

Music In My Life

by

Harold Vincent Beck

1924 to 1939 at homes in North Kensington (Age 0 to 14)

My father was a pianist as well as Church organist. He was especially good as an accompanist and a piano teacher - he taught Billy Thorburn, the music hall artiste. A programme has come to light showing that in 1908, age 19, he played the piano in an orchestra at a Grand Operatic and Dramatic Concert at Bechstein Hall (now the Wigmore Hall).

My middle name is the surname of a branch of my mother's family of which one member, Frank Vincent, made a good living out of piano busking. It is reputed that the story in the musical Salad Days is based on his lifestyle. My sister says he was a very fine pianist – she introduced herself as he played near the Middlesex Hospital in the 1950s.

As a boy I went into the choir of the Church where my father played (Holy Trinity, Latimer Road - also called The Harrow Mission). I accompanied him when he played at other Churches and often sat with him on the organ stool. It was inevitable that some musical appreciation would rub off on me. I was encouraged to play the piano but got nowhere - I think coordination was the problem. So my musical appreciation is all to do with listening, not playing.

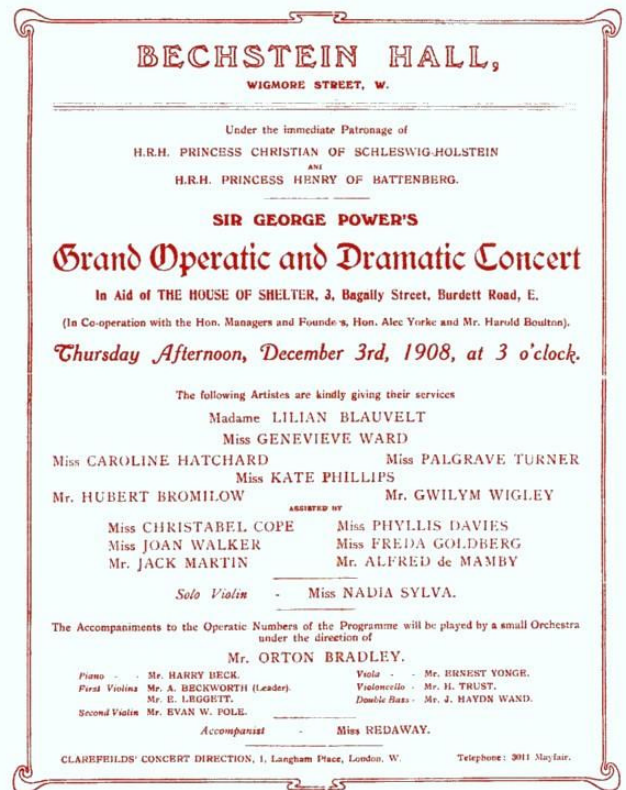
Dad was very good at taking us children to places and events of interest, such as parks, museums and the George V & Queen Mary Silver Jubilee procession. Likewise with concerts. I do not remember any school musical occasions while I was Oxford Gardens L.C.C. infants and primary schools but it must have been while I was there that my father started taking me to musical events.

One of the first concerts I remember, probably not so much due to the music but because it was colourful, was a performance of Hiawatha at the Albert Hall. The arena was transformed into an Indian village and the singers wore Indian clothes and head-dresses. I think the performance must have been in two parts, on either side of lunch, because the singers came out in their costumes and mingled with the audience as we sat around the Albert Memorial. I saw a reference to the Hiawatha performances recently - apparently they were annual events from 1924 to 1935 and the one I was taken to was probably around 1930/31, when I was about 7 years old.

I also remember being taken to the Crystal Palace, entering this enormous glass building and going to a concert in a small section of it. I cannot remember anything about the concert itself.

The first time I was taken to an entrancing Christmas-time performance of Hansel and Gretel was probably while I was at primary school but the second occasion would have been during my pre-war days at secondary school. I think the first was at Sadlers Wells and the second at the Old Vic.

When I got to the Regent Street Polytechnic Secondary School for Boys while it was still in London, one School musical experience stands out. This was a tutored gramophone recital in the Fyvie Hall at 309 Regent Street. It probably took place in 1935, not long after I joined the school, when I was 11 years old. I think it was an extra-curricular event in the lunchtime with one of our masters providing the tutoring. I remember being very taken with Tchaikovsky's Sleeping Beauty - I must have told my



father how much I had enjoyed it and this may well have been the reason why he started taking me to symphony concerts.

