Chapter 4
Radio and the Music Confessional

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Introduction

> *It is the hot, early summer of 2022 and I am sat in the garden of my house in south-east London, among thirsty flowers and wilting shrubs. Leaning back in a reclining chair, my feet propped up by another, I am listening to radio podcasts via my phone. A comfortable pair of headphones shuts out the surrounding urban noise, allowing me to lose myself in the radiophonic moment. I choose the next programme and press play. A familiar theme tune strikes up, overlaid with sounds of lapping waves and herring gulls, and I am ready to drift away for another forty minutes on an imaginary desert island, surrounded by the sea. The presenter, an invited guest, and me. Just the three of us…*

Why does radio feel a more intimate medium than television? And why does it continue to feel personal to me, even when I know that I am simply one of perhaps hundreds of thousands of other listeners, all listening to the same programme, each of whom is most likely sharing similar sentiments? Perhaps it is the soothing tones of the presenter's voice sounding warm in my ears. Or my curiosity about the guest's story, which seems to be recounted just for my personal benefit. Or maybe it is my interest in and sometimes curiosity about the music at hand, combined with the apparent familiarity with which it is often discussed.

Radio does this to you. It draws you in to your own intimate, personal world while letting you know that you are not, in fact, alone: you are part of an imagined radiophonic community, collectively participating in a shared broadcast experience. And when music is added into this intimate space, we can believe that our affective response to the musical sounds, and any discussion of them, are being similarly shared by countless others. They may not have the same emotional response as me, but somebody, somewhere 'out there' is going through a similar emotional journey, or so it seems.

In this chapter I concentrate on this experience of radio listening and the intimacies that are seemingly engendered between the listener and the broadcaster(s).[1] I do this by concentrating on one particular type of programme: autobiographical recollections interspersed with musical examples that are meaningful to an invited guest and explained to the listener during the course of the broadcast. I focus on perhaps the most famous of these kinds of programmes – BBC Radio's *Desert Islands Discs* – although I see this as one particular instantiation of a broader trend. And I consider how such programmes blur the distinction between public and private domains, how this ambiguity becomes musically inflected, and how they can be seen as forms of music confessionals that align with other forms of confessing that increasingly characterise our age.

The Desert Island Play Frame

The radio paradox of feeling as though you are one while knowing you are among many has long been recognised. Media scholar Adam Crisell (1994, 11), for example, notes that 'while radio is a long-distance mode of communication it is also an inward, intimate medium' and one in which our personal imagination is 'integral […] to the way in which we decode virtually all its messages'. The media historian David Hendy (2000, 121) similarly observes that while the act of radio listening 'is more personal, more intimate', it is simultaneously 'an act which is replicated countless times among members of the wider audience'. Those who create radio programmes are well aware of these individualized intimacies and of the strategies they might employ to enhance them; Elwyn Evans (1977, 16), for example, who was previously responsible for radio training at the BBC, instructs potential broadcasters that, 'In radio, the audience to be aimed at is an audience of one (infinitely repeated)'.

The manner in which we engage with radio, and thus the kinds of intimacies it provokes, have changed over time, often as a response to changing technology.[2] In its earliest days, people listened to the radio on headphones, giving the experience a particularly individualized quality. Radio loudspeakers didn't become commonplace until after 1925 (Taylor 2002, 439), from which point radio consumption became rather more communal: groups and families would sit around the radio in the evening, sharing the experience of hearing the latest news, formulating or reinforcing musical and other tastes, and forging social bonds. This changed when television began to predominate from the 1950s, leading not only to a reduced radio audience but also to altered listening habits, including some reversion

to individualized listening (Hendy 2010, 215-16). Today, social radio listening can certainly still be found, both at home and in other situations such as in cars or commercial environments such as shops, gyms, hairdressers etc., where the radio provides background accompaniment to prevent the local soundscape being silent. But in such contexts, while the radio may be tuned in, the clientele are often not. It simply fills a sonic gap at a time when, in many Western commercial environments, silence is felt to be uncomfortable. People are often not consciously listening to what has become a background noise: their minds are elsewhere, a trend that Adam Crisell argues began in the 1960s (2002, 139).

