BBC Lunch-time Lectures Sixth Series–1

RADIO 1 AND RADIO 2

by Robin Scott

Radio 1 and Radio 2

A lecture by Robin Scott
Controller, Radio 1 and 2, BBC
at the first of the sixth series of lunch-time lectures
in the Concert Hall of Broadcasting House

11 October 1967

RADIO 1 AND RADIO 2

by

ROBIN SCOTT

A BBC Lunchtime Lecture is usually, as I understand it, an occasion for an assessment of some aspect of broadcasting in the form of a carefully prepared paper of exactly the right size and weight. I am told that if I am on my last paragraph in forty minutes time that will be all right, but if I am then launched on the last chapter it could be serious, and that would be a pity. Forty minutes is just about the time needed to play the top fifteen records in the Top Thirty – or the Fun Thirty as Radio 1's Tony Blackburn calls it – and that would be more fun, but it's not what I'm here to do and I have no pretensions as a disc-jockey (though I've spun many a groovy disc in my time).

I'm here to talk about Radios 1 and 2 or 247 and the Light – or 'flashlight' and 'halflight'.

These are early days and if my discourse is a rambling one it is because I devoted my first rest day, since the Service started, to writing it.

It all happened last Saturday week at 7 a.m. I had the privilege of launching it (they couldn't hold me back) and, as they say, it's still happening – Popular Music with the accent on Pop all day on 247 metres on the medium wave band. Quite a revolution for BBC Radio – which used to be called Sound – and even Steam, but I haven't heard that word bandied about recently.

Once we had 2LO and a crystal, now we have Radios 1, 2, 3, and 4 and a transistor. Some people don't like progress; they call it change and deprecate anything which upsets habits even though the habits may have become rather a bore. But one does not change for the sake of change and I think that what has been done has been done right for the right reasons.

After 2LO, which was actually one programme (and there were

even some who regretted the passing of that) there were two programmes and they both were the same sort of mixture of good things and things that were good for us.

There was a war and radio became part of everybody's life and a link with home – twenty-five million listened regularly to 'Have a Go', ITMA's catch phrases became part of the language, the 9 o'clock News was a religious ritual, Sundays were coloured grey and Vera Lynn was the Forces' sweetheart.

Then came the Third Programme – a very good thing indeed but never destined to be more than a super service for a super minority. Later was added a good music programme, again a valuable extension to choice, but still only the choice of comparatively few (enough to fill the Albert Hall twenty-five times a day). From the 'fifties the audiences for radio began to diminish because the viewing habit replaced the listening habit – and this change in habit was also reflected in a reduction of listening even during the daytime. Gradually the daytime audiences became more important than the evening ones – in direct ratio to the growth of television licences, to such an extent that the total radio audience at 8 a.m. is now ten times larger than that at 8 p.m.

Those working in BBC radio during those years had to face up to the harsh fact of declining audiences, and to a rather special dilemma. Even with the near saturation of television there remained – and still remains – an important minority who do not possess, cannot afford (or perhaps do not want) a television set. This minority still constitutes the majority of the evening audience, certainly during the period from about 7.30 p.m. to about 10.30 p.m., and for this audience these are the peak hours for broadcast entertainment. This is also the period when minority interests of all kinds expect to find broadcasts addressed specifically to them – particularly if television with its eyes mainly on the mass audience can find no place in its restricted hours to cater for everybody (although BBC-2 has considerably extended the spectrum of interest).

The new factor

The invention of the transistor introduced a new factor to radio broadcasting and listening. People began to carry their entertainment around with them – and what they wanted was more popular music of all kinds, background music to help them pass the time.

The Light Programme helped them to do this but it was the only

network catering for the mass audience. The Home Service with its obligations in terms of Schools Broadcasting could not do so and the Music Programme by its very nature was not the choice for the majority. The Light Programme was still characterized by fragmented planning – with the schedule divided into short programme segments – a half-hour of this, three-quarters of an hour of that, providing a general mixture of popular and light music variously presented – but without any particular continuity of style. It tried to be all things to all men and all women. Its pattern was gradually evolving but it was still characterized by 'stop-go' in terms of programme flow.

