



# Discordant notes: the archives of British music

The archives of  
British music

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to explore the apparent under-estimation of the importance of the archives of “serious” British music.

**Design/methodology/approach** – It considers what music archives are, their value, management issues, access and preservation efforts, and what needs to be done to ensure their survival. A case example of the Eastbourne Recorded Music Society is presented.

**Findings** – The author concludes that, at all levels, something much more concerted than individual initiatives for cataloguing or digitising specific collections needs to be done if the archival heritage of British music is to survive as it should.

**Originality/value** – Aims to raise issues relevant for the records and archives of any third sector organisation.

**Keywords** Music, United Kingdom, Archives management

**Paper type** General review

## Introduction

It is well-known that the British have long been seen as unmusical. This is despite the enormous spread of music making as an activity in the country over the last three centuries and the number of high profile performers (and occasionally composers) of British origins. As a spin off from our reluctance to be regarded as musical, and perhaps now a fear of being thought elitist, there is a gross under-estimation of the importance of the archives of “serious” music. This article can only scratch the surface of a vast subject but can at least be taken as a starting point.

## An analysis

As the paucity of literature in this area is remarkable it is worth attempting an analysis of the archives of British music[1]. To start with provenance, the following can be identified as the potential sources of music archives:

- composers;
- publishers;
- agents;
- soloists and conductors;
- groups, professional and amateur;
- performing societies and businesses; orchestral, choral, etc.;
- recording studios;
- music societies and clubs; and
- colleges and music schools.



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What are music archives? This is equally difficult to assess. My definition is any documentation relating to the creation, performance, publication, promotion, and appreciation of music whether originating from organisations or individuals. Ironically it does not include what are frequently termed music manuscripts (MSS) as these are products not archives[2]. This is the same division as can be made for literature. The MSS of *Wuthering Heights* is not an archive any more than a published edition would be, but Emily's letters relating to writing and publishing, if they exist, would be archives. Equally, recordings are products not archives though again loose usage means that they are sometimes so defined. The BBC Archives are perhaps the most outstanding and frequent misuse of the term. Any idea that recordings are authentic must in any case now be under serious doubt as a result of "Hattogate"[3]. The furore over this demonstrates why they do not have any of the attributes of archives.

The custodial situation is just as diverse as the material and the provenance. Small groups appear in the general holdings of national and local repositories, county record offices, and university libraries. There are two composer-oriented locations; the Britten-Pears at Aldeburgh and the Elgar Birthplace Museum at Broadheath near Worcester. The major orchestras, such as the Halle and the City of Birmingham, maintain their archives and some employ qualified staff for the purpose. Indeed the Halle, using the facilities of their splendid Bridgewater Hall in Manchester, maintains a professionally staffed archive service with a *cordons bleu* café also in the same building! Other organisations are using or considering the use of local Record Offices. Others again, one suspects, do nothing at all or are attempting desperately now to make up the deficiencies of the past[4].

The list above indicates just how wide and complex in regard to organisation, provenance, and custody music archives can be. Moreover there can be crossover; for example a musical society can promote performance or recording. If we attempt to apply the traditional archive categories the same picture emerges. Composers and performers archives fall into the category of personal papers, while the documents created by agents, publishers, and professional orchestras are clearly business archives. Choral societies and other voluntary groups should probably be classed as charity or "Third Sector" archives, to use the new buzz phrase. Any attempt to deal with this logically is clearly going to be fraught with problems. The existence of archives of performers in unlikely places is well illustrated by the fact that the present writer was approached recently by the custodian of the personal papers of Vilem Tausky, the well-known musician of Czech origin and friend of Janacek, who was concerned as to what to do with them. Sensible suggestions were offered but it has to be said that there is little professional lore on the best places for music archives.

Fundamentally all this highlights why archivists have always been reluctant to endorse subject approaches to archive preservation. Given the variety of provenances and custodial organisations for music archives it is impossible to manage them as a single cohesive group. The only evidence of an attempt to deal with this is the existence of the "Cecilia" database accessible on the internet[5]. Sponsored by the British Library and the MLA (Museums, Libraries and Archives Council) and operated by the UK Branch of the Association of Music Libraries, Archives and Documentation Centres, it is heavily dependant on cooperation from librarians, archivists and others holding music archives, who may not always be aware of the fact. When Cecilia was introduced having to point out at a professional meeting to some county and private organisation archivists that they actually had music archives in their care. They had simply not realised that musicians and performing groups were represented in their holdings.