Notwithstanding these occasional social/public engagements with radio, for many it has reverted to being a particularly individual experience, and there remains a sizeable audience for whom the medium not only comprises an important part of their personal entertainment spectrum but who also do listen attentively to particular programmes.[3] All of this is now underpinned by a broader range of technology. We listen to the radio via our phones or tablets, in our cars, at our computers, as well as through loudspeaker set-ups at home and in other ways. Headphones or earbuds have become commonplace, and the increasingly widespread use of noise-cancelling software now built into headphone technology deliberately increases our sense of isolation when wearing them, a technological development that consciously seeks to create yet more distance between the listener and their surroundings. We have more control than ever before over our personal cognitive space and the manner in which we can use sound and music to characterise that space and inflect our mood (see (Bull 2000)).

In the UK, one of the most popular types of radio programme involves asking invited guests to nominate a small number of musical pieces which they take to be personally meaningful, often because the pieces are related to specific life events. The most well-known example of this is *Desert Island Discs*, which has been a weekly feature of BBC Radio almost uninterruptedly since the programme started in 1942. But many similar programmes can now be identified. In the UK, there is *Private Passions*, a weekly fixture on BBC Radio 3 since 1995, *Beti a'i Phobol*, a Welsh-language version heard on BBC Radio Cymru since 1984, and *Moira Stewart Meets…*on Classic FM since 2019, all of which are constructed around musical extracts chosen by a guest. Following a similar format, ABC Classic FM in Australia broadcast *Midday Interview* from 1994 to 2016, while KPFT Radio in Houston, Texas showed no compunction in appropriating the title of the BBC original for its own *Desert*

Island Discs, broadcast from 2012-13 before the presenter took the same show to WMPG Radio in Portland, Maine. Other examples could be provided to show the widespread dissemination of this popular radio format, in many different languages. Such programmes remain remarkably popular. In the UK, *Desert Island Discs* (henceforth *DID*) has become something of a cultural institution: in 2022 it was the second most popular programme on British radio, after the news and weather,[4] and in the same year, the discovery of 90 previously lost *DID* recordings made national headline news (particularly on the BBC, which of course provides the programme's home).[5]

Such programmes inhabit an intimate, liminal radio space: betwixt and between the real world and its sounds which surround us, and the studio world in which the dialogue is taking place and the musical sounds are brought to life. The desert island play frame enhances this sense of individual isolation precisely because the *point* of imagining being on a desert island is to emphasise individual isolation.[6] The programme forces the guests – and by extension the listener who submits to and participates in the play frame – to consider how music might be used to ameliorate the solitude. Guests are invited to discuss the reasons behind their musical choices, and thus each episode becomes part autobiography, part radio confessional, and part disclosure of personal musical taste. As listeners, we hear the explanations of the associations the guest makes with particular pieces and how those associations arose. Such programmes thus provide insights into other peoples' lives, the place of music in those lives, and how the pieces at hand begin to accrue meaning, both for the individual and the broader social contexts in which they are enmeshed. Taken as a whole, they provide a substantial corpus of people talking about music – about themselves also, but the discussions are motivated at least to some degree by the whys and wherefores of their musical choices.

I have argued elsewhere (Cottrell 2017) that these programmes are akin to oral history, in that they are exercises in memory recall which punctuate the autobiographical narratives with pieces of music that are often selected because of the personal reminiscences the music provokes. As historical accounts they might be seen as 'doubly imperfect': not only are they subject to the selective editing of the human mind in the act of memory recall – as are all oral history narratives – but they are also further edited by the production team to fit the time allocated within the broadcasting schedule. But there are also important differences between oral history interviews and programmes such as *DID*. Whereas the former particularly emphasize the historical narrative which is their raisin d'être, programmes such as *DID* have

evolved to seek more from the interviewee as to the reasons underpinning their choices. Interviewers have become more inquisitive: less interested perhaps in the 'what?, when?, who?' of the unfolding narrative, and more focussed on 'why?' and 'how?'.

