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**File:** **LR003221 - DAVID ELLIS (Interview 49 (Part 1 of 2))**
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START AUDIO

Trevor: A history of north regional broadcasting, interview number 49, David Ellis.

Music features from the very beginning of broadcasting in the north of England, from day one. Fortunately, perhaps, the very first station director, Kenneth Wright, was a musician, who later, in London, was to become the BBC's Deputy Director of Music. One of the very early stars was Isobel Baillie and shortly after she came to the microphone, the station's first group of musicians, Jessie Cormack, piano, Sydney Wright, cello and Leonard Hirsch, violin, took to the air from the Metrovicks Studio, the first broadcasting ensemble.

The first Station 2ZY Orchestra was formed by Dan Godfrey Junior and Manchester, incidentally, has the distinction of being the very first radio station to broadcast full-length operas and to issue libretti to the listener. How about that? By 1926, it had become the Northern Wireless Orchestra, and in 1934, the BBC Northern. It was known throughout the country by that name, when a young assistant to the music department librarian was appointed in May 1964. His name, David Ellis.

00:01:24 What, I wonder, was David's Interest in coming into the BBC? And let's also, David, begin with first impressions.

David Ellis: Well, the first impression, of course, was, the complexity of the whole operation in situations which hardly could be credited today. My reason for wanting to come into the BBC was, in fact, I was looking for a job and being a composer and having writing skills, thought they might be useful to the BBC. So, I did the simple thing, I just wrote in and was surprised, a few days later, to be asked to come in and have a chat, and then began the association first with the music librarian, but my knowledge of the BBC, my association with the BBC, actually goes back much further.

I was an avid listener to 'Children's Hour'. No name-dropping, but a young man, Trevor Hill, appeared on the scene, and of course there was Nan Macdonald, and some names that we shall probably come around to eventually, and a very, very original programme, no pun intended, 'Your Own Ideas', which gave an opportunity for young people to demonstrate their precocious talent.

Unbeknownst to me, my mother sent in a piece of music that I had written, didn't say and word, and I was sitting at home, listening to the programme, and suddenly, the announcement came. It was Mabel Hardy, and she said, "And now here's a piano piece of music by a young man from Liverpool, David Ellis." I nearly fell through the floor, and there was my mother, sitting in the background, smirking, and I was absolutely astonished.

Anyway, it was fine, and I sent more music after that, and became a regular broadcaster. In fact, at that time, the airwaves musically in that programme were dominated by two names – myself and another young man from Manchester called Max Davies – very talented, wrote fiendishly difficult music. I don't know what on Earth has happened to him, by the way.

00:03:34

Trevor: Can you remember the title of your first piece that was broadcast?

David Ellis: I can't, in all honesty. I can play you the first four bars of it.

Trevor: Well, you say 'the other man' who we don't know what happened to him, Max Davies.

David Ellis: Oh, Max, yes.

Trevor: No. He sent me a piece. It was called 'Blue Ice'. Now, he had had a piece broadcast by Vi. She played it, it was called 'Clouds', and about a year later, he sent in this piece called 'Blue Ice' which I looked at, and I thought, "I can't make head nor tail of this." I showed it to Vi Carson. I showed it to Charles Groves, and Charles said, "Well, I don't know." He said, "Do you know, it really is an incredible piece for piano. I don't know if he can play it." And Vi said, "Well, I think he's either brilliant or mad. Get him in," and so Max came in and performed his own composition.

David Ellis: That's right, but I don't remember the title, no, but I certainly remember Max, and it was a great pleasure and, indeed, a privilege in later years, to meet Peter Maxwell Davies, now Sir Peter Maxwell Davies. We became very good friends and, of course, we're still very much in contact.

Trevor: And he, here in 1992, jumping right forward, of course, he has an association now, or will have, with the BBC Philharmonic.

David Ellis: Yes, it's extraordinary the way things have a habit of turning a full circle, and going back to where we all started from. Who knows? He may conduct, for the orchestra, one of my pieces when he first comes.

00:05:10

Trevor: Now, you've done the 'Children's Hour' bit, and you've come into the BBC, and into the Music Library.

David Ellis: Yes. Initially into the Music Library, principally because the news was good for music, plans for expansion in terms of broadcasting hours, and there was a great deal of work to be done. The music librarian is always an overstretched job, because it wasn't just providing music for the orchestra, but providing music for the whole of the region's output, stretching from the Scottish border to the Midlands, geographically. It was a huge area of music, as well as being geography. So, I came in to help out and be a dogsbody, as it were.

00:05:57

Trevor: Working to John Bethel?

David Ellis: I was working to John Bethel, yes, who I hadn't met before, but he knew of me because a year or so, probably about two years

earlier, I'd had a word performed by the BBC Northern in one of the regular, then, Monday evening broadcasts that the orchestra gave. He had remembered the name, obviously come across the music, and thought, "Well, this guy obviously can put pen to paper," and so began a very happy and long relationship in the music department, and in the Library.

00:06:38

Trevor: Within a short while, I think within only a matter of months of you joining David, you'd been retitled Research Assistant, Music Production. That sounds rather good.

David Ellis: Yes. It was a marvellous way of getting around the bureaucracy, because of course, in order to establish a post, as you will know, it took months, sometimes years of wrangling with the powers that be, but the North region had a certain latitude in posts, and although it wasn't permanent, what in fact happened was that the Personnel Officer came to me and said, "Okay. We're going to make this Librarian's post permanent. It's come through now, and it's going to be advertised, and obviously, with your experience, you stand a good chance. Are you going to go in for it?"

` I thought, "Oh, it's pretty good, this." Anyway, I said to John, obviously, "What do you think?" He said, "Don't do it. Once you've become the Assistant Music Librarian, that's it." John, being a young man himself at the time, probably still is, it would have meant limited promotion possibilities, so I said, "No, I won't apply for the job." So, I was told, quite rightly, "Okay, you finish on Friday." So, I went home on Thursday, in fact, because I had a day's leave owing to me. I got a telephone call from the Personnel Officer on the Friday

morning, the next day, and he said would I come in and see him.

