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‘How the Music was Made’: Television, musicology and BBC Four

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Abstract

This article focuses on BBC Four’s original music programming, considering documentaries which, according to the channel’s commissioning guidelines, ‘tak[e] a musicology approach’ to give audiences a ‘privileged view’ of ‘how the music was made’. It focuses on two case studies: *Tunes for Tyrants: Music and Power with Suzy Klein (2017)* and *Being Beethoven* (2020). Drawing upon original interviews with key production personnel for each series, this article explores the roles of music scholars in the television production process. It examines how musicologists are engaged with a production, what roles they undertake, and the value of their work for programme makers.

Keywords

BBC, BBC Four, Television music, Musicology

> *Experts are absolutely the life and blood of BBC Four. That’s what is the great joy—or was the great joy—of BBC Four. It’s in the expertise, in doing something in more depth and detail, and exploring aspects of a story that people aren’t necessarily familiar with (Helena Braun, Executive Producer, Wingspan Productions, 2021).*

What can television teach us about classical music? Whilst the functions of print media, radio and narrative film in enabling musical understanding have been explored (Dromey, 2018; McCorkle Okazaki, 2020; Robin, 2020), little research has considered the role of contemporary television in disseminating musical knowledge. This lack of attention is striking given, firstly, the noted role of historical television in fulfilling this same

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aim (Boon and Venn, 2021), and secondly, television's capacity to engage a broad, non-specialist audience through its combination of the audial and the visual (Hartley, 1999). BBC Four—as the corporation's 'primary site for music programming'—presents an important case study for unpacking this relationship between television and classical music (Weston, 2020). This article focuses on one particular strand of BBC Four's original programming, considering classical music documentaries which, according to the channel's commissioning guidelines, 'tak[e] a musicology approach' to give audiences a 'privileged view' of 'how the music was made' (BBC, 2020a).

Central to this programming approach is the role of musicologists—broadly construed as those 'studying music as a scholarly endeavor' across 'all aspects of music in all cultures and historical periods' (American Musicological Society, 2021)—who shape BBC Four's classical music output (in particular) through a variety of on- and off-screen roles. The place of these experts in a televised examination of classical music can be understood within the context of public musicology: 'the desire for music scholars to reach out beyond the academy', to disseminate their research in non-academic formats (Robin, 2020). However, compared with other kinds of academics, such as historians or scientists, musicologists occupy a marginal presence in television content: production companies are more likely to engage other kinds of musical contributors—such as performers or conductors—who can both offer their own perspective on 'how the music was made' and provide visually (and aurally) stimulating content, such as on-screen performances. There is also the problem of language: how can a musicologist express fundamental theoretical concepts—such as harmonic progressions, tonal structures or melodic devices—without recourse to discipline-specific terminology which could potentially alienate a majority of viewers? Consequently, whilst musicologists can certainly provide various types of specialist knowledge, the question remains of where their value lies in music programming.

This article examines the roles of musicologists in two BBC Four case studies: *Tunes for Tyrants: Music and Power with Suzy Klein* (2017) and *Being Beethoven (2020)*. Both programmes are three-part docuseries. This format is a reasonably consistent type of programming in BBC Four's documentary output, extending beyond (classical) music. The BBC's commissioning guidelines state that such series must include 'a sense of scale and relevance', and 'need a quality about them that brings viewers back' (2021a). To this end, *Tunes for Tyrants* explores 'music's crucial role in the most turbulent years of the 20th century', spanning a diverse array of historical periods and geographical contexts, from the Russian Revolution to the Second World War (BBC, 2017). *Being Beethoven* is more tightly focused, and proceeds chronologically to 'tell Beethoven's life story in the present tense, reimagining how [he] might have experienced day-to-day life' (BBC, 2020b). In order to develop an understanding of the roles of music scholars in the BBC Four production process, this article draws upon testimony from original interviews undertaken by the author with key personnel for each series: for *Tunes for Tyrants*, Helena Braun, an executive producer for Wingspan Productions who worked as a development producer across the series and was also the producer/director for the first two episodes, and for *Being Beethoven*, John D. Wilson, a musicologist at the University of Vienna who worked as an on-screen contributor for the series, and Phil Cairney, the series' producer/

director. Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the author in April–May 2021 with these three personnel. Through consideration of their testimony, this article examines how musicologists are engaged with a production, the roles they undertake and the value of their work for programme makers. At this moment of BBC Four's uncertain future, this study interrogates the contribution of the channel in making visible the study of music and examines the implications of this programming for the broader relationship between academia and the TV industry.

