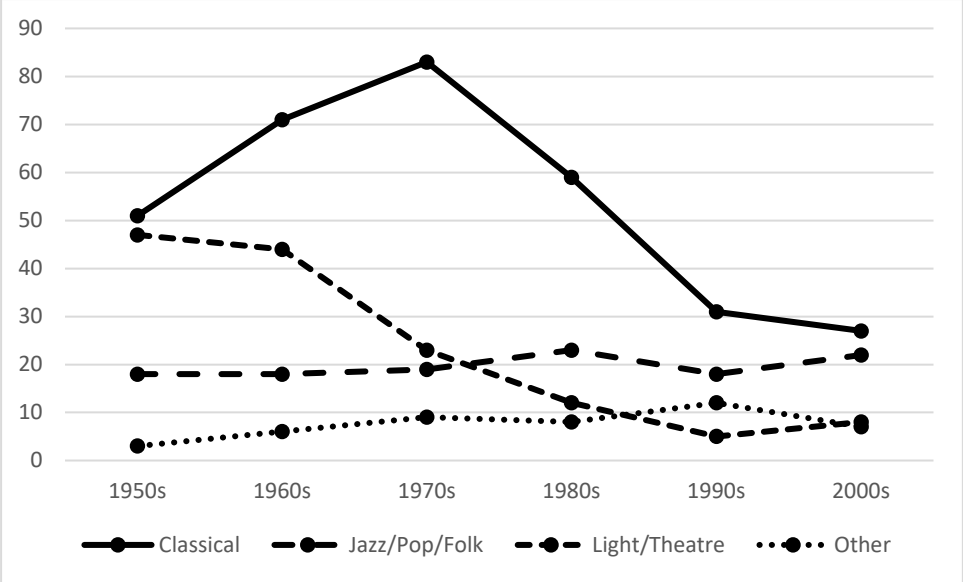

Figure 3: total numbers of musician castaways on *DID*, by genre and decade

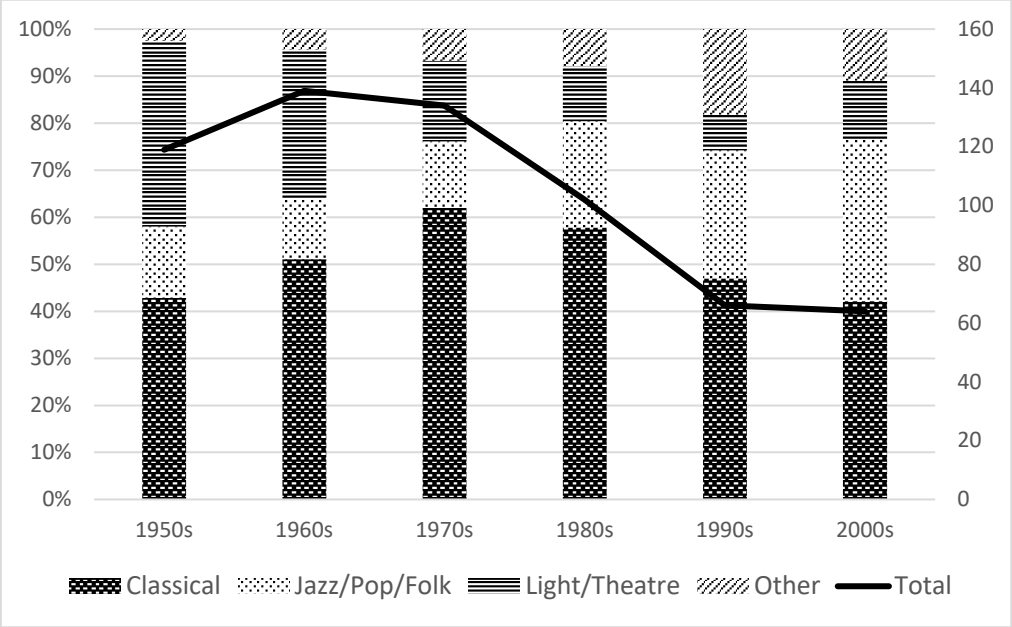

Figure 4: Proportions of music castaways on *DID* by genre and decade, from 1950 to 2010, plus total. The black line shows the total number of musicians appearing in each decade, measured against the right vertical axis.[4]

[4] The taxonomic inaccuracy of the online *DID* database makes it difficult to infer accurate figures directly. I have therefore taken all 656 castaways who have been coded as 'music' and