The audience for daytime broadcasting began to grow again, particularly in the early morning, and well established programmes like 'Family Favourites' continued to command regular audiences as high as any television programme. Meanwhile, the voice of the lobby for commercial radio grew louder; then on a spring morning in 1964 came the first Pirate broadcast – soon to be followed by others until finally three years later nine ships or forts were bombarding the country with popular music of various kinds. The most successful of these stations used formats and a style of presentation largely derived from American radio. The top 20, 30, or 40 records recur again and again in a slightly different order interspersed with old hit records and tips for the top. Such formats and a rave style of presentation characterize what the Americans call the 'Rocker' type of station. In contrast, and appealing to a much smaller and older audience, were the sweet music stations which in quieter vein offered a mixture of middle-of-the-road and light music. The main attraction of these stations was that if you wanted that particular sort of music or musical mixture you could tune in anytime and get it. Riding these formats were the disc-jockeys with their regular daily assignments.

Outlawing the pirates

The Light Programme in meeting this challenge hovered somewhat uneasily between pop and sweet music carved up into a fragmented pattern – though some longer 'strips' were introduced. The pirates did not individually or collectively provide national coverage, although their signal strength benefited considerably from transmission over water. Nor did they capture the majority of the audience even in the areas they served. The main inroads into Light Programme listening were at the weekend, particularly at

times when the BBC as a whole did not offer a daytime alternative to talks, religious broadcasts, light music and variety.

Paradoxically, the Light Programme's morning audience for the mixture format of 'Breakfast Special' gradually increased and over the three years – 1964 to 1967 – rose on average by over a million, reaching a peak of about 6 million at 8 a.m., whilst the Home Service was building audiences for its new style news broadcasts, too.

When, finally, the Government took measures to outlaw the pirates, thus confirming agreements which had been entered into at an international level, it asked the BBC to provide a service of popular music during the hours which lie outside the period of peak-viewing of television.

The 247 metre medium wave network relaying the Light Programme was to be used for this. Its coverage would be increased so that at least 85 per cent of the country would be served. In fact, the 247 metre wavelength is not in any circumstances capable of providing 100 per cent satisfactory reception throughout the whole of the United Kingdom but the final coverage is, of course, considerably more than the combined coverage of all the pirate radios, and the engineers are still pursuing their efforts to improve it.

Radio 2 – basically the old Light Programme with some changes and improvements in terms of alternatives to pop – was given the long wave of 1500 metres and the vhf network because the long wave, which was always the basic Light Programme transmitter, gives the best coverage of any single transmitter used by the BBC – about 98 per cent of the population – whilst vhf, which has been available for about twelve years, gives virtually total coverage in addition to its superior quality. Radio 2 is, therefore, the better equipped of the two networks. In fact, only a very small fraction of the population is actually deprived of the possibility of hearing such programmes as 'Woman's Hour' and 'The Dales'.

Meeting two needs

Many of the complaints being received are due to ignorance of how to tune existing receivers and much of the reception could be improved by the addition of a small length of wire in the aerial socket. BBC engineers are dealing with all complaints and giving guidance where necessary. It is, of course, regretted that no vhf network was available for the new service. Very clear and repeated warnings were given of the impending changes but as was to be

expected a sizeable minority was caught unawares. I will return to this problem later but it is one that concerns us deeply.

If the split in Light Programme wavelengths represented an enormous technical problem, the planning of the new service was no less arduous and complicated. It was logically possible to provide popular music – of one kind or another – all day on the 247 metre wavelength merely by switching out – or 'opting out' as we call it – from 'Five to Ten', 'Morning Story', and the repeat of 'The Dales', 'Woman's Hour' and the afternoon instalment of 'The Dales', Monday to Friday; and at weekends from 'Peoples Service' and the Sunday variety programmes. But this clearly did not go far enough. A limited plan would not have provided any homogeneity either to the Light Programme or to the popular music service.

My aim, when I began to tackle the problem early in the spring was to try to create as homogeneous a popular music service as possible whilst retaining the main features of the Light Programme on the 1500 metres vhf service and providing new alternatives to pop where none existed before.