00:08:07

Trevor: Was that [Neville Stiff 00:08:07]?

David Ellis: That was Neville Stiff, and Neville said would I come in and see him, and I thought, “Oh, Lord, what have I done? Have I forgotten to hand in my key or something?” He said, “Well, we’re thinking of putting in an extra post in the music department. Would you be interested in doing it?” Of course, I said, “Not at all, no way am I interested in that.” He said, “Well, it can’t be permanent. It may be permanent, but it can’t be, and we can’t call you a music producer, but we’ll call you ‘Research Assistant’.”

That’s how I got into music production. I came in as a research assistant, a non-existent, temporary post.

00:08:45

Trevor: Who were your colleagues in the department at that time, David?

David Ellis: Oh, a marvellous team. A new Head of Music had just been appointed, but he hadn’t yet started and, in fact, Stephen Wilkinson was filling in. He was the Acting Head of Music, pending the arrival of the legendary Gerald McDonald, whom we may mention later on, and what a bunch of characters the music department was. Peter Rorke, who was looking after the orchestra, and went to Australia and became something quite

big in ABC. Bill [Railton 00:09:18] who succeeded the late, great Harry Mortimer, looking after mainly the brass band___[00:09:24], but not exclusively.

Stephen I've already mentioned, and a wonderful man, Arthur Spencer, who sadly, towards the end, was suffering ill-health, but nonetheless used to come into work regularly – indomitable spirit, cheerful, happy, what an inspiration to us all. It was a really first-class team.

00:09:46

Trevor: So, those were happy days for you.

David Ellis: Oh, I couldn't imagine anything happier, actually. I mean, not only having an interesting, challenging job at the ground floor, but also working alongside people who, if you went in and said, "Look, I'm stuck," you know, even if it was filling in your expenses account, at which Bill Railton was a past master, or listening to Arthur say, "Well, in 1938, I remember…" But it wasn't just the music department, as well. It was everybody else around.

My office was next door-but-one to Stanley Williamson, for example, and his knowledge of documentaries and the spoken word, and yourself, of course. You weren't a million miles away. We were surrounded. We were surrounded by wonderful people, and the nice thing about it was, you only had to pop upstairs one floor and you were in another world, you know, the, sort of, television world as well, so everything was together.

Trevor: Well, it's spring 1965. That sounds a bit like 'This Is Your Life', doesn't it? It's alright, I haven't put that note down.

David Ellis: Who's going to appear behind the screen?

00:10:50

Trevor: Anyway. Spring '65, David, and a year after joining as Assistant to the Librarian, you're appointed as a music producer. Now, did that entail looking after the BBC Northern Orchestra broadcasts, or did that job come later?

David Ellis: It was exclusively orchestra. The Research Assistant job became established and, again, I was invited to apply, but it was made quite clear to me that I need not necessarily get the job. Two other things happened in quick succession. Peter Rorke, with whom I was working closely as the Orchestral Producer, decided to do a television course, and he trotted off to London for something like three months, and there was nobody else to do his job, except me, which was marvellous.

But of course, he was coming back. He came back, but only for a few weeks, and he came in one day and said to me, "I'm off to Australia. Goodbye, good luck," and we got Vera Lynn in and we sang a few songs together. Then, along came the interviews, and I, along with I don't know how many others, applied for the job, and I have to say that, clearly, having done the job for three months must have been an important factor, and happily, I got the job, and it was exclusively looking after the running of the orchestra and its programmes.

Trevor: Yes. Writing in a BBC publication, I think it was called 'This is the North of England' in 1948, the one and only Sir Thomas Beecham observed that our orchestra was, and I am going to quote Sir Thomas, "An ornament and credit to the North." But he went on to say that the London overlords still limited the number of musicians. Now, you'll appreciate, David, that that criticism didn't go down too well at Portland Place.

00:12:46 There were, of course, quite a lot of 'London versus Manchester' differences over the years, both in radio and in television. Was this so in the experience of the North's music department?

David Ellis: I'd like to say, "Yes," because it would then lead to interesting revelations. There were problems, of course. I don't think there were too many differences in music terms. There may have been in administrative terms. You refer to Sir Thomas' criticism that the orchestra was still a small group, and it was interesting, you see, that our ambitions were to make the orchestra symphonic in size, but then London came back, you would expect them to, and said, "But you haven't got anywhere big enough to play, so there's no point in increasing the size," so it was a, kind of, 'Catch 22' situation.

Also, I suspect that Sir Thomas, being the character that he was, would use anybody to get at the BBC in London, because he didn't approve of them at all. No, it was true that the orchestra was a super-efficient group of players, the envy of lots of others as well. They were working under difficult circumstances, not just finance, because finance isn't the panacea for all problems. So, we had to begin, if you like, a long protracted – and I say patient, because that's not me – battle to establish a place in the sun, but it could only be done in one way, and that was on quality.

So, at the same time, of course, there was expansion coming in to music broadcasting, so it was a golden opportunity. Whatever differences there may have been, it was us making sure that we could get a fair share of what was happening on the airwaves, not only in radio, of course, with the development of Radio 3 into the music programme, and so forth, but also the wonderful things that were happening in television in glorious black and white, BBC 2, etc.

00:15:07

Trevor: Did London Music Department sometimes take the view, do you think, that the Halle could do things because they were a larger orchestra, and so a certain amount of work would go to them rather than to the BBC's house orchestra, up here?

David Ellis: There was a body of thinking, I have to say not necessarily in the music division in London, to whom we worked, but elsewhere, who produced statistics to show that 'n' hours could be filled by 'y' orchestras, at 'x' cost. That has been going on for years and is coming up again, but the truth of the matter is that the house orchestras of that time were performing a role, as well as a repertoire, that couldn't possibly be included in the non-BBC orchestras.

