

The Connected Histories of the BBC

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| Provenance: | <p>The file reproduced here was provided by the BBC to be made publicly accessible through the Connected Histories of the BBC catalogue hosted by the University of Sussex. It was selected in 2021 from one of five collections:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BBC Oral History • BBC History of North Regional Broadcasting • BBC Horizon at 50 • BBC World Service Moving Houses Project • Alexandra Palace Television Society Oral History |
| Clearance: | Interviews have been reviewed and edited to comply with GDPR and other requirements. |
| Copyright: | <p>© BBC</p> <p>© Alexandra Palace Television Society</p> |
| Conditions of use: | <p>This interview is available for private research. If you wish to use any of the interview in a published work or for a commercial purpose, permission must be requested from the BBC at</p> <p>historyteam@bbc.co.uk</p> <p>apts@apts.org.uk (for Alexandra Palace material)</p> |
| Partner: | The Connected Histories of the BBC research project was led by the University of Sussex, 2017-2022, funded by the AHRC. |
| More information: | The project's public resource including more information on terms and conditions of use are available at: https://chbbc.sussex.ac.uk/ |

File: LR0003428-A-001 - PATRICIA HUGHES

Duration: 0:26:34

Typist: 1036

START AUDIO

0:00:02

Interviewer: Right. Well, did you expect to have a career in broadcasting?
Was it something you had in mind at the outset?

Patricia Hughes: Do you mean earlier on? I mean, before I-

Interviewer: The very beginning.

Patricia Hughes: Yes. No, I didn't. I had no idea that I would. But you see, when war broke out in 1939, I happened to be on holiday in Sweden with my parents, who- my father worked out in Malaya. And the only thing we could do was to get back to Malaya so that all thoughts of career, so far as I was concerned, went out of the window.

I had just taken matric, 16½, and so the only thing that could happen was that I would go back to the Far East with my parents because we were in Sweden and they didn't know what the war was going to do. They thought they were going to be air raids and all that.

So what I wanted to do was to go on the stage. That was the thing I always longed for, but of course, this completely hit that.

So I went out and I had two years in Malaya just having a lovely time with my parents. And then, of course, the Japs came in, and with a week to the fall of Singapore we managed to get out on one of the last boats.

So anyway, after a lot of fairly hairy experiences, we got to Durban in South Africa because we'd had to leave my father behind, who eventually went into a prison camp. We thought if we stopped off at Durban, we would be near Johannesburg, which was the centre of the Red Cross, and we would hear how he was, whether he was still alive and what was happening.

Anyway, going back to England at that time was really out of the question because, you know, it was- everything was in turmoil and they didn't want a lot of people suddenly arriving. However, while I was in South Africa, I did meet some people who were connected with the SABC. So I did have a taste of it. I mean, they gave me little tiny, little, well, really little roles in very inferior plays. But I was excited to do this, so I had a little taste.

So anyway, the time came and we decided we would make a dash for it to come back to England in 1944. I think it was '44. While I'd been in South Africa, I went to the local polytechnic to train to be a secretary because I couldn't do anything. We had no money. We'd left everything behind. We walked out of our houses with one suitcase each, little suitcase, and we had no money. So I had to earn some money.

So I thought, well, the only thing to do is to go and train to be a secretary. So off I went and became a terribly inefficient secretary. However, I was able to make a little money on which we could live. We eventually got back to England in 1944 and I happened to have two friends who worked in the BBC. One was a secretary and one I'd had- was a great friend in Malaya

who had become an announcer on the General Overseas Service, which is now the World Service of the BBC.

So I had two friends in the BBC, so I thought, "Well, if I've got to work in an office, it would be nice to work where I knew somebody." So I applied. I sent in my application and, to my amazement, they accepted me. So I joined what was then known as the Overseas Audience Research Department, where I was probably the BBC's most inefficient secretary. I couldn't do anything right. But anyway, I did the best I could.

Then out of the blue one of the women announcers on the General Overseas Service wanted to leave, so a vacancy came up. I'd known this friend of mine, Helen Coleman, who was an announcer at the time. And I thought, "I'd love to do that. I'm sure I couldn't, but I'd love to try it." So, of course, this was a chance out of the blue. I mean, I couldn't lose anything. I didn't know anybody that I could get any kind of help on this.