If in the process we could improve the service to those wanting continuous pop *and* make the alternative more attractive to the sweet, middle-of-the-road and light music audience, we should have contributed to a greater measure of enjoyment and pleasure. This would be reflected in the total audience figure for both services. If this combined total was greater than that for the existing Light Programme we could claim some measure of success. If, on the other hand, all we did was to carve up and reduce the faithful Light Programme audience, the operation would be a failure.

Keeping up the style

The challenge was therefore twofold. Given unlimited needle-time and money there is no doubt what we would have liked – and would still like – to achieve with two mass entertainment radio services. The first would be a popular music and pop network, the second a sweet music service including also the serials, magazines, and variety shows which appeal to many millions. And, although the audience is very small late at night there should eventually be some service of entertainment music right through the twenty-four hours.

I was particularly concerned that the popular music service should have continuity of style, that it should not just be a series of

programmes linked by announcements, that it should be attractively presented and that it should have a special image.

And what is popular music? The Government White Paper of December last did not attempt to define this and rightly it was left to the broadcasting authority to decide. There was indeed some idea that the new service would be for the 'sweet music' audience. But there was already a good deal of this on the Light Programme and it was abundantly clear that if the new service was to be dynamic and attractive it must go for pop. There is no doubt at all in my mind that to have reduced the percentage of pop would have cut the BBC away from the majority of the audience – both existing and potential. We should not forget that the young housewife of twenty-seven – perhaps with two children or more – was a seventeen year old when rock 'n roll music first hit this country and that it is nearly five years since four brilliant Liverpudlians first began to plant their imprint on the world of entertainment.

Furthermore the pirates had revealed or created needs – as so often happens with new products. Swedish radio had gone through the same experience as had French radio – which, until it reorganized its France I network, was a poor third in audience ratings to its commercial competitors from across the frontiers. Competition is good for everyone not least to the BBC, partly because it stimulates, partly because it shows where improvements might be made – and audience statistics whether of size or of appreciation do not always indicate this clearly. Nor does it always help to ask the audience what it wants, because the pattern of response tends to be confused. In commercial terms, to ask the public whether it wants soap of a particular colour or shape or size or smell would elicit such a mass of different answers that it might not be of much guidance to the manufacturer. But as soon as somebody offers a product of a new and different sort which captures the imagination a new need is created. The fact is that most people don't know what they need until they start needing it – and then they demand it.

The needle-time problem

Satisfying any demand costs money particularly if it is not being sold. Practically every time the BBC increases its service to the public it has to do it by further streamlining, further economies or cuts in other directions. Twenty-five shillings per licence holder does not provide any reserve funds and there was precious little extra cash available for the new popular music service – in fact –

about £400 per day 'above the line' and a top radio variety show can cost more than that – but let's not forget that that variety show may entertain an audience of nearly eight million on a Sunday afternoon and provide as many laughs for as many people as a tv show costing more than ten times as much.

In addition to this comparatively small sum of money about two hours extra needle-time per day were to be available bringing the total for the two Light Programme radio services to a little over seven hours per day. Needle-time is the number of hours of actual playing time of commercial gramophone records permitted by agreement with Phonographic Performance Limited – a body which represents the gramophone industry in its negotiations with the BBC. Gramophone records are copyright, by law, and their unrestricted use is illegal. The pirate broadcasters usurped the right to do so and without unrestricted use of gramophone records their programming would have been quite impossible.

Of course unrestricted, or somewhat less restricted, use of commercial records would make it comparatively easy to programme a pop network and a middle-of-the-road/light music alternative, although the cost would be still prohibitive if the same needle-time payments were applied. American observers find it difficult to understand our problem of access to recorded music and tend to forget too easily that some fifteen years ago the recording business in the United States ground to a complete halt for nearly fifteen months through union action.

