

# EUROPEAN MUSIC?

## The International Broadcasting Union's 1930s Concert Series

### *Concerts Européens*

---

Morten Michelsen

Unfortunately, in many cases, the details of these concerts, and above all their dates, were communicated to the office too late, and thus also to the members, to allow them to set up the relay. This is particularly regrettable, as it is a "European Concert" that has a special mission to perform: rapprochement of the peoples, to which the members of the Union are under a moral obligation to participate.<sup>1</sup> (IBU 1932:1)

These words from the International Broadcasting Union's (IBU) British general secretary, A.R. Burrows, point to one of the many major – and banal – practical problems in international cooperation concerning radio relays. Also, they spell out clearly a main objective of such cooperation: the coming together of the peoples of the world. The words concern a series of concerts, *Concerts Européens*, broadcast 1931-39. Each concert was produced by a national broadcasting organization and relayed to interested IBU members.<sup>2</sup> The technological logistics of the relays were extremely complex, and the concerts became major tests of practical European cooperation. They also contributed to a sonic mapping of Europe by giving specific places within Europe a sound and/or a music. To many organizers, these concerts were among the most prestigious

---

**1** | *Malheureusement, dans bien des cas les détails de ces concerts et surtout leurs dates ont été communiquées trop tardivement à l'Office et de ce fait aux membres, pour leur permettre d'en effectuer les relais. Ceci est particulièrement regrettable lorsqu'il s'agit des "concerts européens" qui ont une mission spéciale à remplir: celle du rapprochement de peuples, et auxquels les membres de l'Union ont contracté l'obligation morale de participer.*

**2** | *Concerts Européens* was one concert series among many. An earlier IBU series, *Nuits Nationales* broadcasts 1926-31, was based on the same idea, while all kinds of bi- and multilateral cooperations took place all the time during the interbellum years. In the report referred to Burrows mentions that in the previous eight months 195 international concerts were made available to the members. See also Fickers/Lommers (2010: 309-24) and Lommers (2012: 242-43).

events of their radio activities. In addition, having a national radio station was important to the many new countries in Europe following World War I. Radio broadcasting granted them an equal voice in the ether next to the older nations and allowed them to partake in the emerging democracy of the airwaves.

In the following I will ask how music fitted within a dialectical or paradoxical strategy of nation- and continent-building by discussing one aspect of that strategy, namely: how did interbellum radio organizations and leaders use music in the concert series *Concerts Européens*. What music did the orchestras play, how did the broadcasting houses contextualize it, and how did they communicate nationality and/or transnationality in music and in concert programming? In her book on transnational radio, Michele Hilmes addresses this paradox in detail and describes it succinctly:

[...] the inherent *transnationalism* of broadcasting's cultural economy [is] constituted both by the demands of the nation and the equally compelling impulse to go beyond, to provide a conduit to speak to other nations and let other influences stream into the national space. These two capacities operate in considerable tension. Transnational elements in broadcasting's cultural project were (and are) resisted and denied as often as they are acknowledged and encouraged. (Hilmes 2012: 2, italics in the original)

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

I will begin from the assumption made by Arjun Appadurai about contemporary cultural economy that its complex and messy flows cannot any longer be understood according to simple bipolar models like center/periphery or consumers/producers. (1990: 296) Appadurai points to a difference between then (less complex) and now (more complex) which makes perfect sense from the perspective of now. But when trying to understand historical circumstances, there is considerable reason to assume that the time in question appeared just as complex to its contemporaries as our times do to us, which is why I will apply Appadurai's assumption to a much earlier phenomenon: European radio between World War I and II. His statement may help explain the elements of the complex paradox of nationalism and transnationalism in music broadcasting.

It is hard to decide whether or not music has national marks. Questions of context and reception are more important than nationally defined styles or composers' and performers' national backgrounds. (O'Flynn 2007) In general, there was an abundance of radio-related discourses linking music and nationality or music and universality. Such contextualizations often marked music as either national or transnational, and if you look at national programming in general, there is no doubt that most broadcasting organizations applied both

discourses. At a daily level, programs that celebrated each nation's great musical and literary sons (hardly ever daughters) and the playing of the national anthem at the end of each day were two obvious practices supporting the national perspective. The *Radio Times*, for example, lists BBC series *Six concerts of British Music* broadcast between 1 and 12 January, 1934, and the 17-part *Pilgrim's Way: A Tale of Everyman's Journey through Life, and of his Many Moods. An Anthology of Poetry and Music*, broadcast throughout 1934 and 1935, mixing British music and poetry. On the other hand, the frequent music relays from other countries supported the transnational perspective. In between was a large grey area where questions of national belonging could be answered differently according to circumstance.

At a transnational level, the emerging radio structures supported by the IBU did not adhere to the center/periphery principle practiced in the nation states, but to a network principle. The IBU saw its main obligation as coordinating the construction of a European radio infrastructure. (Fickers/Lommers 2010: 314) Contrary to nation-building, this 'continent-building' was new and followed the ideals of the then new League of Nations. It was based on technological coordination and distribution (e.g. relay frequencies) and the ideology of peaceful, modern man. (Lommers 2012: 84-85) In order to discuss these questions in detail I will briefly explore two types of materials casting light on the series: the IBU's intentions as understood from IBU archive materials and the actual concert programs themselves.

