

MUSIC PRESERVED – A NEW KIND OF BIRTH

Although Music Preserved was created 25 years ago in 1987 as the Music Performance Research Centre, it was an unexpected accident that happened to me in April 1979 that had originally provided its catalyst, although I had no concept or design whatsoever of what was to evolve. The entire coming about of Music Preserved was due to the remarkable imagination, foresight and skill of its Emeritus Chairman Basil Tschaikov, a distinguished musician who not only had enjoyed several decades of experience playing with all the major London orchestras, but was also a cutting edge figure in the world of music education. It was he who thought up a completely novel concept with a new purpose that challenged many pre-conceived attitudes to archive-recording, both in and out of the music profession. For Music Preserved's 25th birthday he agreed to speak with me and set the scene of the situation before and leading up to the birth of the Music Performance Research Centre. Following here is a transcript of his words, which I have put into the format of a self-contained article.

Jon Tolansky

In the late April of 1979 I had just started to prepare for my first term as Director of the National Centre for Orchestral Studies (NCOS) at London University, Goldsmith's College when I received a phone call from Jon Tolansky telling me that his house had been struck by lightning and that quite a portion of his extensive collection of tape recordings had been damaged. He asked if he could come and see me to consult me about an idea he had regarding his tapes. I agreed and we had a brief meeting in which he asked me if the NCOS would be able to take his entire collection so that the tapes could be safely housed there and made available for the students to listen to. I immediately told him we had no space to do that, but I invited him to come and visit me in my flat in Welbeck Street where we could talk about the general gist of his idea. When he came, he told me that he had many hundreds of tapes of performances that were not commercially available, which he had himself made mainly from radio broadcasts going back as far as the late 1950s. I said to him that I had never made or collected recordings, even though I had played on such a great number since the mid 1940s, and so I was at first rather bemused by what he was saying to me. It may sound naive, but I really had no idea that Jon, as I was to find out from him, was one of quite a lot of people who had been making recordings in this way. He was at pains to point out that they were completely different from commercial recordings made about the same time by the same performers of the same music. A few days later he returned and brought with him a few examples for me to hear, and I then became interested in the idea of finding a place to where his collection could go.

My initial thoughts were questions – was there already a place where recordings like this were housed for public listening access, did the actual performances that Jon had taken down exist anywhere else, for instance in the BBC Archives, and was Jon aware that they were unauthorised and illegal? In answer to the last question, Jon did not realise that his collection was, shall we say, of dubious provenance, but in answer to the other questions, he was fully aware: there indeed was an organisation that housed such recordings for public listening, it was called the British Institute of Recorded Sound (BIRS – later to become the National Sound Archive and now the British Library

Sound Archive); and Jon had already found out over the years that a good many of his recordings did not to the best of his knowledge exist elsewhere and that included both the BIRS and also the BBC Archives. Indeed, some of them had been recorded from broadcasts transmitted by organisations other than the BBC, and a few had even been made covertly and illicitly on location inside opera houses and concert halls.

I was concerned with three more issues: i) why did Jon not wish to give his tapes to the BIRS? ii) even if he had wanted to donate his recordings to the BIRS, how could they be in a position to accept illegal materials? iii) how could any proper organisation accept an illegal collection of tapes? It was these questions that began an eight year project that ultimately was to lead to the foundation of the Music Performance Research Centre (MPRC), now Music Preserved, in June 1987. It would take a large number of pages to relate the full and very complex story of how this all evolved, but suffice it to say as a thumb nail summary that I saw the need for the creation of a new and unprecedented legal and artistic infrastructure to enable the initiation of a new public listening archive, devoted to 'live' music performance, that would set two goals: i) set up a facility for future concert, opera and recital performances that were not being broadcast to be recorded by and exclusively for the new archive, with full consents from performers and rights organisations; ii) subsequently create the circumstances by which collections of previously recorded performances such as Jon Tolansky's tapes could be donated exclusively to the new archive. Both goals could only be achieved if a new foolproof system of rights protection was set up for the archive.