The fact that we were in the same city as the Halle really had nothing to do with it. After all, you can go further and say, "Forty miles down the road, there's another fine orchestra," and there still is. It was only a year or so before that, there was one in Leeds at that time, no longer with us, but now happily back with the opera.

But the roles were so different, so the fact that we were two orchestras in Manchester, and one in Liverpool, had nothing to

do with it. The Halle Orchestra spent a lot of time on the road, as does the Liverpool Orchestra. We were not in the public domain with our concerts, or very few, and we had a very specific role to play. You, for example, in your introduction, referred to the first opera broadcasts. That was something that the Northern was doing a considerable amount of at that time, otherwise it wouldn't be done.

So, when the equations of 'x' equals 'y' minus 'zk squared', when it came down to it, if you look at the content of what was being done by the BBC Northern, and say, "Okay, fine, give that to the non-BBC orchestras," it became impossible. So, those were the only differences, but my feeling was, and I wasn't right at the top then, music was right in the forefront of that, was that the music division and the music department of Manchester, that's the music division, the overall supremoes of broadcast music, and Manchester, didn't disagree on the broad front, and that is important, I think, to say at this point.

Trevor: Yes. I think those of us in other departments were quite envious of the relationship between Gerald McDonald, as Head of Music North, and day-to-day working relationships that you all appeared to enjoy with Sir William Glock, as Head of Music, and others in London. A man that- I only have to hear his name mentioned, and I see this figure and I see this burst of enthusiasm, and that is, of course, the legendary Hans Keller.

David Ellis: Oh, yes, well, Hans was unique. He, I think unfairly, suffered a great deal of criticism in the trade, if you like. He was a man who was so supremely intellectual, but he didn't flaunt it. A

supreme intellectual, not just about music. Our most enlightening conversations were often about football.

Trevor: Of which he knew a thing or two.

David Ellis: Did he know a thing or two. His analysis of the game was really quite startling and revelatory. I often said to him, “You’re wasting your time doing this job. Why don’t you go and manage the England football team?” We had a lot of laughs about that. He didn’t share my enthusiasm for Liverpool football team. It was purely jealousy, you understand, because he was a West Ham supporter. Sometimes he changed. I often used to pull his leg and say, “Well, you only change when your team’s winning. I stuck with mine even when they were in the Second Division.”

We’re off the subject of music, but I say this in order to show that Hans Keller was not some kind of musical machine for whom analysis of music was the be-all and end-all. That was absolutely a load of rubbish. He had very strong views. There are those outside, and some inside the BBC, who thought that he ran things to suit his own whims and tastes. That was absolute rubbish. I know of lots of pieces of music that he absolutely detested, and if he’d had his way, he would never have allowed them to have been heard on the radio, and I would submit my programmes and chat to him.

Talking on the telephone to Hans was quite an ordeal, and I would usually begin by saying, “Now, sorry, Hans. I see your team lost on Saturday. How about us putting in such and such a piece in our programme?” and it broke the ice. He would always say to me, “If you feel you must put that piece of music in your programmes, then do so.” He never, ever once

prevented my programming ideas from coming on the air, ever. I can honestly say that. If there were one piece, I would remember it, or one occasion. Never, ever in 1,200 broadcasts, I think I was responsible for, did he ever say, “No, you’re not having it.

Trevor: I know some of us would make a point of going to the radio Review Boards in London, only because we knew Hans Keller would be there and he would be talking, and it made the trip all the way down to London and back jolly well worth it.

David Ellis: Yes. At this early stage in my career, of course, that was the privilege of Gerry McDonald. I was yet to meet the formal Review Boards. My dealings with Hans were on almost a day-to-day basis, telephonically and memo-wise.

00:21:06

Trevor: You’ve just mentioned, David, the number of broadcasts which you were, as a producer, responsible… How did the region, in the end, manage to achieve that increase in orchestral musicians, which Beecham had advocated nearly 20 years earlier?

David Ellis: The first was, we decided – this was with Gerald McDonald who was adamant about the way things were going go – first, get your numbers up. How do you get your numbers up? You need money. What’s the justification, and so forth? So, we, sort of, worked out this strategy that, if we changed our name, you couldn’t call this rose by any other name unless it actually had the constituent ingredients.

So, we embarked on a brutal and bloody battle to increase the size of the orchestra, which we achieved. He achieved, he was responsible for it. I merely egged him on and provided the ammunition. He fired all the bullets, and we got an increase in size. Then immediately wrote down and said, “Well, you can’t call an orchestra of, I think it went to 71 or 72, the BBC Northern Orchestra. It’s now a symphonic orchestra.” So, we changed the name to BBC Northern Symphony Orchestra, and then it was but a next step to do the next peg, and so forth.

Behind all this, I should say, and later on you might perhaps want to talk in greater detail, was the name of George Hurst, because he, more or less, was saying, “Look, if I’m Chief Conductor of this orchestra, I’m not going to conduct the Brahms symphonies or the Bruckner, or whatever, with three double basses.” You know, most symphony orchestras were boasting eight. On the continent, they had twelve, with a consequent parallel with the upper strings.

Trevor: Without Toscanini.

David Ellis: We had three, you know, and there we were. In a studio, not in a public concert situation, we had to buy in, and so I prepared the documents which said, “If we’re going to continue to play this repertoire, which we must…” and Sir William, of course, said, “Yes,” and Hans Keller gave us all the support we needed. We couldn’t go out into the big wide world playing a major repertoire with three double basses and four cellos. It’s nonsense, and the figures proved it, because we were buying in players, and it was costing us more to buy in players than actually to have them on the establishment. Ludicrous.

00:23:32

Trevor: Yes. You've mentioned George Hurst. Who was the conductor at the time you took over as the producer of the BBC Northern, David?