The record companies are by no means sure how much exposure is good for a record – most of them did not like the over-exposure of their products by the pirate radios, though it is significant that some of the smaller companies were quite ready to pay at least one station for 'plugs' of their records on the air. Meanwhile the Musicians' Union whose members are largely responsible for making these same commercial records is understandably anxious to protect their interests, and would vastly prefer continuous live performance on the BBC air to the use of commercial records. But only a small percentage of the Union's membership is up to broadcasting standards – or indeed in regular professional employment and there is little doubt that what the public wants (and is entitled to expect) is a varied diet of good popular music. Much of this cannot be obtained by recording in BBC studios either because the artists are not available or because the time involved in creating the equivalent of the commercial record would be out of all pro-

portion to its use once or twice. The making of the Beatles' last long playing record 'Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band' took several months, with special electronic sounds and multi-tracking. In any case the Beatles are not now interested in making special recordings just for BBC radio. It is their records that represent them – just as Toscanini's recordings with the NBC orchestra represent him.

It is hoped that a sensible solution to the problem can be found, for its continuance is hardly conducive to the public good.

Radio by numbers

The BBC as the biggest patron of music in this country – and indeed in the world – has contributed more than any other body to the encouragement of music of all types, values this contribution and is sensible of its continuing value.

I mention these facts in passing because they – as much as finance – inevitably coloured and influenced the plans for the new popular music service – Radio 1 because no other really satisfactory name can be found and it is decided that it is better to use the numbering system, which is also used in several other countries. Dozens of names have been suggested – the best perhaps just Radio 247 (but then there is a possibility that another wavelength may be used to augment it so that is discarded). Radio by numbers is the final decision and it is true that to go on calling the Light the Light when it is no longer the Light on 247 metres shorn of 'Woman's Hour' and 'The Dales' might create even greater confusion. Whatever the final plan for the new service on 247 it is quite obvious that it must operate in tandem with the Light on 1500 metres and vhf for longish periods of the day and during the evening hours most days of the week. Therefore, it would be better if the two services carried consecutive numbers. Since the Third has already a number (and whoever objected to that?) the 1500 and 247 services inevitably are 1 and 2 or 2 and 1. If I asked for the favour of number 1 for the new 247 metre service it was for good reasons of promotion and because it was becoming increasingly apparent that at various times during the day it would be the 'lead' service both in terms of audience and in terms of the Light – or Radio 2. That is to say parts of Radio 1 programmes would be shared with Radio 2. There was no significance in terms of numerical rating behind these changes in nomenclature for the BBC's radio networks. People do jump to wrong conclusions far too easily.

During the spring I was revising and re-revising the plans for Radios 1 and 2. The aim remained the provision of as completely separate a service as possible on Radios 1 and 2 during the peak listening daytime hours.

From twelve hours per week the total of new programme hours was raised to over thirty then to over forty and finally to over fifty-three on the same basic budget. Much of this was achieved by packaging programmes into longer strips and money was also obtained by a slight reduction in the more costly light entertainment shows. Better use was to be made of staff effort and there would be further streamlining of production methods. Allowing for savings on the existing Light Programme the actual extra cost of the over fifty-three hours of new programme time on Radios 1 and 2 averaged out at just under £70 per hour 'above the line' – or if you're interested in statistics about one 4000th of a penny per hour per listener to a peak pop show with a five million audience.

In allocating the resources, in terms of needle-time and finance, I also had to bear in mind the possible increases in staff. These were finally very small in relation to an increase of nearly 40 per cent in output over the previous Light Programme. The main weight of extra production responsibility was to fall on the popular music department, which had also to reorientate its activities in terms of the 'sharper' pop content on Radio 1. On its expertise in booking the right bands and groups and singers the success of Radio 1 would largely depend.

Middle-of-the-road music

The final plans for Radio 1 and 2 did not go as far as I would have liked mainly because of shortage of needle-time. Because of this almost every programme consisting only of records has to be shared with Radio 2. We were all aware that however popular they might be, the record request programmes would fit a little uneasily into Radio 1 – particularly after the impact of the early Pop Show – or sandwiched between it and Saturday Club or in the case of 'Family Favourites' on Sundays between two long pop programmes. They are all the more exposed because of the style of almost all the rest of Radio 1's programmes.

