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Towards a musicology of early-mid 1960s recordings by Suvi Raj Grubb

'Who is that black man over there?' asked, predictably enough, the Austrian conductor Herbert von Karajan, during a rehearsal for an early-1960s recording session.¹ In assessing the career of Suvi Raj Grubb (who became Walter Legge's assistant in 1960, and among EMI's most important classical music producers in the twenty years after Legge's resignation in 1964), this very preliminary exploration will mention some of his best-known recordings as sonic statements important to the evolution of the common values of commercial stereo; but it will also, necessarily, begin to map race/ethnicity, and the story of Empire, onto the sonic values expressed by classical music, this most important register of musical whiteness.

Suvi Raj Grubb was a South Indian Christian. He was born in 1917 and socialised into the Anglican musical tradition alongside the more general western music repertoire; while still working in India he was a church organist and later a choirmaster. He took a science degree at Madras University; from 1939-53 he had a career in All-India Radio, ending as a producer. On emigration to England in 1953, he worked as a freelancer with the BBC; his wife was a doctor. He became a member of the Philharmonia Chorus, which was first set up for Klemperer's recording of Beethoven's 9th with the Philharmonia Orchestra. This led to Grubb meeting with EMI producer and the founder, and as far as he was concerned owner, of the Philharmonia Orchestra, Walter Legge. Grubb became Legge's assistant at EMI in 1960, then a full producer 1964, with responsibility for a roster of international artists. He retired at first to Spain in 1985, producing memoirs for 1986 publication; he returned to India in 1992, dying in Pune in 1999.

The production of 'classical music'

In classical music recording at this juncture, the producer was the listening ear, while the artists played and the engineer did the technical stuff. The producer therefore mediated the relationship between the score, the performing artists, and the technologies; less often the producer also mediated between the composer and any or all of these aspects of the music's realisation. The producer's task seemed to revolve around correcting mistakes, sometimes prompting or executing aesthetic decisions about the soundworld offered to the listener - though these were usually within what I call the 'row 15' approach.

Hi-fi masculinity and the producer

¹ Email correspondence from John Deacon, 18.8.2005

Classical recordings were sold alongside prestige domestic equipment for hi-fi, and then stereo. The target consumer was affluent, male and middle-aged (incidentally a consumer type which is almost impossible to address now).² Alongside the hardware of conspicuous consumption came the software, the music itself, sold as well-packaged high art for the amateur enthusiast.

The classical record producer at this time was, perhaps unsurprisingly, the same person as this target consumer, a middle class male who knew what he liked and bestowed in collaboration with journalists and consumers alike the discourses of superior technical ability, taste, and even genius, on the performers they recorded and listened to. In sum Legge and Grubb, like John Culshaw at Decca, whatever their status as amateur performers, had principally been 'trained' not in music performance or composition but in music *appreciation*; the appreciation, that is, of an already existing repertoire. Their memoirs register the subtle but important shift in the arrival of music graduates as producers, from the 1960s onwards.

In other words the classical record industry worked from the 1930s to the 1960s with an autodidact-plus-engineer tradition. This might be called the age of the appreciator; compare John Bowers and Graham Wilkins, the founders of B & W loudspeakers, two classical-music enthusiasts who happened to be electronic engineers, and whose company, founded in 1967, therefore tried to build speakers which reproduced classical music with accuracy.

Hi-fi celebrity and the producer

EMI/HMV had realised the relative profitability of classical recordings before pop – Abbey Road studios were opened in 1931 after classical recording's first great decade.³ After the Second World War and the establishment of the LP, EMI records and the Decca/RCA international series each included, apparently profitably, opera as well as orchestral music. Whether or not the recordings were profitable for the companies, artists signed to these labels could make 'half a million pounds' annually from recording royalties in late 50s/early 60s.⁴ This is the equivalent of today's premiership-footballer level of earnings. (A detached four-bedroom home in the South-East of England cost in the region of £6,000 in 1964).