David Ellis: It was George. George had taken over from John Hopkins, who had a brief stay with us.

Trevor: Like you, somebody who made his debut in 'Northern Children's Hour'.

David Ellis: That's right, yes. That's right. Just think, and became the conductor of the orchestra. He was associate at one time, then he became the conductor, and like Peter Rorke, who I mentioned earlier, off he went to Australia, and he, in fact, became the boss of ABC Music. Still happily living there. No, he went to New Zealand first, I'd better be accurate. Briefly in New Zealand, then to Australia.

George Hurst, yes. George Hurst was the Chief Conductor. What a character. You work with George, you can work with anybody. Marvellous training for a young producer. I've seen the staff cowering under tables when George was on the rampage. Extraordinary.

Trevor: An imposing figure. Even more imposing upon a rostrum, I imagine.

David Ellis: Yes. I mean, let's cut the joking, if you like. He is, and was for the orchestra, a fine conductor. He was a trainer. His patience- he knew exactly what he wanted and nothing would stop him from getting that. Happily, he moulded the orchestra in such a way that they could respond to him. It was hard going. George was, at that time, a trial to us all, but we loved him dearly, and we wouldn't have had it any other way.

00:25:10

Trevor: There were, of course, around, towards the end of the 1960s, David, as you will know and remember, one or two big BBC internal upheavals for the very existence of certain house orchestras, the first of which took place in 1970 as a result of the Mansell and McKinsey reports for Broadcasting in the Seventies.

David Ellis: Yes. Well, we felt that, having won a significant battle by increasing the size of the orchestra, quite honestly, we could take on anybody, and these minor reports were just so much paper, of course. Well, if you like, it was a kind of in-built northern arrogance. It was also self-preservation. It was also because that was the way things were for the north, not just music, for everybody. We were all having to fight for our place in the sun.

What I used to resent, actually, personally, I used to resent the fact that they in London knew that Manchester was turning out good stuff, and they would only ever, sort of, go overboard and admit it with great reluctance, if they were forced to, and I think, of course, we had some allies at court, didn't we? Governors and the advisory councils, and people like that, and

by having them as allies, I think the battles of the early seventies were a little bit easier to fight.

I do emphasise one important thing: if we just come back to Gerry McDonald, when I, sort of, first reported for duty, I can't tell you exactly what he said, because you'd have to edit it out. I said, "Well, here I am, sir, reporting for duty. What do you want me to do?" And I paraphrase, he said, "I want you to make the BBC Northern, as it was then, Orchestra the best orchestra in the world. Now, go away and don't bother me again," kind of thing. So, I said, "Yes, fine," and I walked away and thought, "What was the man saying?"

You know, if he'd said he wanted it to be the best orchestra in Manchester or the North West, or on a line drawn from Hull to Aberystwyth, or something, fine. But he was quite specific. He said, 'The world." So, I thought, "Oh, well, that seemed clear enough. I'll just go out and do it," and we began to do things which certainly improved its public image.

I honestly believed – some of my colleagues didn't – I honestly believed that we could make this orchestra a major international unit in the market place, against all the odds. I think it was- again, I use the word 'arrogance'. I think we were arrogant enough, I certainly was, to believe that we could do it, so therefore, the McKinsey report and the Mansell reports were just, as I say, pieces of paper, because we could go along and say, "We are the finest orchestra, not quite in the world yet, but maybe tomorrow."

Trevor: Of course, the orchestra wasn't helped at all, David, by the conditions under which they performed. As a boy, if you came to the Children's Hour concerts which Charles conducted…

David Ellis: Yes, I did on one occasion.

00:28:31

Trevor: …that would have been in, what studio one in old Broadcasting House?

David Ellis: I remember going to one in studio one, yes, which was unbelievable.

Trevor: Well, from the middle of 1949, they all came from the Milton Hall down in Deansgate, Manchester, a place, for you and for me, the scene of many happy working relationships, first with, for me, with Charles Groves in the late forties, early fifties, when he did those splendid Children's Hour concerts for us. Always broadcast live, of course. A lot of the incidental music for our plays and features, much of which was composed and conducted by Henry Reed, and there were one or two occasions when we combined the talents of the then BBC Northern with those of the Northern Variety Orchestra.

` It was marvellous for us to, I mean, have an orchestra to actually play the music for your play or your feature. Those of us producing weren't paid extra, but of course, the musicians were and so, naturally, it was in their interest, from time to time, to be asked to do these…

David Ellis: … to do these foreigners.

00:29:42

Trevor: …these foreigners, yes, and by Jove, didn't those enrich the BBC's output? I mean, not only programmes which we were heard in this country, but of course transcription service took them overseas, and they had a very, very wide hearing. When you first came into the BBC, weren't you involve with the television series, talking of the orchestra and the music, 'The Great War', series?

David Ellis: Yes, that's right. Yes, 'The Great War' series suddenly landed, at fairly short notice in planning terms, on the desk. Sixty episodes, I think it was, or something, and because of the reasons you've mentioned about the, sort of, schedule D, and the 20 minutes in a three-hour recording session, it wasn't possible, even- only signature tunes were exempt from this.

If a sequence of music, say, appeared in episodes one, seventeen, twenty-four and thirty-six, whilst you could record it once and repeat, which made a lot of sense, it was, in fact, quite expensive, and where it was cheaper to do repeat recordings, these were done, which meant, of course, the orchestras workload, and consequently their pay packets, were quite heavy.

It had another effect, of course, because this series went around the world, not once, not twice, but I think three times, and on every episode, there appears those magic words 'Incidental music played by the BBC Northern Orchestra, conducted by George Hurst'.

00:31:24

Trevor: And composed by…?