The decline in overall numbers of musicians appearing on the programme is clearly at the expense of musicians drawn from the 'classical' and 'light/theatre' categories. The reduction in 'light/theatre' musicians doubtless reflects declining national interests in musical variety shows, middle-of-the-road (MOR) music and so forth. Although the absolute numbers of musicians drawn from the 'jazz/pop/folk' category has remained largely static, they now form a greater proportion of musicians invited onto the programme. Not evident from these graphs is a further shift within this category, with fewer jazz musicians appearing since Plomley's death and more pop and rock musicians being invited (the numbers of traditional/folk musicians are consistently low).[5] This is not especially surprising, and undoubtedly reflects not only the changing tastes of both the production team and the listening audience, but also the changing social status of certain 'elder statesmen' rock musicians (e.g. Brian May, Charlie Watts, David Gilmour) whose achievements and longevity have altered perceptions of them from being youth-oriented, vaguely counter-cultural figures to icons of the British musical establishment, and thus candidates for inclusion in the *DID* canon.

---

myself allocated them to the genres as indicated, being guided by what each castaway appears to have been most well-known for at the time they appeared on the programme. While this reductive exercise is inevitably based on subjective judgements, it does overcome the duplication of genres otherwise inherent in the online database.

[5] For an alternative approach to these data on musician numbers see Simon Frith's chapter in this volume. Because of his focus on popular music Frith has disaggregated the category of jazz/pop/folk used here, demonstrating that such categorisations are inevitably interpretative and variable.

The ‘other’ category, largely comprised of castaways mainly known for their contributions to arts administration and cultural policy, has drifted upwards slightly, perhaps reflecting the higher media profile that certain roles–directors of large arts organisations, for example–now carry. More pronounced is the decline in the number of classical musicians invited as castaways. This undoubtedly reflects a change of policy following Plomley’s death, in which the programme became better aligned with the general popularisation of BBC programming occurring over a similar time scale–as evidenced, for example, by the evolution of the Light Programme into Radios 1 and 2 in 1967 or the production of more popular programmes in the face of increasing competition from Channels 4 and 5 (established in 1987 and 1997 respectively). It most likely also reflects a different ethos underpinning the programme after production was moved from a department within Radio 3, the BBC’s flagship classical music channel, to Radio 4, its speech-oriented current affairs channel, following Sue Lawley’s appointment as presenter in 1988.

3. Classical Music and Oral History

Notwithstanding the declining numbers of musicians invited onto the programme, *DID* continues to represent a substantial oral history archive of musicians talking about their lives and work. In this respect it is much like other oral history archives. Individuals are interviewed about their personal histories, and recount their autobiographies with all the insights, omissions, myths and embellishments that accompany the process of oral story-telling based on memory recall. Memories are of course usually imperfect if assessed purely in empirical or factual terms; as the seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes (2011: 582) put it, ‘imagination and memory are but one thing’. Furthermore, whereas most oral history interviews are usually archived in unexpurgated forms–albeit that transcriptions of them may be lightly edited to remove the ‘ums’ and ‘aaghs’ that look out of place in written

texts–the *DID* broadcasts have been rigorously edited to fit the constraints of the available broadcasting time. As oral histories they are therefore 'doubly imperfect', having been through two rounds of analysis, editing and interpretation: one by the speaker, in the act of recollection and verbalisation, and one by the production team preparing the broadcast. They are then subject to further acts of interpretation by radio and podcast listeners, as well as scholars and readers of volumes such as this.

The use of oral history in relation to the Western classical music tradition remains under-developed within musicology, notwithstanding occasional exceptions to this general rule such as Mari Yoshihara's (2007) work with Asian and Asian-American classical musicians in the USA or John Tibbetts' (2010) intriguing mix of music criticism and oral history in relation to the music of Schumann.[6] However, just as recent disciplinary shifts into hermeneutics, performance studies, musical ethnography and so forth have all served to redefine the boundaries of musicology, so too can oral history provide an alternative understanding of the work of composers and performers that may illuminate differently the inferences we draw about that work.