What emerged in consequence, in commercial classical music recording, was a star system – in which the 'stars' were in most cases performers, not composers. Associated with EMI and Suvi Raj Grubb for example, were a number of people, often technically gifted aesthetic perfectionists, but with relatively limited knowledge and ambition. Perhaps this could be summed up as 'the Giulini problem'. Italian conductor Carlo Maria Giulini

² A sharp overview of gender relations of 'hi-fi' is Timothy D Taylor, *Strange Sounds. Music, Technology and Culture*, New York, Routledge 2001, pp. 78-81. For more detail see Keir Keightley, "'Turn it down! She Shrieked!': Gender, Domestic Space and high Fidelity 1948-1959, *Popular Music* 15, may 1996, 149-77

³ Pandit, pp. 64-5.

⁴ Culshaw, pp. 320-21

made an incandescent recording of the Verdi Requiem in 1964 (which is still available), and a handful of other relatively successful records, which represented his entire conducting repertoire; he seemed to know very little music, or about music, apart from these few pieces.

Some of the other EMI stars under Grubb's wing were:

- Otto Klemperer, who dealt in Austro-German mainstream repertoire
- Daniel Barenboim, and his wife Jacqueline du Pré, also tended to the Austro-German mainstream.
- Violinists Itzhak Perlman and Pinchas Zukerman were a *little* more adventurous, with Bartók duos and in Perlman's case light music and ragtime in the recorded repertoire.
- Mstislav Rostropovich, who worked with contemporary composers regularly as well as recording mainstream material.
- André Previn, who was a jazz pianist and film composer as well as classical conductor, and who occasionally made more adventurous recordings, though it is worth noting that his 1974 version of Messiaen's *Turangalila Symphony* was not produced by Grubb.

Hi-fi conservatism

All this added up to an inbuilt conservatism shared widely within classical recording. The production of those conservative values can be seen from Grubb's first encounter with Legge. Before Legge offered him the assistant's job Grubb had to answer twenty questions on standard Austro-German repertoire and the minutiae of opus and Köchel numbers, ending with the questions 'how many minor key piano concertos are there by Mozart?' (there are 2: D minor, K 466, and C minor, K 491) and 'what are the instruments in Schubert's octet? (clarinet, bassoon, horn, string quartet, bass). He got them all right. None was on any type of popular music, twentieth-century music, or pre-18th century music; or Indian classical or popular music for that matter.⁵

Legge's taste in and knowledge of repertoire mapped onto the musical values of his recordings. Legge was anti-modernist (he saw Strauss and Sibelius as the great 20th-century composers; he was friendly with Vaughan Williams, and with Britten). But he was also conservative in recording aesthetics. Technically and aesthetically the search was for a simulation, or indeed of a simulacrum: recording equipment was used principally as a register - not a modifier, conditioner or manipulator - of sound, so the original recording environment was considered vital. Like Decca, EMI would tend to use the Kingsway Hall, but not the lightweight Festival Hall, for orchestral recordings.

Grubb's inheritance of these values is clear; for example we find a fairly standard anti-modernist comment made in passing in his memoir. Talking of working with Boulez on a recording of Bartók piano concertos with Daniel Barenboim, Grubb remarks 'I confessed to him at one point that I

⁵ Grubb, pp 16-18

found very modern music a tough proposition'.⁶ Indeed, we might view the 1960s habilitation of Mahler, which is often seen as a by-product of the LP and, especially, stereo, and in which Grubb played an enthusiastic part, as also a by-product of anti-modernism.⁷ Such tastes are directly reflected in Grubb's recording career. The 240 gramophone recordings listed at the end of Grubb's 1986 book *Music Makers on Record* (this list does not claim to be a complete discography) contain just under 1000 individual pieces of music. Only 61 of these are twentieth-century works, most of them being tonal music by composers such as Strauss, Sibelius, Debussy, Ravel, Rachmaninov, Shostakovich, and Falla; there's a smattering of Stravinsky and Bartók, and 1 piece each by Schoenberg and Berg, each of whom was safely dead by the time of recording. There's nothing by any post-war avant-gardist. Two important first recordings supervised by Grubb were Shostakovich's *Lady MacBeth of Mtsensk*, and the completed version of Falla's *Atlántida*; another noteworthy excursion into the byways of the twentieth-century repertoire was John Ogdon's 1967 recording of the Busoni piano concerto.