David Ellis: Composed by Wilfred Josephs. One of my jobs was to make sure the right bits of music were in the right place at the right time, and do some copying and crossing out. Oh, all sort of jobs. It was a very, very exciting time, very hard for us all, but it worked.

Trevor: We've only had in North region, to my knowledge, one controller who's been a musician, and that one person was Tom Wightman Chalmers. Donald Stephenson left, Tom Chalmers took over. He was succeeded by Bob Stead, who came back from Australia/New Zealand as Controller. Now, Tom Chalmers was very much a musician.

Occasions when the service and lessons from a certain quarter of England, the organist sitting there, he was never billed as such, was Tom Wightman Chalmers, and I remember him saying to me, within two days of coming here, I got to know him during the war on overseas service, he was Head of Presentation, and he said, "I've just been down to that Milton Hall."

He said, "I am appalled." He said, "There are two things I want to do. First of all, there's nothing outside broadcasting house…" this was old Broadcasting House, "…saying it's the BBC. A teeny little plate." He said, "We should have a big sigh," and he said, "and the second thing, we've jolly well got to do something about that dreadful Milton Hall."

Well, many, many years, David, as you know and I know, much water was to flow down the Irwell…

David Ellis: And the walls of the Milton Hall.

00:33:01

Trevor: …and the walls of the Milton Hall, lapping against, yes, and of course, it was during Ernest Warburton's time of Head of North Regional Music that we began to plan New Broadcasting House, and the all-important Studio 7. Strangely enough, the first purpose-built home for what had, in 1967, become the Northern Symphony Orchestra. Was it after that increase in numbers, David, that you first toured abroad?

David Ellis: Just after. The first increase was '67. In 1968, we opened one or two foreign doors and happily, we were able to undertake a modest tour in 1969. I thank my lucky stars that if the promoters of the concerts – in fact it was a German organisation that took us onto their books – if they'd have come to England and said, "Well, we'd like to hear the orchestra in situ and talk business with you," if we'd have taken them into the Milton Hall and said, "Well, here we are…"

Trevor: End of story.

David Ellis: That would have- the first Lufthansa flight back to Germany. But we circumnavigated that by going to them. We thought it was tactful and we got a little bit of money and I went with dear friend who sadly died soon afterwards, [Maurice Taylor 00:34:23], as the contracts expert, and Maurice again was part of that team which was so important to Manchester.

He and I had a very happy travel to West Germany, as it was then. We met this promoter, we did a deal. We came back the next day, partly by train because Maurice liked travelling on trains, and I knew Germany well, so I took him on a few

interesting routes, and then we flew the last leg, and we had a contract in our pocket, which staggered lords and masters elsewhere, because they didn't believe it was possible.

I suppose the culmination of all these things really was the beginning of it, and the agent who fixed that contract with us has remained a firm supporter, or certainly throughout my time, a supporter of the orchestra, and did a great deal for the orchestra's international standing. That's a man called Hans Ulrich Schmidt, who's still very much alive and a great advocate of all that's best. He said, "I'm only interested in quality." I said, "Well, we share this view."

That took us then into the departure of Gerald McDonald to London. He went on to bigger and better things, one would like to think, as Chief Executive of the new, as it was then, Philharmonia Orchestra. I think if he were today, he would say it was anything but bigger and better things, but that's how history. Ernest took over, Ernest Warburton, a legend in many ways. Ernest, too, was a man of singular ambition, not for himself, but for those about him.

He was totally different from Gerry, and I think there are senior colleagues in Manchester at that time who preferred working with Gerry McDonald than they did with Ernest, because Ernest knew what he wanted. He knew how to go about it, and the occasional toes were trampled on, and occasionally, he bumped into people, but he always said to me, "Well, as you know, my eyesight isn't very good, I can't help bumping into people." That's a nice human touch. I suppose, really, this was the beginning of the acceleration of, not only the orchestra, but the whole of the music department.

That's not to suggest in any way, or to undervalue what had happened before. Ernest could not have achieved what was achieved, we couldn't have achieved together what had been

achieved without the George Hursts, the Gerry McDonalds, all those other wonderful people who, by this time, had moved on outside the BBC. Gerry McDonald was still the Head of Music when we made our first tour, and I always remember that first concert on foreign soil in___[00:37:20]. The orchestra was so relieved to get there and play the first notes, as it were.

Overture Benvenuto Cellini by Berlioz, which begins quite loudly, as is Berlioz' wont. I don't think a German audience had ever heard an orchestra play so loud in their life, it was relief from the orchestra. They just went, "Wham!" It was quite staggering. A wonderful beginning to a great international career for the orchestra which, of course, make me very happy.

Trevor: You disappoint me, Mr Ellis. You can remember the first work that the orchestra performed overseas, but you cannot tell me the title of the composition that was first played on the air from the pen of David Ellis. That may come later as we're talking.

David Ellis: I'm sorry. I'm sorry about that. (Laughter)

00:38:14

Trevor: We're talking about, now, concerts and things like that. You had John Bethel retitled as your Acting Concert Promotions Manager.

David Ellis: Yes, that's interesting. John was my first BBC boss, and of course, after a short time, he, as it were, was working for me, but happily, certainly in the music department, we didn't have

this hierarchy at all. We were all doing a particular job that was working for Broadcast Music. Titles were useful ways of determining car parking spaces and salaries, you know. Yes, and John has a particular flair for the presentation side of things. He wasn't just the guy who got the music out and collected it up at the end.

We were already very much in the market place. We were earning a lot of money. I think it ought to be emphasised, this, one other thing that's worth mentioning that comes to mind, because we were the first orchestra to find – I did it myself, I'm very proud of it – we were the first orchestra to find a way around the sponsorship of BBC orchestras in the concert world, because as you know, the BBC Charter is quite specific. No money must exchange hands at all. Credits in Radio Times and on the air were…

Well, we looked very carefully, and I went to Gerry McDonald and said, "I've been reading the Charter, which not every BBC employee does, and I think we can get around this," and we did. We therefore began to make ourselves pay in a modest sort of way in terms of our public concert output. We were doing a lot of public concerts by this time. People were beginning to talk about us, another reason why we managed to overcome the problems of, "Let's get rid of all those wretched house orchestras." It was therefore a natural step to risk doing a series of concerts in our home town of Manchester.