Guests have also become more willing to reveal themselves on the radio, and more accepting, it seems, of presenters who seek to probe, not merely to ask. Hendy (2017, 162-63) associates this shift with a series of programmes over the 1970s and 80s which changed the parameters of what was considered acceptable to discuss on air. This was particularly the case with a programme titled *In the Psychiatrist's Chair*, which ran from 1982 to 2001. Hosted by Anthony Clare, a distinguished professional psychiatrist as well as a broadcaster, the programme became renowned for the probing nature of Clare's questions, and for his capacity to get people often to reveal their private selves: the composer Michael Tippett openly reflected on his homosexuality; the tennis player Arthur Ashe discussed the death of his mother; journalist and campaigner Clare Raynor reflected on the abuse inflicted upon her by her parents; and so forth. If the BBC had previously shied away from exploring emotive subjects in too much personal detail – perhaps reflecting stereotypical character traits of its very British audience and their stiff upper lips – this had now changed. Emoting on air was cool, and programme makers used these new opportunities to explore the developing public interest in the private lives of radio guests, and harness that sense of the private self, publicly displayed.

The longevity of *DID* has seen the programme necessarily adapt to these changing broadcasting fashions, particularly in the approaches taken by its presenters. The creator of the programme, Roy Plomley (presented 1942-1985) epitomised the wartime era in which the programme was founded: his public school voice and his rather paternalistic, old-school approach – all guests were treated to lunch at his club – were accompanied by questions that were formulaic and never probing. He was followed by two presenters with journalistic backgrounds, Michael Parkinson (1986-1988) and Sue Lawley (1988-2006). Both brought a more enquiring approach, using the musical cues to elicit more personal insights from their guests, and not being afraid to ask more penetrating questions. But perhaps the most obvious emulation of Anthony Clare's presenter-as-psychiatrist approach has been that of Kirsty Young (2006-2018), whose soft Scottish vowels and low-pitched voice encouraged guests to reveal many personal insights, with the musical interludes sometimes used to reveal very intimate stories. As Jo Littler (2017, 100) points out, Young's interviewing style is rooted in

cultures of psychoanalysis and counselling, and Young has asked of the programme 'What's its point, what's the aim? For me it's to strike up an intimacy with the guest that allows them to trust me and in turn properly reveal themselves' (Young 2012, ix). Guests have themselves occasionally noted the parallels between the psychiatrist's couch and the desert island studio: the actress Cate Blanchett observes explicitly that 'I wonder, now, as I put myself on the couch',[7] while the film director Baz Luhrmann ironically notes to current presenter Lauren Laverne (2018+) that 'as I talk to you, doctor, I feel like we're getting to the heart of the matter.'[8] The poet Lemn Sissay similarly notes of his experience as a castaway that it was 'very rare that you have somebody sat across from you who can delve into, and then look out from behind your eyes through the music that you only listen to in your head' (2017, 30).

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This sense of psychoanalytic investigation encourages guests to be, on occasion, remarkably revealing, particularly about family relationships. The extent to which individuals are prepared to discuss aspects of their intimate lives is notable. Sometimes these narratives are very closely tied to the musical extracts heard in the programme while at other times the music can feel quite disconnected, even incongruous. The following examples endeavour to capture something of these discussions, although they are inevitably mitigated by the reduction of oral human behaviour (speech and musicking) to the two dimensional written text.

Sissay's 2015 broadcast discusses in detail his relationship with his adoptive parents and his shock at being rejected by them at the age of 12, having spent nearly all his life with them:

> *And they basically put me into care, into children's homes, and said that they would never write to me or contact me again. That was explicit in this deal […] Let me say this calmly […] basically I was a threat within the family. I was like a trojan horse. The devil was working inside of me. They were extremely religious […] I reserve the right to be emotional about what happened to me. I reserve the right to feel.* [9]

Even as written text the sense of intimate disclosure is clear. This section of the programme is both framed and reinforced by two pieces which listeners might construe as 'emotional' music. Immediately prior, we hear the massed bagpipes of the band of the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards playing *Amazing Grace*; Sissay noted some years later that in the responses he had received to the programme, 'that was the one where people consistently said that they cried' (2017, 30). As the conversation moves away from this particular narrative and on to Sissay's work with children in care homes, we hear his next choice, Gorecki's Symphony no. 3. This popular and again evocative piece is slowly faded in underneath his words, heightening the sense of drama contained within the narrative.