Whatever the adventurousness or otherwise of the repertoire, the sonic ambition remained the common sonic values of commercial stereo and hi-fi conservatism, attempting to produce a simulation of the listener's position in the expensive seats of the concert-hall or opera-house. Grubb had a lifelong suspicion of multi-track recording, arguing that it gave too much power to the producer and encouraged conductor weakness.⁸ Grubb imagined himself as the ideal listener – someone sitting dead centre a few rows back in a pretty expensive seat. Now this isn't to say that he always allowed the engineer to set up the microphones and then just listened for intonation errors. He did, occasionally, allow himself to bring out details of the music which might be lost in some concert halls, and the extra clarity in this regard offered by stereo is the basic reason why his comments on stereo were positive. He even, more adventurously, sometimes allowed for changes in balance and equalisation during a recording session, to match the temper of a different work.⁹ However, about the quadrasonic experiment of the mid-1970s he was almost uniformly negative, explaining that when he mixed for quad he just replicated the front channels at the back with a little extra reverb.¹⁰

This is the fundamental aesthetic position which seems to drive the musicology of classical recordings: the limited sound world of high-fidelity, the attempt to be faithful to the concert performance as perceived by the listener in row 15. Of course records were never in any danger of being

⁶ Grubb, p. 68; cf. Culshaw, 176, on Decca and Britten, when the company was reluctant to record *Peter Grimes* – 'if we were to abandon so relatively conservative a modern composer we should rule out contemporary music altogether'. This would seem to confirm the failure of the BBC's attempt to proselytise new music: see Jennifer Doctor, *The BBC and ultra-modern music 1922-36. Shaping a Nation's Tastes*, Cambridge University Press 1999.

⁷ cf. Culshaw, p. 340

⁸ Grubb, pp. 128-9

⁹ Grubb, p. 64

¹⁰ Grubb pp. 66-7. Boulez, an established conductor by the late 1960s, welcomed quadrasonic, arguing that it would enable the listener to hear more of the music.

any such thing: recurrent throughout Grubb's memoirs is the acknowledgement that recordings should never contain poor intonation, wrong notes, or distorted sound. So what we have is not a copy of a live performance, but a simulation attained through 'repeated takes', in the apt title of Michael Chanan's book: indeed, since most classical recordings present a copy of a performance of which there is no original, they are one stage beyond simulation: they are perfect Baudrillardian simulacra.¹¹

As well as making new recordings Grubb was involved in restoration and remastering projects from the start of his producer's career. The musicology of restoration, which started well before CD remastering, is a similar story of 'conservation' in which the original released product is 'improved on' to make it a better fit with the ideology of row 15. Where a classic mono recording might have favoured the voice or solo instrument at the expense of the orchestra, Grubb would often change the balance, and as often he produced pseudo-stereo, in yet another simulation of the ideal listening position in the concert or opera house. Take for example Wilhelm Furtwängler's 1950 recording of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, produced by Legge, which Grubb restored in 1964:

All I had to do to give the orchestra greater prominence was, judiciously, to emphasise electronically the frequencies above and below the range of the voices – and considering that a tuba starts from about 43 cycles per second and a piccolo can play notes of up to 4000 cycles per second [the voice is about low bass 65 to high soprano 1046] ... a wide field was available.¹²

It's worth commenting at this point, and I have to acknowledge that I have not done any detailed listening to the original releases, that Grubb may well have been making an oblique comment on the musicality of Legge's work in his refurbishment of acknowledged highlights of the gramophone such as that *Tristan*; the 1955 Dennis Brain/Karajan recording of the Mozart horn concertos; or the 1963 Mozart *Così fan Tutte* conducted by Karl Böhm, which was re-released in a refurbished version in 1973. (At all events, well before Legge's death in 1979 the two were no longer on speaking terms; despite the warmth and professional acuteness of their work while Grubb was Legge's assistant, the latter's writings intended for publication make no mention of their professional or personal relationship).

