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Partner:	The Connected Histories of the BBC research project was led by the University of Sussex, 2017-2022, funded by the AHRC.
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'A History of North Regional Broadcasting' - SIR CHARLES GROVES, CBE.

(INTERVIEW 8 - Notes).

Trevor Hill. From day one in 'The History of North Regional Broadcasting', music has been to the fore. Admittedly the very first programme broadcast from the Metrovicks experimental station on May 17th, 1922 consisted of gramophone recordings; Fritz Kreisler playing 'Berceuse' .. 'on Wavelength 400 metres', and a Fox Trot played by the Joseph C Smith orchestra was heard on 'wavelength 450 meters', - this, I should add, with the mechanical assistance of the 'New Edison Diamond Disc Phonograph' on loan from a Manchester shop.

And when Station 2 ZY officially began a regular service of broadcasting on the 15th of November 1922, Kenneth Wright the very first Station Manager was also the station's pianist. He used a Steinway 'baby' grand - on loan from the firm's London showroom.

One of the 'first night stars' from the Trafford Park studio, was **Isobel Baillie**. And her broadcast recital was 'live' !

Some 22 years later, when a young **Charles Groves** was appointed the permanent conductor of the BBC Northern Orchestra, I imagine things were a little more 'established'.

Sir Charles: (talks about the growth of the orchestra - started in 1934 by the Director of Music in the North Region, Hubert Foster Clarke, son of the custard-powder 'King'; .... from the 35 players ten years earlier to the 43 members when he became the conductor.

Might like to mention that the very first group of Broadcasting musicians were a trio consisting of **Jessie Cormack** on piano; .....(she was the famous 'Cloud Lady' who told stories on the Childrens Hour), ..... .. **Sidney Wright**, (cello), and **Leonard Hirsch** (violin). When the Station Manager married the pianist, they left the British Broadcasting Company - since Reith wouldn't allow husband and wife to be employed together.

Kenneth Wright's place was taken by **Dan Godfrey Jnr**. Music being his first love, he formed the '**2ZY Orchestra**'- also the **Chorus** comprised of members of the Halle and the Beecham Operatic Choruses.)

TH: (Mentions that Manchester was the first radio station to broadcast full-length operas performed in the Studio .. and to issue libretti in connection with them. The Manchester-based '**Garner Schofield Band** were probably the very first Dance band to give a 'live' transmission.)

But the orchestra you inherited has gone through several changes of title over the years; that of '**The Northern Wireless Orchestra**',..... in 1926; ..'**The BBC Northern**' in 1934; '**The BBC Northern Symphony Orchestra**' in 1967, and then in 1982, '**The BBC Philharmonic**'.

I'd like to talk about 'The BBC Northern'. I still look upon it as your orchestra. Some fairly well-known names took turns to wave the baton before you became the permanent conductor !

Charles: (May like to mention Sir Thomas Beecham, Sir Hamilton Harty, Sir Adrian Boult, John Barbirolli, and Dr. Malcolm Sargent).

TH: You once told me rather a nice story about your first meeting with Beecham. (You asked if you could assist - he asked you to take his 'Roberts' radio into the artists' Green Room and keep an ear open for the latest 'Test' score - and to 'Report back from time to time')

In the relatively short time I had the pleasure of working with you, I think you told me that, as a child, you were 'A Ward in Chancery'. That has a lovely Dickensian ring about it.

Charles (to explain, please - and to tell me about his early interest in music; how it became his profession - and what brought him into the BBC and to Manchester in particular).

TH: What were your first impressions of the BBC ?

Charles (replies - perhaps here he might like to mention those who were in North Region's Music Department when he arrived:-

(including **Maurice Johnstone... Gordon Thorne ..Arthur Spencer Winifred Roberts** - or were some of these a few years later -1948/9?)

TH: Since it was still wartime when you took over the Orchestra, was the Region doing any special Music programmes; touring Service camps, special Lunch-time recitals ?

Charles (some of his early work on joining, please)

TH: One of our nicest colleagues, without a doubt, was **Reginald Stead**, the leader of the orchestra for many many years.

Charles (to talk about him, please - and others who stood out as 'characters'

May we also talk in some detail here about **Maurice Johnstone ....Violet Carson.**)

TH: The first time we met is when that very remarkable woman in North Regional Broadcasting, **Nan Macdonald** introduced us up in Studio 4 in 'old Broadcasting House', Piccadilly. You came in to talk 'off the cuff' - and 'live' at that, about the items which the Northern orchestra would be playing later that week at one of Nan's Childrens Hour Concerts from the Milton Hall.

And it wasn't 'kiddywinks' stuff either; 'Golliwogs Cake Walk' and that sort of repertoire.

Charles (to give some idea of the range of works the Northern played at those particular Concerts - and how the Milton Hall was always packed)

TH: I found it no easy task to take over from Nan for a period - and to try to announce parts of the Concerts in the way she did, - and not only Concerts; the whole output from 5 to 5.55pm on the 'Home' Service

I think you must have done more 'ad lib' microphone work than any other staff conductor of a BBC orchestra - before or since. Were you SNF - Staff No Fee, or did you come into the 2 gns 'Contribution-to-Programme' category ?