On Radio 2 I should have liked to include more middle-of-the-road music – more Peggy Lee, Bert Kaempfert, Mancini, Sinatra, more Jim Reeves, too, and a host of others. The slots are waiting to be filled and Radio 2 will not be complete until they are. But at

least there are considerably more alternatives than there were – for the great majority of listeners. The emphasis appears to have been on Radio 1 and it is true that Radio 1 had to be as good as we could make it. The extra fifty-three hours fifteen minutes can be ascribed as about three-fifths to Radio 1 and two-fifths to Radio 2.

In fact the prospect of changes in radio led many people to expect that their particular favourite music would get far more airtime. Some also expected that in some miraculous way one partially new network would not only replace every single pirate station but provide hours and hours of folk music or country and western music. All these interests have to be balanced and we have a pretty good idea of their range of support. We shall certainly be always ready for change and evolution in taste.

Radio 2 had inevitably to retain continuity announcements but we knew that good presentation was vital to both networks. Announcements between programmes on Radio 1 would obviously be an intrusion and the presenters or disc-jockeys must hand over to each other. This would be simple enough were it not that Radio 2 shares some of Radio 1's programmes. Radio 2 has to be cued out and switched out on the second when it leaves Radio 1 programmes which it has shared to lead into a programme of its own. The presentation and continuity schedules had to be entirely rewritten and a whole new 'code of practice' had to be defined in the greatest detail.

Including the news

To make Radio 1 lively and slick but informal I needed new studios and new equipment so that the disc-jockey shows could be self-operated (as 'Breakfast Special' already was). The continuity studios lent themselves best to modification – by the introduction of cassette machines, an extra turntable, echo, prefade and prehear facilities and intercommunication.

Self-operation of equipment was vital to the liveliness of the Radio 1 programme. The creation of a special Radio 1 centre of operations would also help to produce the team atmosphere which any pop network needs for success. Whilst the transmitter engineers were hard at work expanding the 247 network, the technical operations staffs were modifying two continuity suites for Radio 1. Their crowning achievement was to produce a special compressor/limiter which anticipates the volume of voice to be used and balances this with the music output thus enabling voice-

over-music introductions to records to be made without having to balance the two outputs by faders.

I cannot speak too highly of the work of this splendid engineering team.

All programmes – with only two exceptions for foreign-based contributors, would be live on Radio 1. But a number of Radio 2's programmes would be recorded – or recorded repeats – and since replay times of tape can vary up to a few seconds in sixty minutes there would be occasions on Radio 2 where a separate newsreader was necessary. This has worked surprisingly well though there has been occasional untidyness here and there. We will probably move towards a separate corps of newsreaders for Radio 1 because the news summaries should not sound like 'interruptions'. It is difficult to hit exactly the right compromise style for both Radio 1 and 2. On the other hand, I have resisted the introduction of dramatic sounds and frenetic reading of the news.

The frequency and length of news bulletins on Radio 1 and Radio 2 have been increased – News Time is at a much better time (7.30 p.m.) – as is the Sports News (6.30 p.m.). There is a new and overdue Midnight News and, of course, Radio 1 is geared because of its flexibility to follow up a developing story. I felt that the late evenings were a little colourless, remembered some old Light Programme attempts to make them more lively and aware (with programmes like 'Light Night Extra') and asked Light Entertainment to have a go at a Monday through Friday music and news show. This is a team operation which also involves news, current affairs, outside broadcasts, and popular music. We shall see whether it can be increasingly compulsive and entertaining. There was always room for a programme of this kind and I have great faith in it and the team concerned.

Are jingles fun?

In planning Radio 1 and replanning the Light, I also seized the opportunity to reshape the evening pattern of programmes, reducing their number and channelling the effort elsewhere into Radio 2's daytime schedule. I should have liked to have introduced a late evening cliff-hanger serial, instead we have two episodes of a serial a week – on Mondays and Thursdays – and this has got off to a splendid start with a typically magnetic Durbridge product.

But of course we had to do something about the Auntie image associated with the BBC – in many ways unfairly. We have all

lived through the quite unprecedented press coverage of the plans for Radio 1, and I have lost count of the press, radio, and television interviews I have given. I felt this was a most important job to do because it was essential to prepare the ground before the start of the new programme – and to get our potential audience to accept the notion that the BBC *could* provide a pop music service in the right style.