Disclosures of this kind, while powerful, are not uncommon on *DID* and similar programmes. Cate Blanchett muses whether her decision to stop playing the piano was because she associated it with a sense of guilt when, as a child, she didn't get up from the piano and kiss her father goodbye as he left the house on the day he died; the disclosure is followed by the song 'Bésame Mucho' performed by Trio Los Panchos, because of its association with Mexico, near where her father grew up.[10] Richard E. Grant speaks very openly about his father's alcoholism, and how his father attempted to shoot him in the garden of their home after catching his son pouring bottles of whisky away because Grant hoped it would stop his father drinking.[11] And I have noted elsewhere (Cottrell 2017, 271-72) the details of the pianist Lang Lang's relationship with his own father, and how the latter encouraged Lang Lang to commit suicide when, as a nine-year old student, the young pianist was thrown out of his local music conservatoire.[12]

Naturally, many intimate revelations about family relationships are more positive, especially when they are connected with recordings selected for desert island solitude because they feature a member of the family whom the castaway would wish to recall. The founder of the Iceland supermarket chain, Sir Malcolm Walker, chose a performance of 'Quando me'n vo'' from Puccini's *La bohème* given by his wife and amateur singer, Natalie Walker. She had given him a copy of the recording 'on condition I never played it for anybody. But given that I'll be by myself on the island and only me will hear it, I will take that with me'.[13] The composer Gavin Bryars selected a recording of one of his own pieces, the Epilogue from *Wonderlawn*, played by an ensemble including his two daughters, one of whom was playing a cello owned by his mother. As he observes, 'it's kind of a family album'.[14] The politician Anthony Wedgwood-Benn (Tony Benn) chose a madrigal composed and performed by his

son Stephen, which had also been performed at the funeral of their sister/daughter-in-law ten years previously.[15] Such examples assert the intimate bonds that exist between these family members, musically manifested for the purposes of the desert island play frame.

A different aspect of the quasi-psychoanalytical insights such programmes produce is when guests reveal something of their own life struggles, especially around issues of mental health. The actor Stephen Graham discusses at length his attempted suicide as he struggled to cope with moving away from his family to live by himself in London while attending drama school. He notes his gratitude to friends and family for supporting him through a difficult period, before the narrative moves on to his next musical choice, Chaka Khan's 1983 hit 'Ain't Nobody'. The song is significant for Graham and his wife because they met around the time of his suicide attempt; her support eventually led to their marriage. While the song itself is not explicitly about the redemptive power of love, its place in the programme, iconically representing the couple's relationship, has a redemptive quality to it.[16]

In another episode, the actor Tom Hanks retreats from the microphone as his voice breaks when recalling his childhood loneliness. He notes that what was 'rattling around inside my head' as he considered which tracks to choose, was trying to find a 'vocabulary of the loneliness'. Immediately prior to this, Hank's disc choice is Strauss's *Also sprach Zarathustra*, because of its association with Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Although the association is not made explicit in the *DID* programme, the film is characterized by minimal amounts of dialogue and extensive sections accompanied only by music which, together with the overarching theme of journeying into the emptiness of space, provides a fitting set-up for Hanks's narrative about loneliness.[17] Even Kirsty Young, having stepped down from her presenting role because of illness but then invited back as a guest castaway, discusses at length how being diagnosed with a chronic pain condition which required her to change many things in her life affected her self identity: 'It grinds you away, you lose your personality, you lose your sense of humour, you lose your sense of self. There's all sorts of things that go with it. It's awful.'[18]

These frank disclosures of family relationships and personal challenges, buttressed by examples of personal musical taste, are writ large with the act of confession. As such, they align with what Michel Foucault sees as an increasing importance attached to confession in Western societies. He argues that we now inhabit 'a singularly confessing society' in which

acts of confession have become 'one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth' and that 'Western man has become a confessing animal'. Foucault is particularly concerned here with sexuality and the manner in which discourses about sex have evolved, but he notes that what began as rituals of religious confession – quintessential spaces in which sexual activities might be admitted – have now become commonplace in areas as diverse as 'justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relationships'. And in words which seem particularly appropriate when applied to confessions of musical taste, Foucault argues that 'society has taken upon itself to solicit and hear the imparting of individual pleasures' (Foucault 1990, 58-63).