Until this time, this is the early seventies, we had done a regular series of town hall concerts for the lunchtime workers and anybody else who wanted to hear us. These were a great success, as I'm sure you remember. We then expanded those and moved into Salford University, which had just come on the scene, and they too were a great success. So, we said, "Why on Earth don't we do some proper public concerts of our own

in the Free Trade Hall?" Instead of hiding at lunchtime in the town hall, let's go big and we did.

We needed somebody to co-ordinate, if you like, the presentation, the promotion of these. John was there. John had his ideas. We walked about it, and Ernest said, "Okay, bang," and off we went.

00:41:09

Trevor: And under your management, we had the start of the Master Concerts.

David Ellis: Yes, we had the start of the Master Concerts. I said to Ernest, "It's a bit of a pretentious title, isn't it?" and he said, "Well, this is the equivalent of the Meisterkonzerten in Deutschland, where we play regularly. They have them there and they're a great success. Why shouldn't we have them?" It was typical of Ernest, you see. He had this idea in his mind. He could have opted out and said, "Let's play safe, and let's just creep into the Free Trade Hall and pretend nobody's looking," kind of thing. But he didn't. He said, "Bang! These are going to be Master Concerts. They're going to be better concerts than anybody else is putting on."

Well, you can imagine what the reaction was from our friends of the Halle Orchestra, or the management of the Halle Orchestra. A lot of battles ensued there. They were reminiscent, actually, of the exchanges in the House of Commons between the Right Honourable gentlemen from one side of the house to the Right Honourable gentlemen on the other side of the house.

Formal, vitriolic, pointed, but happily, when it came to the end of the discussions – except on one famous occasion which I'll not refer to because it was quite disgraceful – we usually ended up either having a pint together or whatever, so it was constructive, but it didn't go down too well. Quite honestly, if I'd been the Halle General Manager, I would have adopted the same position myself.

00:42:33

Trevor: Yes. The concerts themselves, though, have gone down exceptionally well, haven't they?

David Ellis: The effect that they had – I wouldn't say this to anybody except to you, Trevor, because we're just talking to one another – I'm quite sure that the effect that our orchestra had on the music scene had a great deal to do with the rise in standards of the Halle Orchestra. Even their best friends admit that they were going through quite a difficult time. Sir John Barbirolli was obviously a great influence, but it needed more than just a great conductor, a series of great conductors.

There were all sorts of other problems that they had. Morale was bad, generally, in the music trade, and there's nothing like the competition of Manchester City winning the league to spur Manchester United on, or Liverpool and Everton, or Chelsea and Arsenal, whatever you like. Us coming into the Manchester music scene actually did inject into the Halle a feeling of, "We're not going to let these upstarts…" because we were getting very good reviews. We were not getting their audience. The Halle audience remained loyal. There was no way they were going to come over to us.

So, we had to work very, very had to build up audiences, and I think the end result of all this, eventually, was that Manchester could boast two orchestras of astonishing virtuosity that only London could boast, but intermittently. We were consistently turning in performances the equal of anywhere, and that is the truth. I don't think that would have happened if we hadn't gone in and pushed them up, and as they got a good review, our lads said, "We can play better than them," so we played better, you know, and so it went on.

Trevor: A little competition.

David Ellis: Competition is good for the soul, and the box office.

00:44:32

Trevor: Yes. Well, in my 'This Is Your Life' tone again, it's the summer of 1977, David, and you're appointed Head of Music North. Now, not long after, you and members of the orchestra are standing on a picket line. You're on strike outside New Broadcasting House, because you know that the BBC Board of Governors will be sacking house orchestras. Let me pose now the same question I asked you at that time, and I don't know if I said it as politely as this to you, as we both stood on the steps, but I said, "Should the Head of a BBC department, and therefore somebody in a managerial post, be taking part in a strike?"

David Ellis: The answer is, "No." Absolutely no, but I think most colleagues understood. I wasn't actually not working, if you follow me. I wasn't refusing to go to the office. I should also point out that

unusually, I was also a member of the Musicians' Union, which might be a question that ought to be asked. Should a manager of a department also be in the very union that is on the other side of the table? Anyway, I was.

Trevor: I was aware of the fact that you had a union card, sir, yes.

David Ellis: Yes. I did that because, of course, I was a practising musician for many years, and I kept, if you like, my subscription. So, it was an unhappy time. I also believed, and I'll go into the details if you want, I also believed that this hurt had to happen if we were going to make progress. Now, it's an awful thing to say, and in more recent years, as we speak now, we're talking about redundancies and that kind of thing. At that time, that kind of thing was hardly spoken of in numbers, and that's the truth.

We had to bleed. The profession, I mean. Don't forget, I was part of a profession who worked for the BBC. I didn't work for the BBC and find myself… you know, it was the other way around, and I argued this with Mike Bett, who was then the BBC's Director of Personnel. Not an unhappy argument, because I have to say that he agreed with me, which was quite interesting.

When he posed that question, "Should a manager who sits on the opposite side of the table to a union be actually moving around the table and supporting…?" which is basically your question. I said, "I was brought in to the BBC to be a manager, initially as a producer, but subsequently as a manager, because of my skills in a profession which the BBC was buying in."

You know, there's a level of musicians over there, here's the BBC over here. Who's the guy we want to do it? This is what they said, I presume, because I wasn't picked off the street. So, I was brought in for my professional skills, and I had to protect that profession. He conceded that point, and if you like, that was a, kind of, seal of approval, which I believed justified my action.