One concert I remember very well was at the London Palladium on a Sunday afternoon. The London Symphony Orchestra was conducted by Sir Henry Wood and the main item was Tchaikovsky's 6th Symphony, the Pathétique. What makes it memorable is that my father went through the main themes with me on the piano beforehand. What he didn't warn me about was the great crash which followed a passage in the first movement in which the music got slower and slower and quieter and quieter. I was completely startled when it occurred and nearly jumped out of my seat. My guess is that this concert took place in 1935 or 1936.

The Polytechnic School for Boys at 309 Regent Street was just down the road from the Queen's Hall and my father used to ask me to go to the Box Office to get tickets on the first day of booking of the Proms. Particularly memorable was his request for 30 Balcony tickets for the Last Night of the Proms (there was no ballot for them in those days). He took most members of his own family and the families of his two brothers with whom he ran Becks' Printing Works, along with several members of the Works staff and their wives. What I remember about the concert is the playing of the Fantasia on British Sea Songs followed by Sir Henry coming out and taking a bow, then coming out with his coat over his arm and stick and hat in his hand, then with coat and hat on before the lights were dimmed. My guess is this must have been for the 1937 season, when I was 13 years old. I have an idea he also asked me to get a ticket for a Toscanini concert.

Another music-associated event I remember is my father writing to the BBC asking when The Pied Piper of Hamelin would be broadcast. He showed me the reply that it would be or might be a year or so hence.

1939 to 1942 at School in Minehead (15 to 17)

I was evacuated with the School on 1st September 1939 and when the school arrived in Minehead after its false start in the Cheddar region I was soon involved in two musical activities. One was providing gramophone music at the Polytechnic School's Sunday morning Service at the County School and the other was arranging recitals of music on the gramophone.

The gramophone used in the Service was the one which had been moved from the Fyvie Hall at 309 Regent Street. I had the responsibility of choosing the music. I considered Nimrod from Elgar's Enigma Variations suitably solemn so that was played a great deal (on a 78rpm record, of course). Another was one of the variations in Rachmaninov's Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini - and as this was followed by a rapid syncopated variation which I considered unsuitable, I had to whip the pick-up off the record quickly and surely to avoid the follow-on. This wasn't easy - the rather cumbersome head had to be swivelled through 180 degrees to get it safely parked off the record. The reason I did this rather than use the volume control was because there was considerable purely mechanical sound coming directly from the pick-up on the record.

At some time I became Secretary of the Music Society which met for evening gramophone recitals in the assembly hall of the County School. Entries in The Quintinian, the school magazine, convey more accurately than I can from memory the range of the works played:-

The Quintinian, Spring 1942

MUSIC SOCIETY.

THIS term marks a raising of the standard of music played at the meetings of the Society. This is largely due to the willingness shown by one or two "outsiders" to play their works. On behalf of the members I should like to thank them, and also Mr. Hough, who kindly gives up his evenings to act as M.C. and explain any technical points that may arise.

Two performances of Rachmaninoff's 2nd Piano Concerto and one of Beethoven's famous 5th (Victory) Symphony, supplemented by lesser works from the School records, provided lovers of symphonic music with much pleasure. For the Chopin enthusiast, there was an evening devoted to his pieces. An evening was also given over to ballet music. The rest of the meetings this term consisted of programmes of miscellaneous records.

Although there is no lack of interest in music in the School (shown by the appreciation of the pieces played at the Sunday morning services), the attendance is, at times, only fairly good, probably because Monday night is unsuitable to many, but, unfortunately, this cannot be altered. However, the enthusiasm shown by the few boys who do come, with that of the Minehead residents they bring, makes the short meetings worth while.

It is to be hoped there will be a greater number to hear better programmes next term.

H. V. BECK, Secretary.

The Quintinian, Summer 1942

MUSIC SOCIETY.

MOST of the works played this term have been of the larger symphonic form, little time being devoted to songs and solo instruments.

The few works by contemporary composers were received with mixed feelings. An example of this was Symphony No. 2, by Sibelius. Rachmaninoff's "Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini" elicited very little enthusiasm, and opinion was divided over his second concerto.