## IBU INTENTIONS

Suzanne Lommers's book about the IBU (2012) is based on extensive archive study, particularly IBU documents held in the written archives of its successor organization, the European Broadcasting Union (EBU). It includes a full chapter on the IBU concert activities and to some extent it demonstrates IBU's reasons for setting up the series. Sadly, the EBU archive was closed to researchers not long after her book appeared, so for this research we have had to make do with Lommers's fine work, with some archival documents collected by Alec Badenoch on research visits 2006-2010, and with traces of the concerts in national programming schedules and radio magazines.<sup>3</sup>

---

**3** | I would like to thank Alec Badenoch for sharing the documents he collected. The magazines consulted in this connection with this research are the Austrian *Radio Wien* (1924-38), the Danish *Radiolytteren* (1925-54), the British *Radio Times* (1923-), and *The Listener* (1929-91). Danish and British programming schedules from before World War II may be found at [www.larm.fm](http://www.larm.fm) and [genome.ch.bbc.co.uk](http://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk).

These sources show two important aspects of the IBU's intentions with regard to the concerts. First, in a 1932 letter from the general secretary to the members, he mentions that the IBU developed a program politics "with the aim of spreading the notion of radio's usefulness and making the public understand that there exist certain manifestations of art that can unite all European listeners." (quoted in Lommers 2012: 244) The (art) music in question should legitimate the still questionable medium of radio and at the same time point to a non-specific European unity. Second, when it came to the actual music broadcasts, the IBU tried to set high standards. Rather than establishing artistic quality as the primary concern, they related the notion of high quality to concerns like sound quality, number of participants, a sense of liveness (and thus a sense of community), and the uniqueness of the concerts. And further, rather than placing the European art music canon at the very center of its activities, the IBU, according to Lommers, favored "light but artistic music" rather than full symphonic works. This music somehow still fitted the ideals of art music for the first years of the European Concerts. Later on IBU opened up for: "all genres [...] as long as they were of the highest quality and performed by artists of the highest standing." (quoted in Lommers 2012: 270) IBU's move away from high art ideals focusing on works of art towards a focus on quality of performance during the 1930s was a rhetorical gesture which did not resonate in the actual programs because hardly any broadcasting corporations adhered to the IBU intentions in terms of the breadth of genres. Also, the IBU asked its members to refrain from vocal music because the lyrics would not be understandable to listeners in other countries. This request was ignored by most countries.

## CONCERT REPERTOIRES

I have identified 50 concerts in the *Concerts Européens* series from the sources mentioned in footnote four. The 50 concert programs found were broadcast from 22 different European cities – and one from Cairo, which, while it is not within most definitions of Europe, is within the European broadcasting area.<sup>4</sup> To analyze how the concerts fell within national and transnational paradigms of music, we can look specifically at three key realms where elements of the music can be flagged nationally, transnationally or both: people, instrumentation and genre.

---

4 | A complete list of works and performers for all 50 concerts and statistics can be found at [www.ramund.ikk.ku.dk](http://www.ramund.ikk.ku.dk).

A breakdown of the concerts according to these elements reveals:

Composers and music performers:

- All music in all concerts was composed by composers related to the country broadcasting
- All music was performed by soloists and ensembles from the hosting country<sup>5</sup>

Instrumentation:

- Use of more or less full orchestra (1 exception)
- Inclusion of vocal music (soloists and/or choir) (41 concerts)

Genres:

a) Folk music

- Basic arrangements performed by art musicians (rather than music composed on the basis of folk materials) (5,5 concerts)
- Folk musicians/ensembles (1,5 concerts. Irish musicians play at two different concerts and two ‘gypsy’ orchestras play at a third (Hungarian) concert)

b) Light music (2,5 concerts)

- Excerpts from popular stage works (Austria, UK)

c) Art music (40,5 concerts, nearly half of which included contemporary works, falling into three categories)

- Historical art music (to stress what “we” have accomplished), for example Hector Berlioz (1803-69), Franz Liszt (1811-86), W.A. Mozart (1756-91), Franz Berwald (1796-1868), J.S. Bach (1685-1750), Palestrina (1525-94)
- Contemporary (to stress what “we” are accomplishing), for example Bohuslav Martinů (1890-1959), Carl Nielsen (1865-1931), Frederick Delius (1862-1934), Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937)
- National (to stress musical representations of local/national nature or “the people” using elaborate orchestral and/or vocal arrangements of folk music or national hymns) for example Hamilton Harty (1879-1941): Movement from the *Irish Symphony*, Vincent D’Indy (1851-1931): *Symphony on a French Mountain Air*, Sabin Dragoi (1894-1968): *Rustic Divertissement*, Youssef Greiss (1899-1961): Movement from the *Egyptian Symphony*, The Desert. Finale

Operating with genre labels in the taxonomic manner chosen here in particular has its obvious pitfalls, but in the short form of this article, it may help to shed light on the main tendencies in the overall corpus. Some of the concerts clearly