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They tended to see them as individuals and organisations, not in terms of what they did. Although in a profession it should not be a factor, it has to be said that one of the problems is the personal interests of the custodians. If they are not musically inclined or aware themselves, such material tends to get a low priority or be ignored altogether. This inevitably influences collecting policy. How many local Record Offices in the UK have made an active attempt to acquire music archives? Yet music-making is one of the most obvious examples of historic, social and community activity in Britain.

Archivists should also be made aware of the considerable historical value appertaining to concert and recital programmes[6]. Programmes tend all too often to be regarded as printed ephemera but in fact contain much social data regarding audiences, venues, and performers. They may even refer to contemporary political events such as the warnings regarding air raids, which appear in some programmes in the 1939-1945 period. The names of subscribers can be a roll-call of the great and good of a particular locality and even the analytical notes themselves can be revealing of the writers' and audiences' attitudes to non-musical matters. Professional programme note writers often have grievances, not only musical but social and political as well, and it is not unknown for them to reveal their hidden agendas, their support or opposition to Wagner or Stravinsky, viewing them as radical or conservative according to choice. Elgar is notoriously a composer about whom perceptions of Englishness and social stability could be easily, if incorrectly, woven.

The archives of music publishers and sellers are another important source. The disaster to the Novello archives must not be repeated[7]. They were dispersed by public sale in penny packets and in many cases were bought up by investors expecting to profit by resale of letters bearing famous signatures, though fortunately a small group did end up in the British Library. Given that Novellos played a key role in the history of nineteenth and early twentieth century British music the dispersion can only be deplored. By all accounts it was an entirely commercially driven act not helped by advice from a distinguished musicologist lacking archival knowledge. This can be a problem for business archives in general and may be something that the project now being run by The National Archives in that area could address. At least it is encouraging to note that Boosey and Hawkes have published a history of the company using their archives, although it appears that they are not publicly accessible[8].

What is the situation in music colleges? How well maintained are the archives of the now numerous annual musical festivals, whether competitive or otherwise? No doubt some have been properly treated or at least preserved as part of local collections in Public Libraries (the Leeds Triennial Festival programmes survive from 1858 in this manner) but I suspect the majority are in a state of neglect, if surviving at all. Some libraries have now abandoned the collection of local musical event programmes on grounds of lack of space. This might not be serious if the items are being effectively preserved elsewhere but are they? Even in regard to major composers the situation can be unsatisfactory. Many composer "collections" consist of music MSS and printed material only. I cannot comment on the state of the archives of "popular" music which are not in the scope of this article but I do wonder of the current fashion for "community archives" may not prove to be a barrier to their effective accessibility, given that so much popular music arises in a "community" context. Where are the historical archives of the Beatles?

Though "Cecilia" is a brave attempt to recognise the issues it has to be said that it is not an entirely successful solution to the problem of creating a comprehensive guide to sources. Being essentially a library based approach rather than archives aligned, it

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shows in places a failure to undertake an analysis of the kind made above and hence to appreciate the very different nature and value of the data being accessed. It is possible to search under categories such as Composer, Place, Subject and Institution but there is no hierarchical subdivision nor complete attribute sets. Thus while it is possible to search for Walton as an individual search term, it is not possible to search for English symphonists of the twentieth century. There is a substantial list of organisations but while one could look up the Eastbourne Symphony Orchestra one cannot trawl for non-professional orchestras in Sussex. Nor is it easy to identify music colleges or choral societies as a group. Ironically these problems are symptomatic of the failure to apply adequate classification in websites of this kind, the assumption being that the metadata is all that is required. Significantly a debate at the 2007 Records Management Society Conference was devoted to this issue, and has been continued in the RMS Bulletin[9], indicating that it is becoming central to the whole question of data retrieval systems.