Furthermore, and being mindful of, for example, Howard Becker's (1982) views on the social production of art, it can be argued that the meanings we construe upon musical artworks are shaped not only by those who we might identify as creators or producers–composers, performers and similar–but also by many others such as publishers, editors, promoters, recording engineers etc. There is thus a variety of people whose personal viewpoints and oral testimonies might be adduced to cast light on our understanding of music

[6] The Oral History of American Music project housed at Yale University is perhaps the most established project in this field. It has formed the basis for Perlis & Van Cleve (2005), among other publications. See also http://web.library.yale.edu/oham/about

history, and these may offer very different understandings of musical works than those conventionally asserted by musicologists. Indeed, *DID* provides evidence of the significance we now ascribe to these additional voices, through interviews with, for example, the Beatles producer George Martin, the Director of the BBC Proms John Drummond, and the music critic Felix Aprahamian, to list only a few.[7]

Paul Thompson (1988: 21) makes these points eloquently in his classic text on oral history, *The Voice of the Past*, where he argues that:

> Oral history is a history built around people. It thrusts life into history itself and it widens its scope. It allows heroes not just from the leaders, but from the unknown majority of the people […] And to individual historians and others, with shared meanings, it can give a sense of belonging to a place or in time. In short it makes for fuller human beings. Equally, oral history offers a challenge to the accepted myths of history, to the authoritarian judgement inherent in its tradition. It provides a means for radical transformation of the social meaning of history.

In summary, oral history techniques in relation to classical music help move us away from the domination of literary text and score. They can decentralise dominant narratives, particularly where considerable prominence is otherwise given to the 'expert', whether the

[7] This interest in the influence of non-performers on musical recordings was evident in the very first list that Roy Plomley presented of guests he would like to appear on the programme, which included Fred Gaisberg, the renowned EMI producer, as well as BBC producers Leslie Perowne and Roy Rich (see Magee 2012: 5)

critic, musicologist, performer or composer. They allow insight into the oral/aural tradition of classical music, a point considered in more detail below. They provide alternate concepts of history that may be at cross purposes to, or illuminate differently, histories presented in written texts; and they can help us gain access to musicians'–especially performers'–historical experience, which again may provide different insights into musical understanding.

Thus the *DID* online archive can be seen as a substantial oral history resource relating to the creative and performing arts in general, and the musical arts in particular. 'Doubly imperfect' though it may be because of the extensive editing involved, it nevertheless illustrates the lives and views of a broad range of British and international creative practitioners drawn from a range of genres over a significant time scale. The nature of the programme inevitably means that castaways have achieved some measure of distinction and reputation in their field; we do not, in fact, get to hear from those whose contributions to the meanings we attach to particular musical sounds are less obvious (music copyists, piano tuners, agents, etc.), as we might from a more all-embracing oral history project. Nevertheless, in the rest of this chapter I shall consider what these *DID* interviews reveal in relation to classical music-making.

4. The Practice of Classical Music

Oral testimonies not only serve to counterbalance dominant historical paradigms but they can also illuminate more contested areas of cultural practice, which conventional scholarship may overlook. Given musicology's focus on musical texts for much of the past 150 years, it is unsurprising that many aspects of the social practice of classical music-making remain relatively unexplored. The following extract from Sue Lawley's interview with the opera singer Willard White (7 November 1999) provides a good example of the oral history

dimension of *DID*, demonstrating the tensions that may inhere between the often rarefied conception of operatic artworks and the social realities embedded in the music-making that produces them:

SL: Willard White, there was a great brouhaha at the ENO[8] surrounding you in the mid-eighties, when the offer of a role in Jonathan Miller's *Rigoletto* suddenly was taken away. You were de-invited, as it were, and the GLC[9] said that it was racism at work and threatened to withhold its grant from the ENO. Did you feel you were suddenly being rejected because of your colour?

WW: No, not suddenly. It's not something new.

SL: So you did think you *were* being rejected because of your colour?

WW: It happens a lot in this life. There are situations where, because of your colour, you are just looked at in a different way.

SL: In the world of opera?

WW: In the world.

SL: But I'm amazed that you say it's at work in the world of opera, really. I find that very difficult to believe.

WW: Don't get me on a track where I can say 'well you're not black'. You don't know. Whether you find it difficult to believe or not, it's there. And that's it.

---

[8] English National Opera.

[9] The Greater London Council (GLC) was London's top-tier local government from 1965 to 1986, and therefore partly responsible for supporting cultural institutions in the city during this period.

SL: So do you think that when people say, 'look, dramatically this is not going to work', I know you played in *Eugene Onegin* once as the Prince, and the Russian girl Tatyana marries the Prince, and I think the Tatyana, the person playing that role, had difficulty accepting the fact that you were black, because she didn't think dramatically that the young peasant girl would fall in love with a man who was black.

WW: Yeah.

SL: Do you believe that that is racism or do you accept that that was her dramatic objection, that it wasn't to do with you personally?