The castaway radio programme can similarly be seen as having ritualizing characteristics in which acts of confession – the revealing of personal stories, insights and intimacies – take centre stage. These acts are scaffolded by each guest's musical choices, and so this mediated ritual of confession, like most rituals around the world, becomes characterized not only by its spoken words but also by its musical soundtrack. The music serves analogous purposes to rituals elsewhere. It punctuates the interactions between the participants in the event, moves the ritual from one stage to the next until the final conclusion, and heightens emotional states for those involved, including the audience listening from afar. Indeed, in some ways the music legitimizes the act of confession. Within the desert island play frame it provides the mechanism through which confession is enabled, and an essential element through which the 'hermeneutics of oneself', as Foucault (1997, 182) puts it, become actualized.

As with other rituals, the music not only provides the framework for the event, but it also helps to assert its proper format, the idea that 'this is how it should be done'. There is no variation between the format of different episodes. The mediated ritual is only complete when all eight pieces of music have been heard (and, in the particular case of *DID*, when a book and a luxury item have also been chosen) at which point the participants resume their normal lives. And while there is no reconfiguring of the social order after the ritual, as classical ritual theory might have it (Gennep 1960), there is arguably an aesthetic, affective reordering, as those among the radio audience re-assess their relationships with the music at hand in light of the confessions of others as to what that music means to them.

One of the consequences of these intimate dramatic narratives, therefore, is their contribution to musical taste formation. We get some insights into this from guests who have reflected on

their appearances on the programme. Several have noted the reactions they had to their appearance, and the impact of their choices on the musical lives of others. The philosopher Angie Hobbs (2017, 151) notes how the discussion of her sister's death – which in her programme is followed by an excerpt from Beethoven's Symphony No.7, 'quite simply my favourite piece of music by my favourite composer' – had provoked responses from many people who had been 'in floods of tears at that bit, because it had taken them back to when they'd lost a brother, a sister, a parent'; the psychologist Uta Frith (2017, 146-47) observes that 'some listeners could clearly identify with my experiences and musical choices, and I was very touched by this' with some telling her that 'Ah, these are just my sort of musical tastes'; and the composer Gavin Bryars (2017, 283) considers the impact of his appearance on the development of musical taste when he notes that 'for many, I had put something in front of them that they had never encountered before'. I recognise some of these listening patterns in my own reaction to certain programmes. Moved by Richard E. Grant's response to an Eva Cassidy track, for example (detailed below), I explored her back catalogue at some length to familiarise myself more with her work. Replicated across the listening audience, the public intimacies guests display undoubtedly contribute to the formation of taste communities and hence, in some small way, musical canons.

Like rituals in other contexts, the music confessional is also an act of theatre, and as Richard Schechner (1993) and Victor Turner (1990) have pointed out, ritual and theatre are closely related forms of performance. On *DID*, guests are performing their life stories for the listener's benefit. The presenter is a supporting actor in the performance, and as audience members we too play a role in creating this sense of theatre. First, because we can choose when – and when not – to engage with the performance. Comedian and actor George Burns identifies this quality when reflecting on early radio's impact on the demise of vaudeville: 'Radio made everybody who owned one a theater manager. They could listen to whatever they wanted' (quoted in Taylor 2002, 437). The rise of internet radio and podcasting have only increased this quality. We are no longer at the behest of the radio schedulers: we can listen to an enormous amount of material from all over the world, in whatever order we wish, at times of our choosing and to complement our personal mood of the moment.

We are further involved in the creative process because, as the old adage would have it, the pictures are better on the radio. That is, we conjure up in our imagination the images which are aurally and orally presented to us. As the radio playwright Frances Gray (1981, 49) puts

it, listeners must be 'designers, producers, scene shifters, and the theatre itself' and thus the drama of radio is played out on a stage of our own construction. Gray goes on to note that it is the medium's intimacy which encourages the audience's complicity in this creative partnership: 'Like a bedtime story, it whispers in our ear' (51).

Our own imaginary reconstructions of what are often inherently dramatic confessions are aided by the theatrical strategies sometimes adopted by the producers. For example, musical extracts might be faded in or out underneath the speaker's voice, thus combining the two in a manner that Julie Brown (2017, 247) sees as creating a radio equivalent of the biopic, a film genre in which carefully chosen biographical moments are recreated on screen, often underscored or interspersed with extensive music cues. I would add that while the programmes are not intended to be radio drama per se, they are perhaps even more reminiscent of that genre than its filmic equivalent.