It must therefore be an important area for development for local archive services to seek out the musical organisations in their area. Music clubs, choral societies, opera companies, amateur orchestras, recorded music societies, abound everywhere and my experience is that their archives are often shockingly maintained. In the “Third Sector” there is the ever-recurring problem and bane of all voluntary societies – the reliance on volunteer labour for providing key staff, notably secretaries and treasurers. The holders of these offices may change frequently and archives are at risk at every handover. Even where there is continuity there are still dangers, for in the modern dwelling the conditions are not suitable for the preservation of bulky documentation. Files tend to be weeded on the basis of getting rid of as much as possible rather than a qualitative assessment, there are no funds available for archive preservation and there is often a view that the records belong to the officer rather than to the society. In one case of a voluntary organisation with which the writer was involved, the secretary died and her executors put all the society archives on a bonfire. As if these traumas were not enough the relatively advanced age of such volunteers not only presents risks but can also be deleterious to the proper creation of archives in the first place. In one case the secretary used a typewriter so ancient that ribbons were no longer available and in consequence the top sheet was always blank – only the carbons could be used as documents an intriguing example of a copy becoming the original instanter.

### **A way forward**

The key factors in ensuring the proper survival of archives of such organisations are:

- placing responsibility;
- determining retention;
- providing adequate storage facilities; and
- making a basic catalogue.

It should always be clear who holds responsibility for the archives. This is usually the secretary by default but they may not be the best person for the task and the identification of the role should in any case be specifically assigned and not assumed to lie in any particular existing post. Equally, any officer of the organisation who creates potential archive material must be aware of their individual responsibilities. Such officers would certainly include, in addition to the Secretary, the Treasurer, Publicity Officer, Programme Organiser, Editor and Membership Secretary.

There should be a simple retention schedule which not only sets out the periods for which series of records should be kept but which will also indicate which are to be regarded as permanent archives and who is responsible for ensuring the retention decisions are carried out. Not only officers but all members of the governing body, committee etc., should have copies of, or access to, the schedule. As this document, in effect, defines the archives it must include digitally produced items as well.

As far as possible reasonable storage for the archives has to be found. While documentation is in current use it has to be kept in the hands of the appropriate individual officer, but there should be a system of transfer at a set period into store. For organisations lucky enough to have environmentally acceptable and secure storage space of their own this should be employed in the first instance but there should be some arrangement in place for the deposit of the archives in a local publicly funded custodial service. The agreement will naturally include any requirements for confidentiality and closed periods but these should be as limited as practicable.

A simple list of the archive material should be prepared setting out the dates format, quantity, and a basic description of each item or series. It is unnecessary to indulge in lengthy description of minor items but it should be possible to identify each unit of storage (e.g. a volume, disc, folder or bundle) in the list. A list not keyed to the material is largely useless; a simple numbering is all that is needed. The list can be word processed or a database and be maintained by the nominated "archivist".

The above is hardly rocket science and requires little in terms of expense or human resource but it would work a revolution if it were applied on a national basis to the organisations in the Third Sector, musical or otherwise. Music organisations also need to be aware of the need to establish what material is a priority for them. The habit of individuals giving programmes, cuttings from newspapers or *The Radio Times* or even CDs or LPs, as certainly happens, should only be welcomed if the material has either been generated by or has a real connection with the organisation itself. If it is not and is of sufficient value interest or uniqueness it should be directed to some other potential place of custody. Resources are limited and should not be used on extraneous matter.

### **A case example**

As an example of what can be done and the nature and value of the archives of local musical organisations the Eastbourne Recorded Music Society provides a useful case study. The Society was 60 years old in 2007, making it one of the oldest organisations of the kind in existence. At its first meeting 100 people attended and remarkably that figure of membership has been maintained almost ever since. A decision was taken that a history should be produced but to write a history one needs archives. In consequence the Secretary and Treasurer were asked to hand over any material they possessed which was not in current use to the acting archivist (myself) and an appeal was made in general to the members for any items in their possession. This immediately raised a number of issues.