The works composed in the classical and romantic periods were very popular. An outstanding success was a performance of Tchaikovsky's 5th Symphony. Other items included Elgar's "Enigma Variations," Dvorak's "From the New World" Symphony, Liszt's "Hungarian Fantasia," Tchaikovsky's "Nutcracker Suite," Wagner's "Siegfried Idyll," and Beethoven's Violin Concerto. Before the end of this term it is hoped to present a recording of Faure's Requiem, a work little known in this country.

In conclusion, I would like to thank Messrs. Hough, Bryant, and Grey for their splendid co-operation in making the meetings successful.

H. V. BECK, Secretary.

My musical activities in Minehead were not confined to the Sunday Services and the Music Society. I was allowed the key to a small two story building on a sports ground and in it there was a gramophone in the upper room. I often used to go there alone and listen to my favourite records - I remember playing records of the Grieg Piano Concerto over & over again in that room.

I also for an all too short time collaborated with a classmate, Bertram Herbert, in writing an Oratorio. It was called The Captives and was based on a text by Oliver Goldsmith. I had completely forgotten about this venture until about 1990, when I went to a reunion of evacuees. Bert Herbert showed me the Oratorio's title page and there it was in plain language ascribed in lovely illustrated lettering to Herbert & Beck. There were a few bars of music on the title page which we had composed (or hammered out) one Sunday afternoon. And that is as far as it got. Fifty years on, Bert Herbert reminded me that his billetor's peace and quiet had been so disturbed that Sunday afternoon that Bert had been thrown out of his billet. Bert went on to a distinguished and fulfilling leisure-time career conducting concerts in the Wembley area of London and in Burton-on-Trent. I remained a listener.

A musical event I remember well was a performance of The Messiah in Dunster Church. This probably took place in the run-up to Christmas 1940. My concert-going experiences in London had made me rather disparaging about local performances by mostly amateur musicians and the glitches which occurred in the Dunster performance did nothing to dispel that opinion. Nowadays I greatly appreciate local music-making, perhaps partly because of improved standards of performance generally and because wartime limitations on choice of musicians no longer apply but also because it is great to be at the receiving end of music making by other members of the community to which one belongs.

Another great influence on my musical development as an evacuee at school in Minehead was Moore Orr, a retired bank manager who wrote a record review column for a magazine. He would invite a few of us schoolboys to hear records at his home. Thus we were introduced to new works, some simply to extend the range of works we knew but others to demonstrate the excellent fidelity of his gramophone equipment. Thus for example I got to know Sibelius's Violin Concerto - I was

indifferent to it at first then came to love it. The works played to demonstrate the equipment - and the recording - included Copland's El Salon Mexico and a Danish suite, Slaraffenland (Fools' Paradise) by Knudage Riisager. The most significant part of the equipment was the HMV or EMI moving armature pickup with a miniature steel needle.

Another source of musical appreciation arose from a friendship I developed with a local lad, Charles Bryant. His father and mother owned and ran the Beaconwood Hotel on Minehead's North Hill. Now and again Charles organised a gramophone recital at the hotel, to which I was invited. On one occasion I met one of the hotel guests, P.A.G.H. Voight, who was a loudspeaker specialist. By this time I had become interested in the technical aspects of gramophones and I greatly enjoyed my conversation, nay argument, with him.

From Music To Electronics

Although I was able to listen to music through gramophone recitals, I greatly missed radio broadcasts of choral and orchestral concerts. These had been a regular feature of life at home before the evacuation to Minehead but there was no interest in music broadcasts whatsoever in the family with which I was billeted. It was making up that lack which got me interested in the technical aspects of radio.

It was probably in early 1940, on a short visit to home in London, that I bought a 1-valve radio for 2s 6d (12.5p) in a Church jumble sale. I was billeted in a 3-storey house at the top of a hill in Alcombe, a mile or so from the centre of Minehead, and had been given an attic room. It contained a water tank, which provided a convenient earthing point, and with an aerial wire strung around the ceiling I was now able to listen to many musical broadcasts on medium and long wave, from around Europe. There was, however, one major problem - the batteries required by the radio were much too expensive for me on my pocket-money allowance. The answer was a crystal set and earphones which I bought for next to nothing on a visit to London. This provided me with inexpensive though more local music listening.

