

Fake Music Re-Anticipations

The British Musicians' Union – The BBC Orchestras Strike of 1980

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In 1980, due to hikes in licensing fees, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) developed a plan to reduce its expenditures by £130 million over two years, £40 million of which was to come from cuts in operating costs across many of its services. A portion of these cuts was to affect music programming. The corporation sought to axe five of its eleven house orchestras – in all, 172 positions would be lost.

On March 3rd John Morton, the General Secretary of the Musicians' Union (MU), received a letter outlining these proposals and the BBC's intention to renegotiate the guaranteed musical expenditure agreement that they had with the union. Morton held that by proposing to cut £500,000 from its live music budget, the BBC was in breach of their standing agreement with the MU concerning "needle-time," a limitation on how much recorded music the corporation could use, ensuring the broadcasting of live music. Meetings between the BBC and the MU took place throughout March and mid-April, with the BBC refusing further negotiations in late April and May. The players began the strike on June 1st.

The strike resulted in a cancellation of many facets of programming, including the popular Promenade Concerts, a summer season of daily classical concerts held at Royal Albert Hall. Morton declared the end of the strike on August 1st, after over thirty hours of negotiations resulted in a compromise. Although the outcome was not entirely satisfactory for the MU, their measures managed to keep intact three of the five orchestras in question while securing compensations for those who would wind up unemployed.

Though the strike ensured room for real music to flourish in British broadcasting, we do not begrudge the MU their prominence in the field of fake music, for they brought it into (or out of) every BBC-subscribing home in Europe. While the circumstances surrounding the strike are well documented, the music that these musicians did not play is not. From our current point of late understanding, we simply marvel at their ingenuity: real musicians learned fakeness in order to protect themselves.

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