In 1987 this all came to pass with the foundation of the MPRC, but only after many hurdles had been overcome. From the start I knew it was vital to obtain the support of the Musicians Union (MU) and the Mechanical Copyright Protection Society (MCPS), who at that time, like most organisations that were then involved with recorded music rights, were generally unhappy with the existence of any recording that was not set up and paid for as a commercial artefact. It is vital to understand that in those days, although radio organisations were allowed to make archive-recordings and the BIRS had agreements with the BBC and the MU enabling them to retain copies, there were no proper contractual arrangements for performances not being broadcast to be recorded for archive purposes (even though some venues and organisations were making them) and it was illegal for private persons to record off-air from the radio. Through my many years of involvement with Musicians Union affairs at a high level, in May 1982 I was able to persuade the then General Secretary, John Morton, to allow a small unofficial working party of MU members – myself, clarinettist Gordon Lewin, Jon Tolansky, and conductor Bernard Keffe – to meet selected members of the MU Executive Committee to propose the notion of a new archive that would make its own recordings of performances that were not being broadcast. Gordon Lewin had already proposed at a Biennial Delegates Conference in 1981 that the MU should create its own archive of music scores and also recordings for MU members, and as the Conference had accepted his motion, in a sense what we were putting to MU Executive Committee members had a related precedent. However, we were aiming much further in the recording field and it was really an historic turning point when our proposal was accepted. Although neither the MU nor the MCPS at that time could accept the idea of an archive that would house collections like Jon Tolansky's, with this groundbreaking decision to agree to on-location archive recordings of future non-broadcast performances – something that had until then been inconceivable – I saw that there might be a way, some years ahead, when it would be possible for private off-air tapes to become part of this proposed archive.

At that time it was unthinkable that the Musicians Union or the MCPS would support what Music Preserved has become, housing such a richness of outstandingly valuable private tape collections. I used to say that tape was a four-letter word that was considered out of bounds by many, and I do recall saying to that meeting in May 1982 “don’t you think that collections like Jon Tolansky’s should be destroyed, as they are completely illegal?” Of course nobody said “yes”, so I then said “well then we must try to find a way to look after them properly”. The MU was not actually able to support that until 1990, following a change in the Copyright Act and the granting of a government Order to the MPRC recognising it as an archive that could house recordings of broadcasts. By that time the MPRC was 3 years old and it had been constituted not only with Board membership representing performers, performance venues, broadcasting organisations and recording rights organisations, but also with the personal written support of many internationally celebrated artists. They included Claudio Abbado, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Richard Bonyngne, Sir Colin Davis, Plácido Domingo, Sir Mark Elder, Dame Gwyneth Jones, Bernard Haitink, Dame Kiri te Kanawa, Sir Charles Mackerras, Lord Menuhin, Sir John Pritchard, Sir Simon Rattle, Sir Georg Solti and Dame Joan Sutherland. They were delighted that MPRC should record their performances – and starting in October 1987 that is what we did, engaging some of the top balance engineers in both the broadcasting and commercial recording sectors, and using the highest quality equipment that Sony had donated to us. The archive-recordings were all set up with new legal contracts that contained a completely foolproof system of rights protection. We went to venues such as the Royal Opera House Covent Garden, the Royal Festival Hall, the Barbican Centre and Symphony Hall Birmingham, and the list of artists began to expand substantially – Luciano Pavarotti, Mstislav Rostropovich and Klaus Tennstedt were a few of the most famous new additions.

In 1989, thanks to a recommendation from Humphrey Burton, the Barbican Library agreed to provide accommodation for an MPRC Listening Studio, which Sony underwrote, and the public could now hear the new MPRC recordings. The following year, the MPRC decided to accept private collections of off-air recordings such as Jon Tolansky’s, and before long we were receiving a considerable number of offers from other collectors or their descendents. The MPRC Council of Management accepted them on one condition: the tapes had to be donated with legal Deeds of Assignments and Deeds of Gifts that gave them official legally protected status within the confines of the archive.

There is a lot more to tell, as this was really just the beginning, but for a 25th anniversary memoir it is time now that I conclude. Music Preserved, a vastly expanded archive now from how it was at its inception, successfully continues to uphold its original tenet: the preservation of public performances in archive-recordings that secure the integrity of the performances and the performance contexts. It seems not so long ago that we had to move mountains for this to be accepted.