However, Helen was a great friend, a friend of mine, and we shared a flat for a few months, and she used to school me a bit in the evenings from Radio Times. I used to go down to the studio and see her working. I watched her doing it and I thought, "My God, I don't think I could do this. It's too difficult." However, the vacancy went up and I applied, not having a hope in heaven of getting it.

I went through the test and it was closed-circuit radio studio linkup. The panel who were judging us, I never saw. They were sitting in another studio. You were told over the tannoy, you know, over the talk-back, what you were to do next. I remember there was a leader recital. I think it was- the singer was Victoria to Los Angeles or somebody like that. I didn't know any German at all. I literally did not know a word of German. I'd done no German at school. I had no idea how you pronounce this.

All it was, was from the Radio Times with the leader first lines- you know how it is- in German. So I spluttered my way through this. I thought, "Oh, my God, this is frightful," and I could hear titters coming through the talk-back, you know, from the panel, who'd left it on. So I thought, "Oh well, that's that. I've obviously failed absolutely hopelessly." But I didn't give up. I went on and I just hoped that somehow I should get through.

So a few weeks later, I was called into my boss's room and he said, "Well, I'm very happy to tell you that you've got the job." So I said, "But how could you give me that job?" I said, "My German was appalling."

So he said, "Oh yes, that doesn't matter because we have a pronunciation department here and it won't take you long to learn the basic pronunciations of German. But one of the things that you impressed us so with was that you didn't give up. You just went on and everybody else sort of gave up at that point." He said, "That is what we want. That's the quality we want." And I got the job and I just couldn't believe it.

Interviewer: So General Overseas Service.

Patricia Hughes: Generally Overseas Service, I joined and there I- and then, of course, the hours were simply appalling because you had to work all night. You had to work long, long hours, and your lack of sleep and getting up at all hours. It was really very mechanical because transmitter switches and things, you had to say, "This is London," at exactly 17 seconds past the penultimate minute or the- you know.

It really became, after many, many years, extremely boring and very tiring because you had to stay awake and do these things,

and none of the joys of going out to present concerts, or very few. I mean occasionally we did the odd programme, but most of it was pre-recorded and recorded, so you never had the sort of, the joy of actually performing.

0:07:52

Interviewer: Did you apply for an announcer's job, therefore, in domestic services?

Patricia Hughes: Yes, I did. There weren't many to go, I have to say, and I never- I didn't get anywhere. Then I was transferred to Birmingham for six months because I was so, quite frankly, fed up with that job. I had a lovely time in Birmingham but for personal reasons I wanted to come back to London. And then Jean Metcalfe, who'd married Cliff Michelmore by that time, was having a baby and I stood in for her.

I think she did- I think Two-way Family Favourites are still going on and I think I did a few of those while she was away because we did Forces Favourites. I mean, it was a thing that, you know, it was something that was part of the job on the General Overseas Service. Then I think she had another baby and she decided to give it up. So her job came up and I applied and I got it.

My whole life changed from then because I ceased to be totally exhausted all the time. It was such fun and it was also a great challenge to know that the audience was outside the studio walls, rather than six weeks away in terms of letters, which of course, on the General Overseas Service, you never sort of felt the importance and the urgency of a live audience, if you see what I mean.

0:09:21

Interviewer: When you got her job, was that Home Service, Light Programme...?

Patricia Hughes: No, that was Light Programme.

Interviewer: Simply Light Programme?

Patricia Hughes: That was only Light Programme. Then I got put on to various Home Service things and I thoroughly enjoyed all this. Then, to my rather awful feelings, I got asked to be put onto the Third Programme. And I felt totally inadequate for that because I really- I mean, I was mixing with people like Alvar and Frank Phillips and all these, Chris Pemberton and all those announcers that were on the Third Programme at that time.

I felt totally inadequate and very humble in that place. So I was there, and I can't remember how long I was with the Third, but I was doing the Third as well as Home Service. Well, we did all those things actually.

0:10:16

Interviewer: All at once? That was still sort of early to mid-'50s we're talking about now?

Patricia Hughes: That was about- yes, it was, because I got married in 1958.

Interviewer: You left then, didn't-

Patricia Hughes: No, I did not leave then. I tried to go on. I got nannies and things for my baby, which I had in 1960. And I found that I was just getting split into six different bits and I had to give it up.

Interviewer: In about '61 or '62?

Patricia Hughes: That was '62, I gave it up.

0:10:48

Interviewer: Right, we will come back to that. Now, the Third Programme in the '50s, describe what it was like to work in it, please.