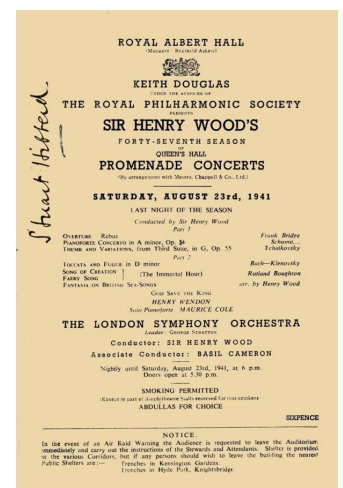
So was the technical side of my career born and from then on it was a natural progression to the diverse and rapidly changing field of electronics.

Music in London during the Blitz

The visits to home in London sometimes coincided with air raids. To I went to one concert, on Saturday 3rd or Sunday 4th May 1941, at the Queens Hall during one of the short visits to London. I sat behind the orchestra, which was not only the cheapest seat but allowed me to see closely the conducting technique of Leslie Heward. Alas the following weekend the Queen's Hall was destroyed by an incendiary bomb.

Following pre-war family tradition, another concert I went to in London while 'on leave' from school in Minehead was a Last Prom. With the loss of the Queens Hall the Proms were transferred to the Royal Albert Hall and the Last Concert of the 47th Promenade Season took place at 6 pm on Saturday 23rd August 1941, the earlier time no doubt being to avoid travelling problems due the blackout. The Programme (one folded sheet price 6d) describes Sir Henry Wood as Conductor and Basil Cameron as the Associate conductor. The orchestra was the London Symphony and Maurice Cole was the soloist in the Schumann piano concerto. A note refers to trenches being available in Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park in the event of an Air Raid Warning. I was sitting in the stalls near the BBC box and was juvenile enough to go and get the chief BBC announcer, Stuart Hibberd, to autograph the Programme.

So, in the 3 years I was in Minehead as an evacuee the development of my musical appreciation was rapid and varied. I was quite pleased when at the end of my time with the School the headmaster, 'Nobby' Worsnop, commented favourably on my Music Society activities. In



my final 6th-Form Report his summarising comment was "A very suitable conclusion to a good run in the Sixth form. He should do well. He has taken a leading part in the musical society as well as his normal school work".

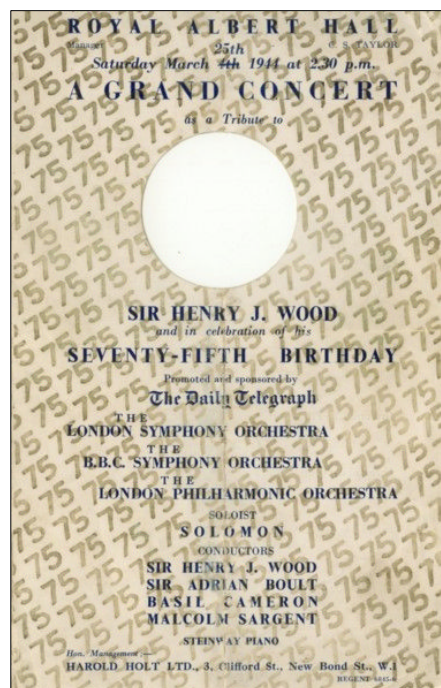
1942 to 1945 at King's College in Bristol and London (18 to 20)

For the year (1942-1943) I was with King's College London during the last year of its evacuation to Bristol, my musical development centred on one or two concerts at Colston Hall. The only item I remember was Mendelssohn's Ruy Blas overture - the rhythmic plucked strings heard from behind the orchestra was quite an exciting experience. I also listened to concerts on the radio.

Back in London in 1943 I was fortunate to be able to get a student ticket for rehearsals for a series of concerts at the Albert Hall. There was the BBC Symphony Orchestra under Boult, The Halle under Barbirolli, and Royal Philharmonic under Beecham. Other conductors included Sargent and Cameron. I think there were 8 concerts in all and the season ticket cost £1 or so. We could sit where we liked at stalls and arena level, except in Beecham's case - he made us sit far away from the orchestra. Apart from the feast of music it was interesting to see the different approaches the conductors had to rehearsal - John Barbirolli, for example, wandered around the hall checking balance.

From King's College London in the Strand it was but a short walk to the National Gallery where Myra Hess gave some lunchtime recitals and I went to one or possibly two of these.

