

The Early Recordings of Sir Adrian Boult

The second incarnation of the British Symphony Orchestra was formed by Raymond Roze in 1919 entirely of de-mobilized servicemen of the 1914-1918 War. Many of the players had been professional musicians prior to the war, and one of the cellists you can hear in these recordings is ex lance Corporal John Barbirolli. Roze died in March 1920 and Adrian Boult helped to reorganize the orchestra and so made his debut with them at the Kingsway Hall in October 1920.

Fred Gaisberg, the His Master's Voice artistic director, had apparently heard Boult conducting for Diaghilev's Russian Ballet at the end of 1919. He asked Boult to make some recordings although they were not in fact made until the 5th November 1920.

The selection of items recorded by Boult and the BSO at first glance looks rather odd. From 1911 HMV had built up a fair catalogue of popular classical work conducted by their 'house' conductor Landon Ronald. Albert Coates, Eugene Goossens and, of course, Edward Elgar had then been added to HMV's roster, as orchestral recordings became increasingly popular and commercially viable. Boult's role was therefore partly to fill various gaps in the catalogue.

The recordings that were issued included *La Boutique Fantasque* and *The Good Humoured Ladies*, which Boult had conducted for Diaghilev's Russian Ballet. In 1913 Boult had sat next to Butterworth for both the second rehearsal and the premier of *The Shropshire Lad* under Arthur Nikisch's baton. This probably made Boult the obvious choice to record the work. Arthur Bliss's *Rout* was something of a novelty recording. Conductor and composer were teaching together at the RCM and Stella Power, a protege of Dame Nellie Melba, was then being promoted by HMV. Bliss was at the recording session and ruined one of the wax masters by shouting after the final chords 'By Jove, you fellows, that was grand'. Sadly this was rejected, despite Boult's protestations that it could stimulate sales. Barbirolli also remembered this session as he and his fellow cellist had 'the devil of a job' getting over the pizzicato passages: 'We ended with bleeding fingers, literally.' The Humperdinck *Hansel und Gretel* recordings were made to fill a gap in the catalogue,

Humperdinck had died on the 27th September 1921, and the *Prelude* was recorded just over a month later, clearly this record sold well and plugged a gap in the catalogue so a second record with further extracts was forthcoming.

Unissued recordings included Butterworth's *English Idyll, No.1*, Holst's *2 Songs without Words, Op 22* and Wagner's *Siegfried Idyll*. Thankfully examples of these were recorded later in Boult's career. Nine of the fourteen sides presented here, including *La Boutique Fantasque*, *The Good Humoured Ladies*, *Rout* and the *Hexenritt* from *Hansel and Gretel* were never again recorded by Boult.

All the recordings were issued between February 1921 and June 1922. Unfortunately the British Symphony Orchestra was not viable and had to be disbanded around June 1923. Recordings of *La Boutique Fantasque* and *Rout* were the first to be deleted, in December 1923. Electrical recording made the other recordings obsolete by 1926 leaving only the excerpts from *Hansel and Gretel*, the overture in 1927, when it was replaced by Coates, and the companion record, in June 1928.

To understand what we are listening to it is a good idea to imagine what the recording room was like and the sort of sound that was produced on the day. A full orchestra was not used, at the very most thirty or so players but often times just twenty. Roughly half the players were strings, an equal number of woodwind and brass, plus timpani and drums. They were then tightly packed together in a recording room that measured about 7 metres square and 3 metres high. The walls were wood panelled and understandably reverberant. Boult, without much exaggeration, said it 'would hardly have held a full-size billiard table.'

They faced a cubical which stood out from one wall with two, or sometimes three, metal horns projecting from it. The strings were closest to one horn, the leader so close as to be almost inside the bell. The woodwind faced another horn, the brass, seated on raised platforms, would play over the heads of the strings, and the tuba, which acted as double-bass, sat at the very back. The percussion was as close

as was physically possible to one or other of the recording horns as room would allow. The scores were often hung from the ceiling, sight lines were blocked and so a number of strategically placed mirrors had to be positioned in order just to see the conductor. The volume level produced was probably close to deafening at times, and the players jostling for space often accidentally bumped each other and the recording equipment.

The acoustical mechanical recording apparatus, with the music funnelled down recording horns to a recording diaphragm and thence cutting the wax master, was of course badly distorted by the process. Through a combination of trial and error, placement of musicians, different sizes and shapes of recording horn etc. the recording 'experts' were able to produce a semblance of a performance, realistic enough for the record buyers to enjoy.

We hear all too plainly what Boult and his afflicted orchestra experienced in their small recording room: the ever present tuba, a rather thin string sound, the woodwind and brass often just too keen. Yet this was cutting edge technology at the time and the miracle is that after a hundred years we can hear anything at all.

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