In the case of *DID*, these dramatic qualities have been enhanced as the programme's production methods have evolved. Until 1985, when Roy Plomley was the presenter, the musical extracts were edited into the programme *after* the interview. The music was unheard by either the guest or the presenter at the time of the interview itself. Since Plomley's death, the tracks chosen by the guest have been played as the interview proceeds. The music is thus more tightly embedded within the dialogue. This heightens the emotional tension of the programme as a whole and, at times, provides keen insights into the way in which a musical extract moves the guest and the emotional import they attach to a particular piece. The programme with the actor Richard E. Grant provides a powerful example.[19] Grant – a particularly revealing guest who argues that he finds secrets 'toxic' – recounts the death of his wife, to whom he was married for 35 years but who had died from lung cancer only a year or so before the programme was recorded. Unusually for *DID*, the producers continue to play his chosen track – Eva Cassidy singing Sting's *Fields of Gold* – throughout the conversation, rather than fading it out, so that music and dialogue can be heard equally. We hear Grant nearly sobbing, certainly having difficulty talking, such is the music's affect when counterposed – for him – with the profound loss he felt from his wife's bereavement. He comments that 'I'm sorry I've been unable to hold it together listening to that […] I've fallen apart […] Why did I choose that one? Goodness me, I'm done.' It is a particularly moving moment that illustrates the heightened sense of intimacy we get from knowing the castaway

is hearing the music in real time, as are we. Our own emotional responses to the music are amplified by hearing theirs.

Audible Histories

Radio conjures up feelings of intimacy in part because it subliminally taps into modes of listening that stretch back millennia. Even the notion of the radio *audience* takes us back to the root of that word, 'to hear', from the Latin *audire*, in a way that predates Enlightenment emphasis on visual culture (Ong 1958); it reminds us of a time when orality was the norm, and visual culture, particularly writing, was much less central to peoples' lives than it is today. Hendy (2010) draws attention to the '"magical" and uncanny elements of listening to disembodied voices and sounds' (215) on the radio and to the essential continuities that remain from human cultures of the past. He notes Daniel Lord Smail's call for 'greater recognition of the "neurophysiological legacy of our deep past"' to illustrate how 'ancient collective memories may persist over time' (224). Specifically, Hendy considers the place of *The Shipping Forecast,* a longstanding daily UK radio item which broadcasts detailed weather information for the shipping zones surrounding the British Isles. Arguably redundant at a time when detailed weather information is available to shipping and coastal communities in so many other ways, the programme remains a staple of BBC Radio 4, whose listeners respond with indignation whenever its time is changed or if the threat of discontinuation appears. Drawing on the work of the archaeologist Barry Cunliffe (2001), Hendy argues that *The Shipping Forecast* evokes for the UK radio audience a connection with the Atlantic Ocean, which itself represents 'a timeless human experience', and that this connection with the familiar sea provides 'both reassurance and a sense of awe'. This image of the comforting sea connotes 'subliminal notions of home, nation, family, safety and order, each time it casts a metaphorical net around the collective audience' (Hendy 2010, 224). To listen to *The Shipping Forecast* then, is not so much for the detailed information on weather patterns it provides, but for the pleasure of subliminally inferring the constant and comforting presence of the sea for the UK's island peoples.

In a similar vein, I suggest that radio entertainments such as *Desert Island Discs* tap into neurophysiological legacies connected to music and storytelling, perhaps especially the kind of epic poetry considered by Albert Lord in *The Singer of Tales* (1960). Drawing on his own

research and that of Milman Parry in south-eastern Europe, Lord argues that the capacity of singers to produce sung ballads of epic proportions is based less on prodigious feats of memory and more on the singers' capacity to improvise their stories around certain themes, and through formulas that enable them to match their narrative to fit the rhythmic and metrical pattern underpinning their performance. Lord sees this as explaining the practice of much epic poetry, including works of Homer such as *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.[20]