Patricia Hughes: Well, it was a big challenge. I mean, Leslie Stokes was our immediate boss and he was an absolute perfectionist. If you put a stress in the wrong place, I mean, you got a memo several pages long saying how illiterate you were and you really had no business to be working with him. Of course, I was getting stresses wrong, practically every name I could think of. But he was wonderful because he did, he demanded a very high standard, which one never felt one was able to fulfil actually. But it was a very good training.

Interviewer: The atmosphere certainly that comes over on recordings of that time of the Third was very, very solemn.

Patricia Hughes: It was, and this, again, was very frightening. I mean, to giggle on the air would be absolutely unheard of. I mean, even to fluff, you just had a sleepless night afterwards because you thought, "Oh, I'm no good, I'm not good enough." I mean, it was so- it was very, very high standard was demanded from you. Of course women didn't read the news so I never read the news on the Third Programme, but there weren't-

Interviewer: There wasn't a news on the Third in those days-

Patricia Hughes: Oh, weren't there? I'd forgotten that.

Interviewer: No, news wasn't brought in until 1965, interestingly.

Patricia Hughes: Oh, I couldn't remember that. I thought there was the odd one.

Interviewer: The first bulletin was 100 years old. It was the 1851 week, but that's another story (Laughter).

0:12:23

Now, continuity work, between programmes. You weren't allowed- well, I will put the question: were you allowed to go quite quickly from one programme to another?

Patricia Hughes: There was complete flexibility. There was no- nothing like- you see, the General Overseas Service, you had to be absolutely accurate and no programme must overrun because of this never ending problem with switching transmitters for different countries. So there was no question of clashing the pips or Big Ben or whatever it was. You absolutely had to stick within the scheduled time of that particular programme.

On Radio 3, there was nothing like that. What am I talking about-

Interviewer: The Third-

Patricia Hughes: The Third Programme. It was completely flexible and the programme could overrun six, seven minutes and you would just let it go.

Interviewer: Or even 60 or 70 sometimes. I mean, yes, extraordinary.

Patricia Hughes: Yes, indeed. So that was tremendous relaxation because you didn't have to feel that you were going to be sacked if you were a second late.

0:13:27

Interviewer: I mean, you were told to leave very long gaps, weren't you, after music, if possible, between programmes? Long pauses, long, almost ecclesiastical silences?

Patricia Hughes: I think we were but I've forgotten. I really had forgotten, but I don't think too much because if you left a pause of longer than 45 seconds, the transmitter switched.

0:13:48

Interviewer: What about your own choice of material? Could you pick readings or other things to fill up gaps if programmes underran?

Patricia Hughes: I don't remember that. There were readings, I think, very erudite readings. And I think they were specially chosen. I don't think I would have chosen them. But of course, always, as now, you had boxes of fill-up records which you could choose yourself. And, you know, it was up to you to choose a suitable fill for the concert that's just ended or, you know, what was coming. I mean, it was up to you to choose that.

0:14:34

Interviewer: How much did you know about classical music?

Patricia Hughes: Very little. Very little. I mean, I like music. I learnt the piano at school, but really all my education had been completely upset by the war.

0:14:47

Interviewer: Presumably besides continuity duties, you were going out to Maida Vale and so on, indeed already to outside concerts to do some announcing on the spot?

Patricia Hughes: Yes, indeed. Yes, we did a lot in Maida Vale, a lot in the concert hall, the old concert hall. I'm sad it's gone, that, because it was a nice little hall. Well, you just did just what you were- you know, absolutely anything. I mean, things came up. But of course, later on, I think one did- one seemed to do much more, but I may be wrong about that.

0:15:24

Interviewer: It seems to me the atmosphere in your first spell in the Third must have been pretty different from the time later on. Or does it not stand out?

Patricia Hughes: Well, I think it was different in the fact that later on it was much more relaxed. And the thing that was very inhibiting and very frightening was this absolutely rigid insistence on accuracy. I mean, really, you felt that you really weren't a human being in a kind of way, that you couldn't show yourself. You had to kind of, you know, be what was expected of you.

This was quite frightening for me because I didn't feel- I just couldn't relax in it, and so therefore- I don't know what recording is now, but hearing them now, what they would be like, I don't know whether that sort of tension would come out. But certainly it was very frightening.

Also I think it never left me, actually, because when I went back years later, I've always had this feeling of it must be

perfect, it must be perfect, which, of course, is very frowned on now. People like you to be human.