---

**5** | There is one exception: The concert broadcast from the free city of Danzig 16 January, 1939, had British pianist Ella Martins as soloist. The city was under Nazi rule at that time.

fall into two distinct parts belonging in different genres, and I have chosen to categorize such concerts in two categories, each with 0.5 points. Thus, the total amount of concerts is still 50. The general categories of folk, light, or contemporary include quite a lot of music, but there are nevertheless a number of categories not represented in the concerts. What is missing is dance music, especially of the modern, US-influenced variety, but also to a great extent old dance music (the Strauss family etc.). Apparently, such music was not considered appropriate for presenting a country's image, even though old and modern dance music was the bread and butter of all European radio stations. The one exception was Austria, which devoted an evening to the operetta composer Franz Léhar (1870-1948), evoking the iconic Viennese dance culture. Instead, sometimes an educational, sometimes an elitist stance seems to lie behind the programming policy. And this seems to contradict the IBU policies as outlined above.

The bulk of the repertoire was composed during the 75 years prior to the 1930s. Most of it was in a romantic or late romantic style, but relatively modern music was presented as well. Relatively modern, because radicals like Schönberg or the expressionist Bartók could not be heard (though some of his late romantic work was). It is also noticeable that older styles like classicism, baroque, and renaissance were also not well represented, and European art music's strong center/periphery structure with the Vienna classicists at its epicenter is not present in the programming. Many countries' wish to present their own construction of a national musical heritage saw to that. The Herderian notion of folk music's double role in constituting the national and the universal is important here. In this line of thought folk music and folk songs as the voice of the people could represent both all of human culture and specific cultures. (Bohlman 2011[2004]: 28-29) This became manifest in the broadcasts of folk ensemble performances, in simple arrangements, and in folk-based, elaborate compositions, often called national romanticism.

## CONCLUSIONS

*Concerts Européens* became a framework for many slightly different cultures, but still based on what radio officials regarded as "universal" principles of music: that is, the historical importance of roots or folk music and the qualities of the European art music tradition based on notation, tonality, instrumentation, and aesthetic function. This left out modern dance music, jazz, and many European folk music traditions not filtered through the art music tradition. Contrary to the IBU's instructions, vocal music with lyrics seems to have been important in order to convey ideas of the musicalized nation: perhaps the sound of language and its semantics were deemed important. Most concerts (80-90 %) must be considered highbrow (also contrary to the IBU instructions). Even

though the IBU's wish to standardize the broadcasts did not succeed, the diverse programming practices demonstrate an ideal associated with the League of Nations: that of a democracy of the air where each voice or country had their say within a set framework.

In the relays, nationality and nation were explicit while transnationalism was implicit. Transnationalism was a consequence of the complete series of concerts (the joining together of different voices), and transnationalism was inherent in the ideology of radio itself, in the transnational organizations facilitating the concerts, and musically, in the standards of quality which the IBU tried to impose. Radio came to present 'the other' as belonging within the nation state. 'The other' could take different forms: it could be local, peripheral provinces within the nation states and it could be very different cultures beyond the nation's borders. In this way, certain genres of music and of radio helped build the imagined community of the nation and, at the same time, to view this community as part of something even larger – a continent – audible as 'European' music. The permeability of the nation as an imagined community is intriguing, especially when it is articulated through music's ability to embrace difference and sameness in the same gesture without any problems. It crosses borders while demonstrating them musically.

So to return briefly to the quote by Michele Hilmes: the considerable tension that she has detected in the relations between the US and the UK might, in this instance, be less tense because the music in its historicity articulated so precisely the dialectic between the national and the international. The articulation of this dialectic was not new to the tradition of art music, but it was one of art music's – and in other contexts popular music's – most important contributions to the then new medium of radio.

## REFERENCES

- Appadurai, Arjun (1990): "Disjunctive and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." In: *Theory, Culture & Society* 7/2-3, pp. 295-310.
- Bohlman, Philip V. (2011[2004]): *Music, Nationalism, and the Making of the New Europe*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Fickers Andreas/ Lommers, Suzanne (2010): "Eventing Europe: Broadcasting and the Mediated Performances of Europe." In: Alexander Badenoch/Andreas Fickers (eds.): *Materializing Europe: Transnational Infrastructures and the Project of Europe*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 225-251.
- Hilmes, Michele (2012): *Network Nations: A Transnational History of British and American Broadcasting*, New York and London: Routledge.

- IBU (1932): "Commision de Relais: Développement des relais internationaux depuis octobre 1931." Série No. 3167, 20 mai 1932. IBU Box 85, Relais, File *Concerts Européens et Internationaux*, (EBU written archives, Geneva).
- Lommers, Suzanne (2012): *Europe—On Air. Interwar Projects for Radio Broadcasting*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- O'Flynn, John (2007): "National Identity and Music in Transition: Issues of Authenticity in a Global Setting." In: Ian Biddle/Vanessa Knights (eds.): *Music, Nationalism, and the Politics of Location: Between the global and the Local*, Abingdon, Oxon: Ashgate.