WW: I accept that it was her objection dramatically and so on, that's fine. It turned out that I was actually there personally. I'm not Prince Gremin, she is not Tatiana. It's a whole make-believe world. And the colour business is not that important. It is made to be that important, it's made to be a stumbling block. I haven't lived my life focusing on racism because it's very destructive. But I know that there have been many situations where, I mean even people who have thought of it kindly and said, 'well you know, we can't have a Mephistopheles who is black because it's fostering this feeling of the black devil'. There is that too. It's because of my colour. Now is that racism or what? What is that? I think in this world there is this wonderful fabric of colours. Maybe it's easier for me to say so because I'm of a certain distinctive quality that makes me noticeable. In a field of white people, I stick out.

Sue Lawley's disbelief in the idea that racism might be encountered in the operatic world is most likely rooted in nineteenth-century perceptions on the innate value and wholesomeness of classical music. Eduard Hanslick's early treatise *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* (*The Beautiful in Music*) (1854) is only one of many references that might be invoked to demonstrate that ideals of beauty, the sublime, the essential good, etc. are often extensively invested in classical music artworks. That these lofty ideals might be tarnished by

matters as profoundly human as racism in the social practice of music-making is undoubtedly unsettling for the white middle-classes who continue to form the bedrock of the Radio 4 audience base. Notwithstanding the success of the UK's creative industries in general, cultural diversity among the creative workforce in general is poor, particularly in relation to the visual and performing arts, and this is nowhere more evident than in the world of classical music.[10] Willard White's story may well illustrate an inconvenient truth, but that is rather the point of oral testimony which, to recall Paul Thompson's words, 'offers a challenge to the accepted myths of history, to the authoritarian judgement inherent in its tradition.' White's recollections are a reminder that those producing classical music work in a very real world, in which prejudice, insecurity and marginalisation may be encountered just as easily as in other walks of life.

There are many other aspects of musicians' work covered in the *DID* archive that space precludes engaging with here. The precarious professional lives that musicians lead, and the fine line between triumph and disaster that they must navigate, is another recurring theme. Incidents which for the population at large are relatively trivial can become career-threatening for musicians, since they may have a significant impact on performance standards. Margins for error are that much smaller when you are on the concert stage. For example, the guitarist Julian Bream (9 July 1983) tells of the perils of splitting a nail in the days immediately before a performance, but that he has given up using false nails because one of them once flew off and landed in the lap of a woman in the front row. More seriously,

[10] According to a report from the UK's Department for Culture, Media and Sport, *Creative Industries: Focus on Employment* (June 2014: 36), just 6.7% of the workforce in the 'Music, Performing and Visual Arts' sector comprised individuals from black and minority ethnic groups. Only the Design sector had a lower participation rate. Personal experience suggests that the proportion in the world of classical music is notably lower than this overall average.

he also reveals that he has taught himself to use his left hand for a variety of everyday tasks for which right-handed people like himself would normally use their other hand, precisely to reduce the risk to those right-hand fingernails that are so crucial for his work. The opera singer Lesley Garrett (10 October 1993) recalls the trauma of losing her voice for a year and the emotional impact this had on her, as a singer who was no longer able to express herself. We learn too about some of the practical aspects of musicianship: of Daniel Barenboim's antipathy towards learning scales and arpeggios (7 May 2006), or from Wayne Marshall (21 April 2002) the importance of digital console programming for the modern organist. These insights into the quotidian aspects of musicians' lives remind us that music-making is as much a craft as it is an art.

5. Classical Music and Oral/Aural Tradition

While the *DID* broadcasts are, as I have suggested, quintessential oral histories, they also provide insights into the oral and aural tradition of classical music (note the distinction here between oral history–the verbal testimonies that musicians and others provide in their retelling of past events–and oral tradition, those aspects of cultural practice that are passed on orally and aurally but not directly through written texts). The oral/aural tradition that inevitably inheres within classical music-making has often been overlooked by musicologists because of the primacy accorded to the musical text. The testimonies offered on *DID* are particularly noteworthy when castaway musicians comment on the musical performances of others, and especially on performers whom they assert have had some impact on their own performance aesthetics.