Interviewer: Well, this is very important. I mean, I would have thought that you were one of the people who had actually got the balance between the perfectionism, the accuracy of what you're reading or saying, but also the warmth of personality.

Patricia Hughes: Well, that's very sweet of you to say so, and I hope it did work that way.

0:16:48

Interviewer: Were you trying consciously for that? Because Tom Crowe says that he was, that he almost made mistakes deliberately so as to bring some humanity into the network.

Patricia Hughes: Oh, I used to tease Tom about his mistakes. "Have you rehearsed the morning yet, Tom?" (Laughter) It used to make him very cross. No, but I think he was right, but it can be a little bit boring to listeners if you're making too many mistakes and obviously contrived ones, which occasionally I think he did fall into.

0:17:17

Interviewer: You did sometimes slip in your own comments about programmes, didn't you?

Patricia Hughes: I did, but only when I knew I was retiring. (Laughter)

Interviewer: Tell me what you did.

Patricia Hughes: Well, I did a terrible thing one night. It was Music in our Time. You were listening, were you? (Laughter) And I cannot relate, myself, to very contemporary music. I mean, I'm too old hat for that. We'd had a particularly awful programme, for me, that night. I'm sure it was very good for people who like it, but for me it was a nightmare. And it went on and on and on and on, with squeaks and groans and, you know, something like six drunken cats on hot tin roofs.

I thought, "I can't stand this another minute." And it ended with about, I think it was about three minutes to go to the next programme because although you could start a programme late, you could never start it early, you see, on [__0:18:16]. So after that was finished and I closed it, I said, "Well, now we've got about three minutes before our next programme, so let's have some music." And they were furious. I had a five-page memo saying, who did I think I was and...

Interviewer: Actually I think it happened more than once. (Laughter)

Patricia Hughes: Did it?

Interviewer: There was that famous one shortly before you retired.

Patricia Hughes: That was [___0:18:44]-

Interviewer: There was one other logged earlier on.

Patricia Hughes: Don't remind me of it. Which one was it?

Interviewer: It was the same sort of thing. It was Music in our Time again.

Patricia Hughes: Oh yes. (Laughter)

Interviewer: You became notorious for- But actually, this is a very important point because Radio 3 has never quite known where to put very serious contemporary music, and-

Patricia Hughes: Well, it is a problem. I'm sure it's a problem. But I know I was naughty about that. I was naughty. But when you think Hans Keller fudged- do you remember that, when contemporary music began to be heard quite- and he did a spoof on the whole thing.

Interviewer: Yes, Mobile for Tape and Percussion by Piotr Zac, yes, famous.

Patricia Hughes: Yes, dragging chairs across the studio.

Interviewer: That's right. (Laughter) It's a famous event.

Patricia Hughes: Yes.

0:19:28

Interviewer: Anyway, you came back into Radio 3. It was Cormac who I think got you back, wasn't it?

Patricia Hughes: No, no. No, it wasn't Cormac. Luckily Andrew Timothy was head of presentation at that time and he had worked with me before. After nine years away, I thought- well, apart from anything else, I needed to work because we needed the money. But I also needed it for my own self. I wanted to work again. I thought, "Well, I don't know. I'm sure they won't take me back, but you can't lose anything, so I'll ring them up."

So I rang them up and luckily Tim answered the telephone, Andrew Timothy answered the phone. And I said, "You know, I'd love to work again. Do you think there's the slightest hope?" And he said, "Well, they don't take women, you know. We don't have many women now." I said, "Well, I'd love to do some work. I mean, if you are short people in the holiday period, I would love to do the odd bit." He said. "Oh, well, I'll remember that."

Sure enough, in about six weeks, he said, "You know, we are a bit short in the holiday period. Do you think you could come and give us the odd shift?" I said, "Well, I'd love to." So I did, and it was about one, one or two programmes in a month. Then they began to ask me a bit more. Then they asked me to

do a couple of proms, which put the fear of God into me because I was completely out of it. I mean, it took me six months to realise the job hadn't actually changed. Amazing, isn't it?

0:21:06

Interviewer: What sort of date was this?

Patricia Hughes: This was '69.

Interviewer: So just before broadcasting in the '70s and all that great furore about the future.

Patricia Hughes: Just before [official 0:21:15] broadcasting, and literally at that time, the beginning of the St John's concerts, and I was asked to do those regularly, which was a great thrill to me. I think it was 1969 that they started.