Incidentally, I didn't stay outside on the picket line all day long and neglect my administrative duties.

Trevor: Well, you weren't alone in standing outside, because in London, we had Sir Charles Groves,

David Ellis: We did, yes, and many other conductors. I mean, the support that came from the profession, from the whole world, was remarkable. I think the thing which put the final seal of approval on this strike was the leaked document from a certain high-level BBC executive who said, "Yes, let us legislate for a strike to happen in April, because The Proms start in July. The strike will only last, whatever it is, six weeks, maybe eight weeks. By that time, they'll all be starving, they'll want to get back to work, and the musicians will not jeopardise the opening of The Proms," and that was in the report to the Governors at the time.

00:48:43

Trevor: Do you know who was the author of that document?

David Ellis: Oh, yes.

00:48:45

Trevor: Will you say? It's an archive recording. Nothing can be used without your written consent, Mr Ellis.

David Ellis: [Howard Newby 00:48:55]. It underestimated the strong feeling amongst the profession, not just the musicians at the BBC, the profession, and I think that set the seal on it, because of course, as we know, The Proms did not open, and the strength of the profession, I think, surprised...

Hardie Ratcliffe, who was the Musicians' Union General Secretary in an earlier skirmish, was seen on television, talking to the representatives of the then Director General, and he said, "Look, let's make it quite clear," and they hadn't thought about this, the BBC. "If there is a strike, if the Musicians' Union is pilloried or whatever, we will close down the whole television service." You just think how much music is involved in television, and they hadn't actually thought about it.

Trevor: The sad thing was, of course, that it was the dance orchestra that went.

David Ellis: Yes, it was. Do you want me to say something about that?

Trevor: Yes, I'd like you to, David. Nobody else has, so far.

David Ellis: I knew all the players in the Northern Dance Orchestra personally, because I also happened to work in the less-

severe areas of serious music. I mean, I was, for a time, a dance band musician. That's where I earned honest money as a student. I came across a lot of the guys because they were students with me, and the NDO was supreme, the equal of any of them. That's the truth of the matter, and that puts into perspective what eventually happened.

From 1964 on, I had the opportunity of actually working with them, which was a great privilege. We combined with the BBC Northern, the symphony orchestra, and we did some marvellous concerts at the Free Trade Hall involving them both. They were a knockout. Ernest Tomlinson wrote the music. We commissioned a big symphony for the two orchestras. It was a knockout.

I did some television work. We opened the Guild Hall in Preston when that building opened, with a wonderful television programme on George Gershwin.

Trevor: That was terrific, wasn't it?

David Ellis: It was, and it was at that point that a degree of disenchantment – and I say this with the greatest reluctance – but they were disenchanting and disenchanted. I couldn't understand this. What it was, you see, a system had evolved whereby, because they were so good and so efficient, they could compress one day's work into, sometimes, a morning, because they were good.

They had a quota to do. If they could do that quota in the morning- it's rather like the window cleaner or the bin men or whatever. They're told they've got to empty so many bins in houses, or clean so many hundred windows. If they work

efficiently and fast, they can do it in a morning and they can have the afternoon off.

I was asking them to work afternoon and evening, and they didn't like it. They did not like it at all. And what were they doing? They were working in the evening, doing their own foreigners. Your old schedule D things. They didn't like it. They believed they were inviolate, and I'm sorry about that, because they're lovely guys, and I know them all personally. They actually signed their own death warrant, and unfortunately, the way forward for the BBC, what is now the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, in increasing the size was actually to have money which was going elsewhere.

Now, this was the terrible thing dichotomy that I, as a manager, had. I was not responsible for the Light Orchestra, Light Entertainment Orchestra. My job was to get the BBC Philharmonic up to strength, scratch, and to have adequate funding. I don't really think I need to say any more.

It was very sad. I wished, of course, that we could have had everything. We could have had the money to do what we wanted with the Symphony Orchestra, the BBC Philharmonic, that there was an ongoing area of music of the NDO, the variety orchestra or the radio orchestra, as it, by this time, had become. They're sadly missed. They're sadly missed.

Trevor: Two big bonus events have occurred during your time in broadcasting, David. Tell me about the emergence of Radio 3, with the all-day music broadcasting, and what you yourself term the establishment of BBC 2 in glorious black and white, followed by colour technology. I hope I've quoted you correctly.

David Ellis: Yes, this all happened going back to the mid-sixties, of course, with the establishment of Radio 3, or rather, the Third Programme expanding towards breakfast time and initially, as I'm sure you will remember, and many listeners will remember, there was the breakfast slot and the lunchtime slot. More bodies were needed, more music was needed. What a marvellous opportunity. Eventually, it became all day, and the Third Programme became Radio 3, and almost anything you wanted to do, provided it was legal, honest, decent, truthful and good would find a way in.

All the producers used to say, "Okay. Here you are. New series, you know, and we used to joke and have little jokey things like, "Here's the opportunity. I've always wanted to do a series on the 144 bassoon concertos of Vivaldi," and all that kind of thing.

Then television, as BBC 2 spread ever northwards, so the orchestra was called upon to provide concerts and we opened in Manchester. No, the Halle did that, be fair. The Halle did that with Barbirolli. In fact, I was asked to write the introductory music for the opening of BBC 2. We went to Leeds, we went to Newcastle, and then when colour came long, and other technology, although there wasn't much money for the house orchestras, what there was was related to interesting projects.

That was another thing I was very pleased to help develop, not enormously, but we did quite a lot of television work, ended up doing a little series in the ABC Studios in Didsbury, which have been closed for years, but had been taken over by Manchester College of Technology. That was a great experience, because I hadn't got much television experience. I was very happy to…

Trevor: The first televising of the BBC Northern, I think it was still, then, was, of course, at this enormous Dickinson Road studio. Live, on a Sunday. They were in studio A, that being… did you ever look up inside the chapel? If you looked up to the ceiling, which has now become our lighting gantry, there was a sign going across the old chapel, and it said, "Let there be sight." Yes.