And what of this style? We have been accused of imitation but in fact the pirates, as I've said, copied American formats. We already had some jingles even on the old Light Programme – but it's difficult to sing the charms of the 'Light Programme'. 'Radio 1 on 247' lends itself much better – a pop network needs fun, and jingles are fun (as long as they are not abused) – and why can't we have fun – particularly when it helps to make things go with a swing.

Much play has been made in the press of the number of disc-jockeys engaged to present the new programmes on Radio 1 and the fact that a number of them worked in pirate radio. The fact is that the Light Programme had provided few opportunities to train disc-jockeys and Radio 1 needed the best people available immediately. I believe that over a hundred disc-jockeys of various nationalities worked on the ships and forts. Most of them and many others, went through auditions with us and were carefully assessed by the audition panel. I approved all the final choices – particularly those for the major daily programmes. I also made a number of direct nominations. Very few of the men concerned were entirely new to BBC radio. Naturally we did not give them long contracts initially because we wanted to see how they and the network shook down together.

I do not foresee any drastic changes but one or two more permanent places need to be settled and this very much depends on success in terms of audience reactions – which is only right and proper.

Increasing the choice

It has been said that we have forty-six disc-jockeys – I don't know who dreamed that figure up. In fact, taking the whole of Radio 1 and 2's programmes and including *all* the presenters of all the programmes we have a few less than we used to have on the Light and we use our staff men to better advantage – and very good they are too. Four disc-jockeys carry the main weekday programme output on Radio 1 – forty-three hours a week between them.

We could not have worked to a strict format of Top Twenty, Thirty or Forty on Radio 1 because of the needle-time problem. In any case I wanted a better mixture than that and the record-buying public is not completely representative of the public as a whole – moreover individual presenters should be allowed to develop their own personalities and this they are doing.

I have mentioned reception problems – and in this connection the reception of 247 metres in darkness is bedevilled in some places by interference from a station in Albania. I had thought also to do jazz a good turn by almost doubling the output on Radio 1 – but Radio 1 is not relayed on vhf and there are fans who cannot receive 247 well at night. The results of the new plans will of course be very carefully analysed. But if the total result of the new plan is to increase the spectrum of choice for the great majority, is that not a good thing? Obviously it is a matter of concern if some sets cannot tune to both long and medium waves – it is a greater matter of concern if the signals do not reach people clearly. Everything possible must obviously be done to remedy things, but it would be unthinkable to go backwards.

Audience response

These are early days and it is too early to draw any firm conclusions from the audience survey reports on the first days of Radio 1 and 2 – but the figures are encouraging. Saturday Club retained its audience of about 5½ million on Radio 1 but there was a new audience of nearly 2 million for Max Jaffa on Radio 2. The combined audience from Emperor Rosko on 1 and Marching and Waltzing on 2 was – at over 5 million – about 1,600,000 higher than the previous Saturday average at noon.

The combined Radio 1 and 2 Sunday morning audience was over 2 million higher than the previous audience for the Light Programme – because of the choice now offered. The same overall increase applies to the total audience for the Tony Blackburn Show and Breakfast Special. The Jimmy Young Show is pulling in an audience of about 5 million between 10 and 11 a.m. – an increase of 1½ million on the previous figures. By degrees people are adjusting to the new wavelength dispositions for Radios 1 and 2. The audience for 'Woman's Hour' is not far short of its previous 3 million – but the audience for the popular music alternative on Radio 1 represents a net total increase of over a million. These are considerable increases and the pattern is promising. It would be rash to draw

early conclusions but the increase in choice though still not as great as we should like is proving popular.

Radio has a lot of life in it and a very lively future ahead – Radios 1 and 2 have every intention of staying very much alive, and doing everything possible to improve the service of music and entertainment to the people of this country.

Published by the British Broadcasting Corporation, 35 Marylebone High Street, London, W.1, and printed in England by The Broadwater Press Ltd, Welwyn Garden City, Herts. (SBN: 563 07403 5)