Interviewer: Yes, I think it- I can check on that. I think it would have been, yes.

Patricia Hughes: And so then one month led to a bit more and a bit more and a bit more, and then a vacancy came up. I think after about two years, a vacancy came up and I thought, "I wonder if I'd get back on the staff? It would be wonderful if I could." I applied and actually Cormac was terribly- he was my boss by that time. And on the last day before the applications were in, should

have been in, I went to him and I said, "I've just realised I want to apply for this job. Is it too late?"

And he said, "Oh, I never thought of you. I mean, I'd assumed that you were part of the team." But he said, "I'm afraid you'll have to go through a voice test." So I had to dash back from St John's, having just done a live concert, rush down to the studio and do a voice test, which I fluffed all the way through. And I was given the chance to come back and I came back, and that was wonderful. And I was back until I retired.

0:22:46

Interviewer: So the job hadn't changed very much. Had the atmosphere changed a lot?

Patricia Hughes: I think it had changed quite a lot, yes, because you see, there were two things. First of all, it was music in the '70s, wasn't it?

Interviewer: Broadcasting in the '70s.

Patricia Hughes: Broadcasting in the '70s. And then we all wrote a letter to The Times soon after I came back, didn't we?

Interviewer: Now, this is interesting. You were one of the signatories to that great letter.

Patricia Hughes: I was but I was- I'd only been back about a month.

Interviewer: Yes, it was you and Tom and I think Cormac who- from presentation who signed it.

Patricia Hughes: I don't think Cormac was in the department then.

Interviewer: He was-

Patricia Hughes: Well, he may have been.

Interviewer: He was actually, yes.

Patricia Hughes: Oh well, if he was, then-

Interviewer: He wasn't presentation editor, he was just one of the announcers.

Patricia Hughes: That's right.

Interviewer: That was actually fairly brave of you.

Patricia Hughes: Well, it was actually- Well, I suppose you could say that, but I think I was on such a high to come back and to be accepted back that I don't think, quite honestly, that I'd given the matter a

great deal of thought. I just wanted to support it. And I felt that all the people that were saying what they were saying were people I respected very much and I just wanted to be in on that. So in a way, it was brave and also in another way it was very stupid because I could have quite easily put my head on the block. But in fact, I didn't.

0:24:06

Interviewer: The letter, I think, did help to save what became Radio 3. I mean, what had already become Radio 3.

Patricia Hughes: Yes.

Interviewer: Because the name of that programme disappeared finally now.

Patricia Hughes: That's right.

0:24:13

Interviewer: Did you have a feeling the letter had been effective?

Patricia Hughes: Oh, yes, I think so, because there were some very high powered names on it. I mean, if they were going to sack anybody, they had to sack us all and there wasn't going to be much left after that. And I mean, it did show what people really felt about Radio 3.

0:24:37

Interviewer: Let's jump to St. John's Smith Square. I mean, out of the blue, were you told that's going to be your gig or...?

Patricia Hughes: Yes, I was. Eleanor Warren, who was the producer for all these concerts, had said she wanted one announcer for the whole series. So I was called up and she said, "Would you do it?" So I said, "Well, I'd love to do it." But I was absolutely terrified.

0:24:57

Interviewer: Why?

Patricia Hughes: I don't know. Well, I'm very neurotic about audiences anyway and of course, having had the nine-year break, I was very unsure of myself. It's a very vulnerable job, you know. I don't think people quite realise. You try to sound relaxed and human and everything on the air, but actually inside you, you could be extremely frightened.

And as I had not done really any broadcasting, let alone public concerts, ever since I left in 1962, to go up onto that platform in what was going to be the start of a very prestigious series of wonderful concerts was very frightening. And I remember the first one, absolutely terrifying.

0:25:45

Interviewer: Describe the first one.

Patricia Hughes: Well it was the Amadeus Quartet, wasn't it? They were playing, I think they were playing Schubert's- wasn't it? The Amadeus with William Pleeth, Schubert, Quintet. It was wonderful.

0:26:08

Interviewer: And had you had your script written for you by Eleanor Warren, or were you doing it yourself?

Patricia Hughes: No. Well, what they did then, Eleanor never wrote the scripts. There was a script depart- well, a music information department actually. And you got sent the notes and you knocked it into your own script so that you could do it in your own way.

Interviewer: You did put it into your own words.

Patricia Hughes: Oh, yes. I mean, obviously, you had to check.

END AUDIO

www.uktranscription.com