Gaining insights into the influences of one musician on another can be challenging. Undertaking comparative analyses of recordings in order to demonstrate this empirically, for

example, is an area fraught with analytical difficulty (Volioti 2010). But the juxtaposition of oral testimonies with musical extracts themselves occasionally allows us to hear this aural tradition in practice, although it is notable how relatively few musician castaways comment on the actual performance characteristics of the recordings; in most cases, like other castaways, they concentrate on the autobiographical associations of their chosen extracts. Nevertheless, there are some tantalising glimpses. Daniel Barenboim introduces a Clifford Curzon recording by saying that 'there was something so lively and felicitous in his sound, and this has always been one of my favourite records.' The producer cross-fades the Curzon recording underneath Barenboim's words, so that we hear clearly the lightness and transparency of Curzon's performance to which Barenboim has so favourably responded alongside his commentary upon it. Singers often reveal how the sound of other voices particularly influenced them: Ian Bostridge (26 October 2008) makes clear how he was captivated as a child by Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau's voice, which led to his interest in lieder, and Thomas Allen (3 June 2001) similarly observes that he wanted to sing 'anything which Fischer-Dieskau sang'; Reneé Fleming (18 November 2005) describes the 'sumptuous sound' of Leontyne Price's voice, while Placido Domingo (27 December 1980) notes the impact on him of hearing Enrico Caruso: 'He was certainly the teacher of teachers. Listening to his records has been what has taught me more about vocal technique, about feeling, about legato, you name it'.

We also gain occasional insights into the oral transmission of musical practice and the manner in which highly skilled musicians endeavour to verbalise musical sound patterns. Such insights are seldom captured in discourse about music, partly because, again, in a tradition centred around musical texts the peculiar mixture of singing, playing, exclamations and gestures by which a musician might seek to convey to others his or her understanding of a particular piece or phrase are deemed peripheral to 'the music itself'. But in rehearsal

contexts particularly, such communication between musicians is an integral part of musical interaction and communication, and an important mechanism by which cultural knowledge is transmitted. Again this translates poorly into printed text, but there is an entertaining example in Sue Lawley's interview with the organist and conductor Wayne Marshall:[11]

WM: The piece that we worked on was the first recitative that Carmen sings, just before she sings the habanera. That is full of stops and starts. Da da-da-da-da dum. Then – dah One! Da deem da da-da – One. Umm. Pause. Ta deee da da-dum. Pause. Ta deee da da-dum. Then in two: um biddly-um. Da dee dah um! Pa pa-pa-pa pum. Deee-dah one! Chung! That's basically it (laughs).

SL: (laughing) Oh simple!

WM: It's strange but, because it's all in two, if you take away all the little stops, all the things where the tempo is not absolutely straight, then it all sort of makes sense.

Such orally transmitted musical information is common in other cultures–for example in the communication of knowledge about tabla *bols* in Hindustani music (Kippen, 1988)–but less frequently encountered in the Western classical music tradition in part because it is usually deemed peripheral to understanding the music of that tradition, but also because it normally occurs in teaching-rooms or masterclasses, where individual approaches to performance aesthetics are made manifest for the purpose of musical education and enculturation. The dialogic context in which such information is imparted makes it difficult (or impossible) to uncover this kind of orally transmitted knowledge without ethnographic research. Heard in

[11] This particular extract occurs exactly 24 minutes into the podcast on the *DID* archive.

context this excerpt is not only entertaining but also gives some insight into the ways in which musicians internalise musical patterns, and how they externalise them verbally.

One final aspect of the aural/oral tradition of classical music arises from the capacity of musicians to hear themselves performing on recordings. As I have observed elsewhere (Cottrell 2004: 44–55) the manner in which musicians conceive their own sound is an important component of their self-conception; yet, like actors, they exhibit a range of reactions when called upon to listen to their own work, with some quite happy to do so and others avoiding it where possible. Thomas Allen (6 November 1982) notes that he doesn't listen to his own recordings, asserting that 'I can't stand that'. In contrast, Louis Armstrong was fascinated by the implications of recording technology in relation to his posthumous reputation (Alexander 2008) and regularly listened to his own recordings, which may explain why he chose five of them for *DID* (in addition to a copy of his own autobiography as his additional book choice).[12] Simon Rattle (13 January 2008) evidences his close association with a particular orchestral sound, choosing a Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra recording on which he conducts, 'just to be reminded of the sound of the orchestra'.