I have used the discourse of conservatism in regarding Grubb's musical knowledge and aesthetics in producing what I have identified as a paradigmatic sign of whiteness, mainstream repertoire classical music. However, despite the relative absence of the politics of race – including his own identity and history - from the memoir,¹³ Grubb was also politically aware, as you would be if you were a brown-skinned person

¹¹ See Jean Baudrillard, 'Simulacra and Simulations', in Mark Poster, ed., *Jean Baudrillard. Selected Writings*, Stanford University Press 1988, pp. 166-184.

¹² Grubb, p. 113

¹³ exceptions can be found in passing: Grubb pp. 46; 223

living in 1960s/70s Britain, whatever your previous experiences and views. He was by no means politically conservative.

Scratching around in the detritus of the world-wide web as part of the research for this paper I came across a very few references to Grubb's political views. Clearly one or two of his professional colleagues thought of him as a dangerous red. One piece of information which should be pursued further is that he is said to have introduced Daniel Barenboim to the Palestinian intellectual Edward Said, and if so I think we can see this meeting leading, if only eventually, to the founding in 1999 of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, the Barenboim-led ensemble of young Israeli and Palestinian musicians which tries to forge political harmony among Israelis and Palestinians through music-making.

Grubb learned the repertoire in many instances from records sold by Indian HMV, a company which produced another successful Indian abroad, Bhaskar Menon, who was the boss of Capitol Records during the 1960s and 70s.¹⁴ Thinking further about HMV in India, and about Grubb's own background in Anglican and classical music, might take us both forward to the conservative repertoire he recorded, and back to the arguments made in early 1990s about the formation of the concept of 'English Literature' as an educational project *within Indian education* which were formulated by Sara Suleri and others. Western culture was produced as an object for elite consumption within India and by Indians. Raising these issues of race and ethnicity, and empire, in the production of Western culture, we might pause to remember that the foundation of Walter Legge's Philharmonia Orchestra, whose chorus led to the meeting of Legge and Grubb, was supported in large part by money given by the Maharajah of Mysore.¹⁵

We need, then, to map the Indian impact on British music-making, and in this regard it is important to note that Grubb was operating as an EMI producer at exactly the same time as a notable wave of cultural Indianisation was taking place within British music. We all know about the Beatles (and other figures such as Pete Townshend), and 'guru chic' in the mid-1960s; and many of us will be relatively familiar with the kinds of Orientalist music which were produced in consequence of late-60s British rock music's encounter with this form of knowledge – most spectacularly by the band Quintessence, whose music prefigured that of the mid-1990s band Kula Shaker in much the same way as the Beatles might be said to have 'anticipated' the music of Oasis. We might know something of John Mayer and Joe Harriott's Indo-Jazz Fusions; and of the rise of Ravi Shankar as a concert artist (with the enthusiastic support of EMI artists George Harrison, Andre Previn and Yehudi Menuhin among many others).

We might also say, and in a way that's what I'm doing here, that Grubb didn't add much to the aesthetics of the profession of classical music production. He certainly did not try to make classical music 'sound Indian'

¹⁴ Pandit, p. 83

¹⁵ Schwarzkopf, pp. 95-6

in any way; of course there were no sitars in symphonies to match the use of Indian instruments in the music of the Beatles or Joe Harriott, and you'd be hard-pushed to differentiate his sound from other classical producers working for EMI. Indeed, in recording eccentric Englishman John Ogdon's Busoni in 1967, arguably Grubb's music-making is closer to that of Pink Floyd, who at the same time were registering the quintessential eccentric Englishness of Syd Barrett at Abbey Road on their first album *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn*, than the Beatles, who, also at the same moment, were recording the Indianised bits of *Sergeant Pepper* in the adjacent studio. But in a way that's precisely the point; and to write comprehensively of either the history of recorded music in Britain or the impact of Indian immigration on British culture (or both) we will have to register Suvi Raj Grubb's place: we have to be able to say '*that's who "that black man over there" was*'.

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