Some of this resonates with the approach taken by *DID* programme makers today. There are strong elements of formulaic repetition in the programme, not so much in the speech patterns themselves – although certain phrases such as 'What is your next piece and why have you chosen it?' do recur – but in the unchanging format of the programme which provides a framework or formula within which ideas are improvised by the guest speaker. The individuals who appear on these programmes are well known to us because they have achieved some level of distinction; they are often celebrities, and in our media-saturated times they take on larger-than-life personas akin to the heroic figures of yore. Being invited to appear on *DID* is often seen as an accolade, the media equivalent of having been given an honour in the system of royal and state patronage that continues to permeate British life. Guests can be seen as having a kind of hero status, and our curiosity about their lives and achievements continues to drive the popularity of the programme. Like epic poetry traditions elsewhere, we are listening to stories about our heroes and heroines, illustrated by music and recounted for our entertainment and edification.

Of course, there are also some important differences from traditions of epic poetry. To begin with, these desert island tales are told in the first person rather than in the third person, as autobiographies rather than biographies; and they are spoken, not sung: the music punctuates the narrative and provides the basis for some of the commentary, but it is not integral to the oral delivery: this is not a sung tradition. And a forty-minute radio programme is not 'epic' in the sense that might be understood in other contexts, or even when compared with other creative outputs such as opera or film; although, as Lord points out, length is not in fact a criterion of epic poetry, and he tends instead to use the term 'oral narrative poetry' so as to include 'all story poetry, the romantic or historical as well as the heroic' (1960, 6).

Nevertheless, I suggest that in listening to such programmes, characterised by forms of words and music brought together for the purpose of retelling the story of somebody's life, we

subconsciously tune in to a distant cultural heritage in which oral storytelling, particularly tales of exceptional achievement undertaken by mythical or quasi-mythical heroes and heroines, was used to provide both entertainment and moral signposts in relation to the manner in which lives might be lived. And if, following Hendy, *The Shipping Forecast* resonates with deep-seated associations with the sea and its place in the lives of the Atlantic peoples, then perhaps both the fictional frame of the desert island and, in the case of *DID*, the signature tune of Eric Coates's *By the Sleepy Lagoon*, overlaid as it is with the sounds of lapping waves and crying gulls, serves a similar purpose. We may not be at the seaside but, as an island people, the British are never very far from it nor from its reassuring permanence. And this too resonates with those subliminal associations we make with island securities and the comforting presence of the sea around us, as we listen to these tales of heroic derring-do.

Conclusion

In his investigation of the ways in which nationalist ideologies are supported by people who conceive themselves as being part of 'Imagined Communities' that transcend national boundaries, Benedict Anderson (2006, 35) notes that one of the mechanisms employed is through the act of reading a daily paper, which he describes as a 'mass ceremony': 'It is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of the skull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whose identity he has not the slightest notion'. Anderson's words resonate strongly with the ideas of Hendy and others noted above, in which the intimate act of radio listening is 'replicated countless times among members of the wider audience'. A programme such as *DID* does not have an explicit agenda, certainly not a nationalist one, although both it and the radio channel on which it is broadcast, BBC Radio 4, are sometimes taken as markers of a vaguely conceived sense of middle-class Englishness. But the programme's audience can be seen as a kind of imagined community in which musical tastes are compared, shared, or rejected, and through which meanings about music become generated or enhanced in part because of the associations made between musical sound and autobiographical narrative.

Hendy notes how the place of music in the programme, and the importance attached to the music, have fluctuated over time. Moving the programme's internal home from the BBC's 'Gramophone Department' to the more speech oriented 'Current Affairs Magazine

Programmes' department in 1985 signalled that music was not seen as the programme's raison d'être and that the musical extracts risked being seen as, in Hendy's words, 'inconvenient boulders in a stream of sustained questioning' (2017, 165-68). This trend has continued in the podcasts that are now made available on the BBC website where, we are told at the beginning of each episode, 'for rights reasons' the music excerpts have been shortened in comparison with the original broadcast. If *DID* can be seen as a form of confession then, it is the oral confession which the programme makers seek to extract that has become its signal feature, and the musical sounds that prompt that confession have been further reduced from boulders to large pebbles by the intellectual property constraints of twenty-first century podcasting.