The initial act of engaging a musicologist in a series marks the culmination of a lengthy period of research and development for a production team, based around a combination of academic and practical factors. Cairney (2021), the producer/director for *Beethoven*, notes that to begin, he 'read all the biographies [on Beethoven] and thought: whose voice do I like, who do I enjoy listening to?' After this initial period of research, Cairney tasked a producer to conduct 'pre-interviews on the phone with everyone we thought read well'. With any suitable candidates, Cairney would then 'have a long chat and work out what they could and couldn't say', fitting contributors together 'like a jigsaw puzzle'. Wilson (2021), a musicologist who appears in the first and last episodes of the series, notes that he was 'impressed' with Cairney's prior research and his concept for the series, which 'sounded like it was going to turn out to be something more intelligent than your typical documentary about classical music'. Cairney's knowledge of Beethoven, due to his meticulous research process, was the determining factor in Wilson deciding to be involved in this series. Whilst Cairney notes the significance of the musicologists' published writings in determining who would be suitable for filming, it is important to also note the relevance of more personal factors in casting decisions. For example, Cairney notes that he wanted to involve Robin Wallace, a musicologist at Baylor University, Texas, in part because 'he has first-hand experience of deafness' through his family. For Cairney, this created a personal link between Wallace and Beethoven, reinforcing Cairney's perspective that what he wanted was 'insight and emotion'; testimony which moved beyond what could be found in published writing.

Logistical considerations are also fundamental to production teams when deciding who to film. Braun (2021), producer/director for the first two episodes of *Tyrants*, notes that due to budget constraints, the series only had about nine filming days per episode, so when finding contributors, 'you have to be really efficient about who's available on Tuesday morning, and who has a room that you can come and sit in'. Likewise on *Beethoven*, Cairney notes how biographer Jan Swafford was filmed for four days, whereas Bettina Reiter, a psychoanalyst, was engaged late in the process and as a result, was only available for an hour during the shoot in Vienna, with the production team having to work around her professional schedule. In these two series, then, musicologists were engaged for a variety of reasons, centred around their published work, informal conversations with the production team and their personal background, all situated within the exacting logistical pressures of the production schedules.

The shooting process for both series sought to balance the musicological insights of the contributors with both the visual demands of television production, and the need to appeal to, as Braun puts it, 'a million people with a wide range of different knowledge' (2021). For Wilson (2021), his shoot for *Beethoven* took place at a number of different locations

across Vienna, including a hotel suite for the primary (interior) interview footage, and exteriors walking along the Danube for establishing shots. As Cairney notes, 'due to the fact that you're dealing with the 18th and 19th centuries where there's no moving archive [...], you have to think laterally about how you use people, locations, devices, to kind of create an environment' (2021). In addition to the practicalities of the filming schedule, producers have to be attentive to the role of language in ensuring that the musicological contributions can be understood by, as Cairney puts it, 'an intelligent layperson'. He notes that, 'when you're speaking to someone whose primary discourse is [...] a musicological one, you've got to say "no, no, no, you can't say that, you're going to have to say it again, but without the references to time signatures"'. The extent to which this was necessary varied due to the experiences and expertise of different participants. For example, Wilson suggests that it was never 'explicitly stated that we had to speak accessibly', but that he already 'had the idea of what a general audience needs to hear and the kind of background that they need' from his other work in public engagement, including museum exhibits and radio interviews.

This emphasis on the role of language also impacted upon the extent to which the factual contributions of musicologists were determined prior to the shoot. For example, Braun notes that in the original shooting script for *Tyrants*, she included 'fantasy text that [the contributors] are going to say [...]—I've tried to imagine everything, because I need to know that these are the bits of information [we need to include], and someone needs to say them' (2021). Given the ambitious scale of the series—spanning a range of historical periods and geographical locations—and its presenter-led approach, it was necessary to outline the content in advance to ensure a coherent narrative. At the same time, Braun acknowledges that 'you never put answers into people's mouths'. On *Beethoven,* Cairney (2021) identified biographer Jan Swafford as the 'key contributor' and interviewed him for 'every single sequence' in the shooting script. In this way, Cairney knew that he had coverage for all the key events in Beethoven's life, regardless of future testimony from other contributors. Cairney also notes how he 'always keep[s] a couple of interviews back' until the edit stage, so 'you have the option to pick things up that people weren't clear on' after the shoot is complete. On both series, there was also a regular back and forth with contributors in the edit, primarily for fact-checking. However, due to BBC policy, it is not usually possible for contributors to view the final cut of the programme before broadcast. Instead, it is vital that producers foster positive working relationships with contributors in the shooting stage, so that they trust the subsequent editing of their work.