Charles (to reply - and to talk, perhaps, of the fact that in his day, the Northern Orchestra did a lot of 'Schedule D' recording work; .. a three-hour session during which the orchestra rehearsed and recorded specially composed Incidental music - mostly for Childrens Hour plays and features. For this, the musicians were paid a special fee.)

TH: (Mentions a composer Charles suggested for one of the 'Cameo Cartoons', **Henry Reed**. The ex pianist from the Midland Hotel Manchester where he'd played for Henry Halls band, who started with the BBC in 1934.- and the suggestion that Henry should himself conduct !)

I remember showing you a composition from a young lad who lived on the outskirts of Manchester. He'd sent it in to me for the 'Your Own Ideas' programme, which **Olive Shapley** started pre-war. You looked at it and said, "I'd get him in. He's either quite brilliant - or slightly mad". I did just as you suggested. In fact, the composer flew all the way down to London in 1989 in order to play that same piece at the Earls Court Radio Show. You remember him ?

Charles (To talk about 'Max Davies' - now Sir Peter Maxwell Davies)

TH: (Mentions Max skipping school on one occasion, since he's asked if he could attend a weekday rehearsal of the Northern orchestra - and the question he put to the conductor when I introduced them. Charles to mention, **Martin Milner, John Hopkins, John Ogden** - all of whom began in Northern Childrens Hour)

(Here I'd like to touch on one aspect of your work in later years; your very practical interest in young composers and musicians, and in seeing that they and their work were given concert performances. You and Max did a very good Radio 3 'Concert Interval Talk ' for me on this very subject some years ago. It was repeated.)

TH: But before you left us for pastures new, you worked a very busy week with 'The Northern'. Maurice Johnstone told me that you were the driving force behind the Midday Concerts. Were these to become a main source of your pleasure as a conductor ?

Charles (Perhaps you'd talk in more detail about the Regions Music output during your time in Manchester)

TH: (To relate the brief story of the young Manchester schoolgirl who turned up for one of the Town hall Midday Concerts which Charles conducted, thinking that, as with the Childrens Concerts, he'd be doing some of the announcing himself. Instead it was 'that old Philip Dobson !')

I remember the feelings of genuine sadness amongst the Regional staff when it was announced that you were leaving us to become Principal conductor of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra. Was that because you felt there were horizons beyond the BBC - or was there another reason?.

Charles

TH: BBC Musicians are sometimes put in a difficult position. They are members of staff - yet outside there is the all-powerful Musicians Union - and we both remember the Orchestral strike in the late 1970's when many of our colleagues were standing outside New Broadcasting House, Manchester whilst the rest of us were going into the building to work. Could that sort of situation arise again ?

Charles

TH: You will remember a 1948 BBC publication entitled, 'This is the North of England'. In fact on the one page is a photo of Charles Groves, in the days before your C.B.E., with a small insert of the man himself. And on the facing page, an article written especially for the publication by Sir Thomas Beecham who writes, he says, as 'A Candid Friend' and begins, 'There is a general idea that I am what may be described as the Public Enemy No 1 of the British Broadcasting Corporation.'

He was referring to his original opposition to the BBC being granted a monopoly - and to the fact that too many economic considerations were exercised by London. 'Musically', he writes ', the North should have its powers and chances doubled to serve so large a region'. Now in the 1990's, the 'BBC Philharmonic is second only to the BBC Symphony Orchestra. But had there initially been an alternative broadcasting system, would each have employed its own 'house' orchestras ?

Charles (Replies)

TH: In asking you to be 'A Candid Friend', what in the BBC system have been the strengths and the weaknesses in the business of making music?

Charles (Replies - I hope)

TH: Again, looking from an outside perspective, how do you view the next decade in terms of broadcast music ?

Charles

TH: You have at least one musical grandson and, indeed, an ex BBC musical wife. What, I wonder, were Hilary (maiden name) first impressions back in 1944 of the new member of North Region's Music department staff?.

Hilary (replies, please and tells something of the manner in which Charles worked with the Orchestra)

TH: Like myself, you were a 'Programme Engineer'. We set the microphones and did the 'balance and Control.' Did the new chap with the baton congratulate you on your music balances ?

Hilary (replies and perhaps she will mention some of the other members of the Manchester Programme Engineering Department at that time, and other programmes she worked on during her time with North Region)

TH: Reading the BBC Year Book for 1933 - a little before our time, it states, 'The BBC was the first Broadcasting organisation to replace engineers by Musicians for 'controlling' music. And quite right too. It helps to read a score and to know when the 'loud bits' are coming.

When Manchester's very first 'staff musician', Kenneth Wright, married another pianist, Jessie Cormack, they had to leave. Did the same 'husband-and-wife' rule apply to you and to Charles when you married?

Hilary (replies)

TH: (signs off the Interviews)

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