Well, I couldn't believe it when I was told that the orchestra were going to come and perform live on Sunday in Dickinson Road, which meant that with 'I am Sooty', we had to go into studio B, which as you know was just the broom cupboard. As soon as the hot cameras came out of A, wheeled across into the broom cupboard, and then we went on the air with Sooty.

David Ellis: Yes, that was horrific.

00:56:36

Trevor: Coming forward a couple of decades, David, will you tell me something about your hold-held convictions regarding the BBC's own orchestras?

David Ellis: In the general scheme of things?

Trevor: Yes.

David Ellis: The house orchestras, A, were generally playing as well as, in some cases better than, their counterparts outside, and that's what the public wants. I think the situation has changed

slightly. Since 1980, since stereo had spread, the improvements in the reproduction of music – we only need to mention the two letters 'CD' – are such now that there is quite clearly a large body of people who would listen to music before, from the radio, including the house orchestras, who now are choosing more and more to spend £300-£400 on a hi-fi set, and buy – as you can – CDs.

I've no figures to prove this. You might be able to tell me. I've not seen any recent figures. I think the audiences for Radio 3 are falling dramatically. I don't think there's any less quality. I don't think any of the silly things that we see people writing about – you know, the cacophonous clique of Radio 3-type composers – has anything to do with it at all, because CD sales of this stuff is coming out as well.

I think people are now exercising a wider choice because they are getting good quality. I don't, at the moment, rate too strongly the independent radio stations as being… I think the loyalty to Radio 3 is stronger than the emergence of new. I think the strength of the hi-fi system and the CD is taking over the role of Radio 3. Not just complementing it, it's beginning to, kind of, take it over.



Trevor: Very big inroads.

David Ellis: I think so. I've no facts and figures here now, Trevor. I just feel it and I see it because I see the way retail outlets are opening huge supermarket-sized areas, you know, devoted to CDs and black vinyl is beginning to disappear, and all this kind of thing. The effect on radio, I think, is enormous. The effect on the place of the house orchestra.

00:59:06

Trevor: So, do you think, then, that the BBC orchestras, first and foremost, let us deal in home-produced goods, like the BBC Philharmonic, should they now be a commercial recording orchestra? Should that be part of their role?

David Ellis: I'm very pleased and proud that I was able, during my stay working for them, to have actually developed the commercial outlet I talked to you before about. We were the first orchestra to subliminally and also visually get sponsorship into our programming, and we made money. You know, we put money into the North Region coffers. Most of it came back to us, happily, and eventually expanded it into doing commercial recordings. You had to start in a small way, and we started in a small way, in order that the record companies would not ignore the BBC Philharmonic.

Now, they are, as a matter of course, saying, "Hey, let's get the BBC Philharmonic to make this recording." That's not enough. I mean, that is one part of its future strength. It's got to find other strengths as well. It's different now than it was ten years ago, in 1980. It is different. The whole picture has changed. The BBC orchestras no longer can use the same, if you like, excuses, reasoning, that saved them before, because they're now outdated.

I mean, just in the same way that the excuses or the reasons that we used were not the 1930s, because don't forget, the BBC Northern has been chopped, or threatened with the chop, more times than I can actually remember. I mean, it started in 1934 as a valid unit, and I think by 1936 it was already being threatened. The history is well known.

01:00:56

Trevor: Well, we won't stay in the 1990s. Let's go back to- you mentioned the eighties. Of course, the Northern Symphony, under that name, you went to Hong Kong, didn't you, in 1983? Bulgaria, by which time you'd got 89 musicians? And you'd become the Philharmonic? Yes. Those must have been quite exciting times for you all.

David Ellis: Oh, they were.

Trevor: Hard, I should imagine, in the organisational side of it.

David Ellis: Yes. I have to say that all these enormous changes which we're initiating in Manchester with the orchestra, going out in the public field, touring abroad, was not done by the sudden influx of a huge team of helpers. The number of people actually running the show was exactly the same as it was in 1964 when we were buried, most of the time, in the Milton Hall studio, which of course, was easy. You know, you could actually go home and see your wife and kids in the evening.

That time, size-wise, didn't change at all. We had the same number of people. We've already mentioned John Bethel, whose ubiquitous attitude to life and his willingness to do almost anything… If you said to John, "Let's do so-and-so," he'd say, "Fine." He didn't say, "I'm the Librarian. That's somebody else's job." And I have to mention [guess Glenys], everybody has to mention Glenys.

Trevor: [Glenys Parry-Jones 01:02:18].

David Ellis: Glenys Parry-Jones, the two of them together from teenagers until recent early retirements in the early nineties, were the team. They had each assistants and secretaries, and so forth, but the BBC Philharmonic team was a Head of Music, who had other jobs to do, a Music Producer who was exclusive, the Librarian, who also serviced the whole of the needs of the region with music, the Orchestral Manageress, Glenys Parry-Jones, a couple of secretaries, and eventually, we got a, kind of, part time promotional thing, which became full time. That was the team.

This was the team that were doing things where, without mentioning any names, like the BBC Symphony Orchestra in London, had twenty-something people running the outfit. Twenty-two, twenty-three… I can't remember. People to lick envelopes, people to put the stamps on, people to do all that. They did a fine job, but we were doing it all.

We had to prove ourselves in the world, and then we got the rewards, if you like. Yes, they were marvellous times, because we had to do everything on the tour. We were the baggage handlers, the front-of-house, the back-of-house, the tea makers. Glenys was the hospital sister. She had a bag of sticking plasters. I drove. I had the distinction of nearly killing a world-famous conductor on a German autobahn when we hit a patch of black ice. I mean, all that kind of thing. And we had to be awake 20 hours a day on tour, which, when you're doing a 24-day tour…

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