One unique event I attended at this time was Henry Wood's 75th Birthday Concert at the Albert Hall. This was at 2.30pm on Saturday 25th March 1944 at a time when bombs were still falling on London, although not with the intensity of three years or so before nor from a few months later with the bombardment by V1's & V2's. There were three orchestras combined into one, and several conductors. Sir Henry is shown in the programme as conductor of several pieces but I do not remember this. I am fairly sure he was present and took a bow. The hall was packed and I was lucky to get a ticket to the Gallery. One couldn't help thinking that had a bomb dropped on the Albert Hall when the concert was taking place much of the musical life of the country would have been greatly damaged if not destroyed.



1945-1950 at 49 St. Quintin's Avenue, North Kensington

When towards the end of the war the family home was back in London, music was again part of the everyday scheme of things. As well as the music associated with my father's duties as Church

organist (for a long time on a harmonium in a consecrated school room until the bombed Church was rebuilt), there were the Sunday afternoon symphony concerts on the radio.

My father, in line with his practice of obtaining good things economically (e.g. buying Golden Syrup in 56lb tins), hit upon the idea of obtaining free tickets from the BBC for entry into studio broadcasts of music. Thus we attended several concerts at the BBC's Maida Vale Studios as members of the small studio audience. In the course of these visits we saw in the vicinity of the Studios such notables as the chubby-faced and rotund Constant Lambert. Likewise I went with my father to a broadcast organ recital by Marcel Dupré at a Church in Bond Street.

At the other end of the scale was the St Quintin Salon Orchestra. This comprised local musicians, most of whom we knew quite well. They strived valiantly - and succeeded in developing in some of their audience a remarkable degree of tolerance.

Then came a wonderful season of concerts, the Royal Philharmonic series, at the Albert Hall. My father and I bought a season ticket each for the eight concerts a month or so apart - I have an idea they were on Saturday afternoons. We chose two seats on the centre aisle of the arena, fourth row from the front. Apart from the musical qualities of the compositions themselves the sound which reached our ears was quite superb. Among special memories was the wonderful brass in the Trojan March by Berlioz, conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham. We were close enough to hear his hisses and staccato shouts. I remember, too, an unusual feature of a Suite by Lord Berners in which the violinists shuffled their feet.

One evening I was travelling in a tube train quietly humming a passage from a Brahms symphony. The train stopped, I continued humming and a passenger next to me joined in. He turned out to be Leslie Richards, a 2nd violinist in the BBC Symphony Orchestra. We struck up an acquaintanceship which lasted for several years. He broadened my musical interests by giving me an insight into the working life of a professional musician and by his enthusiasm getting me interested in a number of works new to me, such as Debussy's Pelleas and Melisande.

I remember with great affection a concert at which the first performance took place of Ralph Vaughan Williams's 6th Symphony. It was an exiting occasion at which the composer himself was present and took a bow. It was disconcerting to read the programme notes on the Symphony for it seemed to be poking fun at the composer - but all was well at the end, where the initials R.V.W. appeared.

Music had been instrumental in bringing me into the electronics field at a period of very rapid growth from its fledgling stage. By VJ-day in August 1945 I had built myself an amplifier which powered an excellent 12 inch speaker in very large enclosure called a 'Baffle'. One of my brothers remembers that on VJ-Day I hung the 'Baffle' outside the top window and treated St. Quintin's Avenue to Marche Slave. A recording of Belshazzar's Feast sounded wonderful on this set-up and another brother can recall my playing over and over again, a Decca (ffrr?) recording of Le Carnival Romain played by the LSO under Victor de Sabata, rejoicing especially in the sound of the brass.

There entered on the scene at that time a Sunday School Superintendent who had attended a music appreciation course at her school (the Burlington, with which she had been evacuated to Oxford) and had for a short time taken piano lessons at the Royal College of Music, though these experiences were not central to my interest in her. She entered into Beck family life and was inevitably drawn into the musical side of it. When Sheila and I got married my father played the organ. We were highly amused when, while we were behind some curtains signing the register, he wove into the Voluntary passages from The Foggy Foggy Dew ("When I was a Bachelor I lived with my son . . .!") and from Berlioz "L'Enfance du Christe" ("Thou must leave thy lowly dwelling"!). These were delightful examples of indirect communication! Then we waited behind the curtain until he got to the passage of Walton's Crown Imperial we had chosen to make an impressive re-entry into the Church (not for nothing had Sheila and I been in a Dramatic Society). Thus did we make our grand musical entrance, which gave us a marvellous start on our journey in married life together (already 67 years long), particularly because it was played by my father, who far more than anyone else had brought music to my life.

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