The fact that a castaway's music choices will be played out publically inevitably impacts on the selections made. The complexities surrounding this 'presentation of the self' (Goffman 1959) are perhaps more acute for professional musicians, in relation to the public demonstration of musical taste, since the choices they make inevitably blur the boundaries between their personal and professional lives in the ears of Radio 4 listeners. This is

[12] Armstrong also asked the BBC for a copy of his *DID* programme, a fortunate turn of events given the fact that the Corporation did not retain a copy, and one only exists in the online archive because this copy was later found in the archives of the Louis Armstrong House Museum in New York.

particularly the case in relation to the different strategies musicians adopt when deciding whether to choose their own recordings, or not. Thus Paul Tortelier (31 March 1984) apologises for selecting a Schubert quintet recording on which he plays, noting that the choice was 'not very modest' but explaining that he would want to be reminded of the intensely positive experience of working with Pablo Casals and Isaac Stern. Placido Domingo similarly didn't think it was 'right' to choose his own recordings. In contrast, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf (28 July 1958) chose only recordings on which she sang, except for her final choice of Richard Strauss's prelude to *Der Rosenkavalier*, in which no voices are heard (although she did sing on the rest of the recording); Plomley (1977: 99) notes that 'her list […] obviously lacked sincerity' and that 'self-advertisement was not the object of the series'. Schwarzkopf herself appears to have been conscious of the ego projection her choices implied, acknowledging to Plomley that she was 'being outrageous'.[13]

DID thus provides some evidence of the intricate relationships that musicians have with the musical sounds they produce, as well as the complicated self-reflexive processes involved in asserting publically that a sound which is deeply and personally iconic for them is something they would want to be reminded of on a desert island – or not, as the case may be.

6. The Myths of Classical Music

The various mythologies contained within the Western classical tradition, the belief system that surrounds it, and the supernatural powers that are so frequently invested in its major figures, are themes that surface quite frequently in *DID* interviews, as well as regularly occurring in scholarly work. Bruno Nettl (1995: 19) identifies an analogy between this tradition's 'Great Masters' and a pantheon of deities, suggesting that in the Music Building of

[13] For a more sympathetic interpretation of castaways choosing their own recordings see Julie Brown's chapter in this volume.

his paradigmatic Heartland School of Music, 'musical life is built on a group of widely articulated beliefs, mainly about composers, and these have something (but not necessarily much) to do with historical reality'. Lévi-Strauss in *The Raw and the Cooked* (1986: 18)–a book that relies a great deal on musical structures and metaphors in its exploration of mythology–writes somewhat eulogistically that 'the musical creator is a being comparable to the gods, and music itself the supreme mystery of the science of man'. Susan McClary (1987: 16-17) uses the religious metaphor to include both composers and performers, arguing that the world of classical music is perceived as being divided into 'a priesthood of professionals who learn principles of musical order' and 'a laity of listeners who respond strongly to music but have little conscious critical control over it'. This laity, being unable to account explicitly for the way in which music affects them, behave as though the process was indeed mystical, and thus refuse 'to attribute to mere mortals the power to move them so'. Clearly, myths and myth-making are an integral part of the classical music tradition (see also Cottrell 2004: 123-30).

We see these various processes of individual and collective myth-making at work in the *DID* archive in a number of ways. Andras Schiff (7 February 1999) notes that 'the divine figure in my life is certainly Johann Sebastian Bach … [He] is the most important composer to me. I start every day by playing Bach. It's a cleansing procedure, it's like taking a bath or a shower.' Steven Isserlis (2 December 2007) similarly explains his choice of Bach's St Matthew Passion as one of his discs: 'Bach really was God in Music, and this movement I find so unbelievably moving. It's sung at a point where Peter has denied Christ. And I'm talking not as a Christian, I am Jewish! I just find it amazing. He's denied Christ, and the compassion, the guilt, the sorrow, just the serenity in this music, really touches on the divine.' It is notable that both castaways are talking about J.S. Bach, a composer in whom the concept of the divine appears most frequently invested. These hagiographic representations of the

composer, and Schiff's perhaps unconscious association with acts of ritual ablution, powerfully connote that sense of religiosity that often characterises musical traditions in general and Western classical music in particular.

The examination of personal memories and the inevitable omissions, misplacements and reconstructions that memory recall entails, also allow us to see personal and collective myth-making in process. As Samuel and Thompson (1990: 5) observe, the retelling of personal histories should be seen neither as the disorderly concatenation of random fragments nor as the blurred recollection of distant experience, but as 'shaped accounts in which some incidents were dramatized, others contextualized, yet others passed over in silence, through a process of narrative shaping in which both conscious and unconscious, myth and reality, played significant parts'.