Nevertheless, these confessions of musical taste and the association of music with life events and personal relationships remain forms of public intimacy. Personal relationships, and the manner in which they have been established, reinforced or broken down, together with the details of individual personal challenges, become played out on the national stage – and now, through the internet, internationally – whereas until quite recently they might have been kept private, perhaps only 'within the family'. While these desert island confessionals may lack the sensationalism of TV programmes such as *Jerry Springer* in the USA or *The Jeremy Kyle Show* in the UK, they are a more genteel part of the same media spectrum, whether experienced on TV (Priest 1995) or within social media (Kaplan 2021).

Perhaps our continuing interest in how other people express their musical identity also aligns with the increased importance attached to individual identity construction more widely over the last 30 years. Individuality and the personal choices through which it is articulated are for many some of the major preoccupations of our times, at least throughout much of the Global North. Some of this has been driven by the mobile phone and the rise of image-dependent social media such as Facebook and Instagram. Putting our private selves on public display has become the norm. The ongoing popularity of programmes such as *DID* and its many imitators is part of the same zeitgeist, and it is perhaps no coincidence that the *DID* tenure of that most probing of presenters, Kirsty Young, coincided with this rise in public self-revelation. If we take vicarious pleasure in seeing the lives of others represented in photographic detail on their social media pages, so too do we engage vicariously with the phonographic associations people make with their life stories. And the use of musical extracts on which to hang these stories ensures that the music itself becomes inflected in particular

ways, both in the public domain and in that private, intimate space in which those of us who listen to the programme imagine is created only for us.

Desert Island Discs and its ilk are thus not only displays of intimate connections with others but also with music, of how music both configures and emblematizes personal relationships, engenders emotional affect and underpins individual identity. Such programmes provide opportunities for those 'confessing animals' who appear on them to reveal to us something of their musical selves. We may concur with or reject their choices, compare their musical tastes with ours and privately reflect on our own histories while ostensibly focusing on theirs, as part of our own creative imaginary. We must be mindful, therefore, as we tune in to these discographic revelations, that more often than not our own musical identity is being in some way refashioned through the confessions of others to which we bear witness.

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[1] The focus on radio in this chapter is also an oblique tribute to the role that radio has played in John Baily’s life. Not only because the medium finds an occasional place in his own published research but also because it provides the sonic backdrop to life in the Baily/Doubleday household. While the television sits in a corner of their house covered by a cloth and largely mute, the radio is a constant presence, providing the soundtrack to their everyday lives.

[2] See also Jonathan Sterne (2003) on the development of 'audile techniques' over the course of the long nineteenth century, and particularly the evolution of listening as 'a site of skill and potential virtuosity' (93).
[3] The most recent figures suggest that 82.5% of the USA population listen to radio at some point during the week (https://www.statista.com/topics/1330/radio/), while in the UK the figure is 89% (https://www.rajar.co.uk/docs/news/RAJAR_DataRelease_InfographicQ32022.pdf). Last accessed 30 January 2023.
[4] https://yougov.co.uk/ratings/entertainment/popularity/radio-programmes-podcasts/all last accessed 30 January 2022.
[5] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-63215698. For a full list of these recently discovered episodes, see https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/MdQtwz2d88J9TV2mMqWx84/a-full-list-of-the-rescued-episodes-of-desert-island-discs
[6] *DID* also resonates with a long literary tradition of desert island solitude that would include books such as Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* or Stevenson's *Treasure Island*. See also Tynan 2022.
[7] *DID* 11 December 2022.
[8] *DID* 22 November 2022.
[9] *DID* 11 October 2015.
[10] *DID* 11 December 2022.
[11] *DID* 6 November 2022.
[12] *DID* 31 October 2010.
[13] *DID* 8 January 2023.
[14] *DID* 5 April 1998.
[15] *DID* 15 January 1989.
[16] *DID* 17 November 2019.
[17] D*ID* 8 May 2016.
[18] *DID* 25 December 2022. As a previous presenter of the show, Young was accorded a longer episode than normal, and these words are some distance from the musical choices that either precede (Christine McVie singing *Songbird*) or follow (Victoria's *Magnum Mysterium*) the discussion at this point. Direct associations therefore feel somewhat contrived.
[19] *DID* 6 November 2022.
[20] For an overview of a broader range of epic poetry traditions see Hatto and Hainsworth 1989.