The present Secretary had been in post for ten years. On assuming office she had understandably set aside the inherited minutes, which went back almost to the foundation and were not of current relevance and put them in her attic. Younger persons than herself do not spend time rooting in their attics and in consequence there was no clear idea of what was actually there. Some strenuous exploratory expeditions had to be made to recover an almost complete set of minutes. The Treasurer on the other hand had very little. He had operated an unofficial retention policy of about two

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years on the primary accounting records and the main results were always presented at the AGM in the form of annual accounts and were thus included in the minute books. Membership records tend to be bulky and rarely provide significant data unless they relate to a period of special importance such as the founding year. Certain records are kept in order to comply with legislation (e.g. performing rights) or insurance requirements (e.g. attendance registers) but have little or no historical value.

A problem which frequently arises in many organisations is the need to identify what are genuine archives and what are actually private collections made by individuals for their own uses. Thus, in this case, a sizeable collection of newspaper cuttings was of great value in establishing what music had been played at previous meetings for a period of about 20 years, but these could not be kept in the official archive as it had been kept by the person writing up the meetings for the press who unnaturally wanted to retain them. Photocopies might be a solution. Given that the dates of most of the meetings are known it would be possible to research the remainder from the files of the local newspapers, but with some 700 plus meetings involved it would be a formidable task. Photographs can also be a bone of contention. If commissioned by the Society (a practice now employed) they clearly belong to it but in the past they were often taken on individual interest and, as is usually the case, they are rarely endorsed with identifying data, which results on reliance on individual memories. Correspondence turned out to be rare. Clearly it was the most vulnerable of the documentation, not being in volume or other substantial form, and also a factor not infrequently found in such organisations, partly at least, treated as the personal property of the addressee.

As the material came in it was listed in a Microsoft Access database not totally ISAD (G) compliant but certainly recording the essential details. In addition, since one of the intentions was the compilation of a history, several tables were populated to record the dates and speakers at each event and to compile a list of the music played. Recently a regularised registering of the content of programmes has been instituted but prior to this only the news cuttings already mentioned could be used. We were fortunate to have a complete set of programme cards from 1957 onwards and this was used to identify the Society's officers, who have included some distinguished musicians such as Herbert Menges, Clarence Raybould, Sir Keith Falkner and John Carol Case. The minutes are the source for the narrative history, which, unfortunately, cannot be complete but covers most of the 60 years. They reveal much about changing tastes and attitudes; for example objections to opera and French music being countered in other years by appeals for more opera and French music. The extreme popularity of Elgar over the last 50 years is marked and is intriguingly counter to accepted views. Statistics of performance reveal the extreme popularity of Elgar over the last 50 years, intriguingly counter to accepted views. (Mozart was, perhaps less surprisingly, the runner-up.) Inevitably there are also the domestic upsets, problems with an "enthusiastic" chairman who liked to reserve seats at events for his friends, and the way in which, more and more, those involved have origins outside the town or even outside the county, indicating the changing demography of regions such as this.

Records management has come into play with the production of a policy document setting out the essentials for good practice for the future. These include definition, responsibility, retention, storage and access and an agreement to deposit the long-term material with the East Sussex County Record Office. Practical recommendations on formats have also been made insisting on the minutes always being in hard copy volume form and also that certain data series should be created for record purposes.

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Appropriate record formats have been acquired for future use and hard copy material is supplied with a label identifying it as property of the Society, to be dealt with only under the procedures. Photographs, if hard copy, are to be mounted in albums and written-up, and digital photos to be maintained electronically, again with identification. Correspondence is to be assigned to a simple filing system with word processed items (up to now most has been typewritten) arranged in corresponding directories and folders and archived electronically. Databases have recently appeared and are treated as records, with applied retention rules, unless employed solely for the creation of hard copy documentation.

In consequence a 65-page history of the Society has been produced, a free copy will be distributed to each member and copies will also be given to the local media. The National Federation of Recorded Music Societies will get a copy and at their recent AGM I was able to make a personal plea for the archives of both the parent and the affiliates to be given proper attention for the future, utilising the present network of professionally run archive organisations wherever possible. All this will be crowned at the next AGM by a proposal to write into the constitution the post of Archivist which if accepted may well be a unique step for a Society of this kind. Hopefully, however, our example will be followed in the near future by increasing numbers of what might be called second-tier musical organisations.