Thus in oral histories we often find specific life events recounted which begin to take on the quality of myths themselves, and this is just as true of *DID* as elsewhere. Wayne Marshall, for example, tells us that the first time he played an organ it was just a single chord in a church to help the choir tune up, and that it was this single event that launched him on a professional musical career. Kirsty Young describes Simon Rattle as having an 'epiphany' in 1966, while listening to Mahler's second symphony, and it was this that made him want to become a conductor; later in the programme Rattle describes himself as still feeling 'like the kid who had this St Paul's vision on the road to Damascus when I hear Mahler', thus again invoking religious metaphors to describe his engagement with classical music while simultaneously constructing a narrative that elevates this historical incident to the status of personal myth.

It is also in the nature of autobiography that we usually gain insights into childhood and upbringing. On *DID* these often–although by no means always–illustrate that the musicians were born into musically supportive families, whether of a professional or amateur

kind. But interviews also reveal the intense commitments made by classical musicians, often over long periods of time, and the pressures that some can feel under even from a young age. A particularly extreme example of this arises in the interview between Kirsty Young and the Chinese pianist Lang Lang (31 October 2010):

LL: The worst was, I had a piano teacher, but every class, basically, she said 'You shouldn't play the piano. You're not good. You simply [have] no talent. You will never make it'. And then after six months she kicked me out.

KY: What did your father do?

LL: He went crazy, he went nuts, of course.

KY: Nuts at you or nuts at her?

LL: Not really to her because he knows that she's a professor at a conservatory. If he's too hard on her that will damage my future. So he was hard on me.

KY: What form did that take? What did he do?

LL: One day he got so mad he asked me to jump [out of] the building and to not live anymore.

KY: To jump off of the balcony?

LL: Yes. We had this big fight. And then I also went nuts. I started trying to destroy my hands on the walls. And somehow we didn't talk for a long time.

KY: You didn't talk and you didn't play?

LL: No I stopped playing, because I hated the piano at that time.

KY: To be beating the wall, to be destroying your own hands, as a pianist, is the most self-destructive thing you can do.

LL: Right. It's the worst thing you can do I think. And I was nine. So that was scary, seriously. Thank God I didn't really do it. I mean, I did, but my father stopped me.

KY: Is it true he gave you some pills at the same time?

LL: Yes. At the same time. But I didn't do it.

KY: This is such an extreme situation, I'm wondering, was your father's reaction out of anger, was it out of shame?

LL: Shame I would say.

KY: It was shame. That he had uprooted the family. That you would have to go back home and say you didn't get in to the conservatory.

LL: Right.

Again we see the construction of a narrative that dramatizes particular historical incidents, locating them in an ambiguous area between memory, imagination, myth, and reality, in a manner which is intrinsic to the process of oral history.

7. Conclusions

Musicianly lives musically told provide us with rich insights into music history that counter-balance the more conventional musicological and historiographic narratives we construct around Western classical music. The *DID* archive represents a substantial oral history resource in relation to the lives, habits, art and craft of musicians, as well as providing valuable information about the social practice of music-making over the past several decades.

The archive is rich both quantitatively, because of the numbers of musicians' stories available, and qualitatively: not only do we hear the musicians' autobiographies told in their own words, but their narratives are also illustrated by short musical extracts of their choosing. There are few other resources that facilitate similar insights into the life stories of such a wide range of musicians.

Each *DID* programme represents a collection of musical choices that are in some way revealing of personal musical taste. These choices underpin acts of identity construction: on the part of the castaway, in the reflexive performance of self that arises from the knowledge that their choices will be broadcast in the public sphere; and on the part of the listener, through the inferences we draw about the castaway's musical persona and the mapping we undertake against our own musical self-identity of the music they choose. While this may be true for all castaways, the additional importance often attached to the views of music by those musicians whose lives are given over to its production, and who are themselves often invested by others with mysterious powers through which they move us (or so it seems), makes their contributions to the music history that *DID* contains especially significant.

DID also provides evidence over the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries of the increasing importance of recordings for classical musicians in informing their own approaches to musical performance. The autodidactic role that recordings play in other contexts–especially in jazz and popular music–is widely acknowledged.[14] But again the centrality of the musical score–together with the ideological importance attached to interpretive originality–has deflected attention away from similar processes at work in

[14] See for example Lewis Porter (1991: 155) for details on jazz saxophonist Lester Young learning from recordings by Frankie Trumbauer, and Carl Woideck (1996: 11–12) for Charlie Parker's subsequent attempts to learn from those by Young.

classical music. Barenboim's observations on Curzon's sound, and particularly the centrality of Caruso's recordings in Domingo's approach to singing, both evidence similar processes at work in classical music. For classical musicians the discographic self is a marker not only of emotional engagement and personal satisfaction but of professional musical heritage also.