Beyond the production process, both Cairney and Braun acknowledge the distinctive value that musicologists provide in these series: Braun (2021) notes that 'there's something really appealing' about musicological contributions for an audience, who can 'learn to unpick [the music]' through the perspectives of experts. This is especially pertinent given that the production teams most often comprise figures who do not provide their own expertise relating to the subject matter. As Braun comments, 'you approach a subject from a position of quite astounding ignorance [...], then a few weeks later you're filming with the script. So, you rely on the experts'. Cairney (2021) also notes how musicologists are 'indispensable', as they provide 'rigour' and 'balance', enabling programme makers to present more nuanced historical arguments with authority. In the

case of *Beethoven*, Wilson notes how the musicologists could serve to 'bring Beethoven back down to earth', by 'demythologising' his life, in contrast to the reverence of the music that, Wilson suggests, tends to be offered by performers. Nevertheless, these performer perspectives (and more broadly, the process of appearing in a television production), can have benefits for a musicologist's own research: Wilson notes that 'there were [...] things that musicians said in the first episode—about the early works—that made me think a lot about interpretation'. As a result, he observes that 'there are some ideas, especially from the musicians, that will end up in my [forthcoming] book'. For Wilson (2021), the experience of participating in this production 'has changed what [he's] going to write'. This testimony suggests that, whilst the relationship between academics and the media industries is often 'ridden with suspicion', it can also be a positive two-way process, whereby future research can be informed by participation in, and viewing of, television (Dromey, 2018: 185).

The value provided by musicologists extends beyond the on-screen roles, to off-screen participants who shape the programme content either directly or indirectly, through their interaction with the production team or their published material. For example, Braun (2021) notes the contribution to *Tyrants* of Caroline Potter and Jürgen May, both of whom are credited but do not appear on-screen. They were interviewed during the production process, but Braun notes how 'first-hand testimony' from musicians 'took priority' and the production team did not have space for these musicological contributions. These experts did however provide additional information which shaped the series: for example, May enabled the production team to access the Richard Strauss archive. Indirectly, Braun also notes the contribution of certain texts—namely, Alex Ross's *The Rest is Noise* (2007)—in shaping the series' narrative. However, Ross's schedule, coupled with the production's budgetary constraints, made it impossible to interview him as part of the programme.

The issues raised in this article point towards two productive strands for the future intersection between television and the study of music. Firstly, it is vital that the place of musicologists on television should not be confined only to classical music programming. Whilst this programming genre has been the dominant site for musical expertise on television (as evidenced in this article), musicology in the 21st century has a much wider scope—in terms of both the object and method of inquiry—incorporating 'the many different ways of studying music' (American Musicological Society, 2021). As David Hesmondhalgh writes, 'music scholarship covers quite a bit more terrain than the term musicology has traditionally embraced: among them, the fields of ethnomusicology, popular music studies, psychology of music, music industry studies and music education' (2019). The 2020 programme for the Royal Musical Association's (2020) annual conference, for example, includes papers on topics including 'Appropriation in Contemporary Club Cultures' (Jack McNeill) and the 'Cochlear Implant as Soundscape Arranger' (Meri Kyotö), among many others. There is huge benefit in television producers recognising the value of music scholarship of all kinds—both within and beyond traditional academic institutions—in shaping programming content which extends beyond the realm of classical music documentaries, and in doing so, mirrors the altogether broader remit of the discipline itself. Secondly, the kinds of music programming detailed in this article tend

to use musicologists on-screen in what can be characterised as 'traditional' or 'passive' roles, whereby academics provide secondary commentary on a pre-defined narrative (Hesmondhalgh, 2019). There is ample scope for music programming that centres a specific research project as the starting point for a programme concept, rather than incorporating scholarship as a later addition. This is where initiatives such as the Edinburgh Television Festival's PhD scheme, and the work of The Academic Ideas Lab—both of which narrow the distance between the television industry and academia—can be beneficial to participants on both sides of this 'divide'. With the demise of original content on BBC Four, however, the question remains of where the outlet for this content lies.

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