### Conclusion

This story does not resonate with the glamour of high-tech records and archives management but it is surely much more in line with the real world still largely being faced by the records profession with the problem of how to make sense of the vast documentation of voluntary organisations, and sometimes public and business as well. The music world is of sufficient importance in itself to deserve the attention of archivists and records managers but it also highlights remarkably well many of the problems faced by voluntary organisations, whose activities, so it is said, now constitute 30 per cent of national GDP, are paradigms of a general situation. There are signs of an awakening interest in music archives. Recently the Heritage Lottery Fund made a grant to the Britten-Pears Library for cataloguing and digitising their collection of concert programmes[10]. While this is welcome news in one sense it is unclear to what extent this collection duplicates material held by other organisations and whether this specialist repository, subject-based approach is the best. We should not blind ourselves to the fact that, at all levels, something much more concerted needs to be done if the archival heritage of British music is to survive as it should.

### Notes

1. The term 'British music' is undeniably both tendentious and imperialist in overtone. If it means anything it is used, as in this article, to describe mainstream classical music written by citizens of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland since 1707.
2. This is the sense in which used in an interesting publication edited by Lewis Foreman *Lost and Only Sometimes Found* (British Music Society 1992) which describes itself as the record of a seminar on music archives but in fact is almost entirely devoted to scores, printed and otherwise.
3. This refers to the recordings of the pianist Joyce Hatto, which are now believed to be the work of other pianists, sometimes solo, sometimes with other orchestras and conductors, and not of the artist herself. See for example Andrew Rose, *Pristine Audio*, 5 March, 2007, available at: [www.pristineclassical.com/HattoHoax.html](http://www.pristineclassical.com/HattoHoax.html)

4. I was astounded to be contacted by the Archivist of one of the major London bands and discover that I was the possessor of recordings of their performances which were not in their own "archives".
5. Cecilia is an on-line guide to music collections in archives, libraries and museums in the UK and Ireland administered by The United Kingdom and Ireland Branch of the International Association of Music Libraries, Archives and Documentation Centres (IAML (UK and Irl)), available at: [www.cecilia-uk.org](http://www.cecilia-uk.org)
6. See R Ridgewell *Concert Programmes in the UK and Ireland: a Preliminary Report*, IAML and the Music Libraries Trust 2003, for a listing of the sources available. As the title indicates this is not comprehensive and there are some problems in using it. Just one example of the social history from concert programmes is the 1902 Liverpool Philharmonic programmes, which point out that only officers and clergyman are allowed to buy seats in boxes at concerts.
7. This is the sale by Sotheby's on 15 May 1996 of autographed letters, music manuscripts and books from the Novello Collection.
8. H. Wallace, Boosey and Hawkes: *The Publishing Story*, Boosey and Hawkes, London, 2007. However this only deals with the period after 1930 when the two firms joined, thus ignoring the crucial late nineteenth and early twentieth century developments in British music publishing. It is unclear whether Boosey material from this period survives but the author states that she had only four months in which to peruse the entire archive before it was sent off to remote storage which in effect means that, though surviving, access is likely to be limited and the owners are paying for what they could have got free with the involvement of the archive profession.
9. Records Management Society 10th Annual Conference *Records Management Today: Celebrating Our Successes*, 29 April-1 May 2007, Brighton. Collaborative event entitled "Is Classification Necessary?" on 30 April and see Waters, J. *Classification Verses Search – Which Is More Important?*, RMS Bulletin, 140, November 2007, p. 15.
10. Society of Archivists UK Newsletter, ARC No. 205, September 2006 (available at: [www.archives.org.uk/](http://www.archives.org.uk/)). The Britten-Pears Foundation, Aldeburgh, Suffolk was awarded £43,200 for a project "designed to improve access to and use of the wealth of information held in the performance history collection at the Britten-Pears library in Aldeburgh" See Heritage Lottery Fund, available at: [www.hlf.org.uk/](http://www.hlf.org.uk/)

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