Finally, I return to the interview extract above from the pianist Lang Lang, and the insights it provides into the highly pressurized nature of his own pianistic training. After this exchange the interview moves on to his next chosen recording, Chopin's Piano Concerto no. 1, which he describes as 'one of the world's most beautiful piano concertos' and from which we hear the elegiac second movement. Responses to musical sound are always subjective–albeit they are also culturally conditioned–but on first hearing I found the concerto a rather uncomfortable contrast with the intensity of the autobiographical narrative and the pressures that the nine-year old pianist had been put under. Subsequently, however, I heard it differently, as reflective and even more full of pathos than previously. The juxtaposition of Lang Lang's oral narrative encourages me to understand the Chopin differently, and this is a rather different perspective on the issues of emotion and identity than *DID* ostensibly sets out to achieve. If the aim of the programme is to allow us through music some insight into the emotional wellsprings of its guests, perhaps part of its success is in fact that the oral narratives with which we are presented actually cause us to consider the music itself in a different light. At the same time as supposedly understanding something of the musical self-identity of the interviewee we are also renegotiating our own relationship with the musical sounds, which begin to accrue different meanings for us through their close association with somebody else's lived experience.

When that experience arises from the very musicians–those enigmatic demi-gods–who are responsible for making those musical sounds, the inferences we draw are perhaps yet more meaningful. A musician's appearance on *DID* is itself a meta-performance, and through

these performances we refashion such meanings as we may construe upon the music we hear, thus leading to some small redefinition of our own musical identity or, at least, a recasting of our relationship with the particular piece at hand. As listeners these radio performances become part of our lives. They are not just musicians' histories; they are our histories also.

References

Alexander, B. (2008), '"For Posterity": The Personal Audio Recordings of Louis Armstrong', *The American Archivist,* 71/1: 50–86. doi: 10.17723/aarc.71.1.v6877q3wu7738101

Becker, H.S. (1982), *Art Worlds* (Berkeley, University of California Press).

Cottrell, S. (2004), *Professional Music-Making in London: Ethnography and Experience* (Aldershot, Ashgate).

Dahlhaus, C. (1989), *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley, University of California Press).

Goffman, E. (1959), *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City NY, Doubleday & Co.).

Hanslick, E. (1854), *Vom Musikalisch-Schönen* (Leipzig, Rudolph Weigel).

Hobbes, T. (2011), *Leviathan*, in M.L. Morgan (ed.), *Classics of Moral and Political Theory* 5th edn (Indianapolis/Cambridge, Hackett), 578–708.

Kemp, A. (1996), *The Musical Temperament: Psychology and Personality of Musicians* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

Kinderman, W. (2012), *The Creative Process in Music from Mozart to Kurtág* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press).

Kippen, J. (1988), *The Tabla of Lucknow: A Cultural Analysis of a Musical Tradition* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

Lévi-Strauss, C. (1986), *The Raw and the Cooked* (London, Penguin Books).

Magee, S. (2012), *Desert Island Discs: 70 Years of Castaways from one of BBC Radio 4's Best-loved Programmes* (London, Bantam).

McClary, S. (1987), 'The Blasphemy of Talking Politics During Bach Year', in R. Leppert & S. McClary (eds.), *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press), 13–62.

Merriam, A.P. (1964), *The Anthropology of Music* (Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press).

Nettl, B. (1995), *Heartland Excursions: Ethnomusicological Reflections on Schools of Music* (Urbana, University of Illinois Press).

Perlis, V., & Van Cleve, L. (2005), *Composers' Voices from Ives to Ellington: An Oral History of American Music* (New Haven, Yale University Press).

Plomley, R. (1977), *Desert Island Discs* (London, Fontana).

Porter, L. (1991), *A Lester Young Reader* (Washington, Smithsonian Institute Press).

Samuel, R., & Thompson, P. (1990), 'Introduction', in R. Samuel & P. Thompson (eds.), *The Myths We Live By* (London, Routledge), 1–22.

Thompson, P. (1988), *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 2nd edn (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

Tibbetts, J.C. (2010), *Schumann: A Chorus of Voices* (New York, Amadeus Press).

Volioti, G. (2010), 'Playing with Tradition: Weighing up Similarity and the Buoyancy of the Game', *Musicae Scientiae*, 14/2: 85–114.

Woideck, C. (1996), *Charlie Parker: His Music and Life* (Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press).

Yoshihara, M. (2007), *Musicians from a Different Shore: Asians and Asian Americans in Classical Music* (Philadelphia, Temple University Press).