

Chapter 12

Desert island dislocation: emotion, nostalgia, and the utility of music

Julie Brown

1. Introduction

Two and a half months after the first transmission of *Desert Island Discs (DID)* Assistant Director of Programme Planning in the BBC's Gramophone Department Leslie A. Perowne wrote to the programme's anchor Roy Plomley:

I have given much thought to 'D.I.D.' recently, and take leave to suggest that you should impress upon your shipwreckees that they are not in fact spending a couple of nights on a sun-drenched island, but that they must sit down and consider very seriously what sort of moods they would be in after about six months entirely alone with their gramophone. They may be entirely gloomy, or if they feel they want gaiety it must be just the right kind. In other words the programme is not just 'My favourite eight records' but something much more significant.¹

What interests me about this intervention is Perowne's insistence on the utility of castaways' chosen discs, their potential to help the shipwreckees to manage their moods while alone on the imaginary island. Ethnomusicologists have long studied music in its social situation, taking into account the way individuals and whole societies – typically traditional societies – utilise music as part of everyday life. Musicologists, however, have devoted less attention to how we in the West *use* it than to how Western art music works as an object of aesthetic

¹ Letter from Leslie Perowne to Roy Plomley, 16 March 1942, in BBC WAC RCONT1, Roy Plomley, File 2a (1942).

contemplation; until the 1990s the main exceptions involved music serving Christian liturgy, or historically-specific musical phenomena such as the 1930s politicised German *Gebrauchsmusik* (lit. ‘music for use’). Changes since then have brought about a disciplinary reorientation, and with it explorations of musical utility hitherto sidelined in conventional musicological discussion. As Tia DeNora puts it (2000: x), all music is ‘a dynamic material, a medium for making, sustaining and changing social worlds and social activities’. It is possible to approach the *DID* archive as a repository of discographic imaginings along these lines, above all of ways in which music can be used as what DeNora calls a ‘technology of the self’. As she observes (2000: 47), individuals often use music as ‘a resource for the ongoing constitution of themselves and their social psychological, physiological and emotional states’, harnessing it to help them to concentrate, regulate feelings, and mediate memories. In her own chapter in this book, DeNora reads *DID* interviews as mediated radio performances of professional selves, and approaches castaways’ use of music accordingly. I will read from within the programme’s fictive frame, concentrating on the ways in which castaways stress the personal and practical when they enter into the spirit of the island scenario and imagine how the discs might serve practical purposes.

The fictional setting’s centrality to the programme has varied over the years. Probably because the desert island situation is what distinguished *DID* from other disc choice programmes, Plomley kept it fairly close to the surface, generally assuming that the island would be experienced as lonely exile from social interaction. ‘Do you think you could put up with complete and absolute loneliness?’ he asked Thor Heyerdahl in 1974. ‘Mr Larkin, are you a gregarious man?’ he inquired of the poet in 1976. In 1945 he even conducted a telephone interview with a Royal Navy signalman (Henry Wheeler), who was on duty on a small island off the coast of Europe – a cold desert island. (Magee 2012: 41; see also Jo Littler’s chapter in this volume). Since then, there has been a move away from Plomley’s

often playfully scripted exchanges towards increasingly probing interviews interspersed with discs whose significance to the format might be little-explored. Plomley's replacement host Michael Parkinson certainly acknowledged the desert island conceit, but was audibly less interested in it than his predecessor; his description of *DID* as a 'parlour game' was not intended to flatter (Parkinson 2008: 310). The BBC's own publication *The Listener* seemed relieved to note among its praise for Sue Lawley's debut that she had restored the programme's 'silly but essential fantasy elements' (quoted in Magee 2012: 224). Some guests today still choose to play Perowne's and Plomley's island-specific fantasy, but Kirsty Young's conception of the programme places the emphasis on biographical narrative, and her probing of disc utility proceeds largely through sound's role within autobiographical memory. For her, 'playing the "game" properly' involves choosing discs that 'illustrate and illuminate who they are and how their life has been'; 'it can't all be just Beethoven or Dylan. It's about pinpointing pieces that cast light on their life's most significant moments – adversities conquered, children born, lovers lost, laughter shared' (Young 2012: vii). Disc utility, both on the island and in the biographical interview, has therefore not been lost; it has just narrowed.

The *DID* online archive is not searchable by types of disc justification, which means that my study will necessarily be qualitative rather than quantitative.² Nevertheless, the

² The *Desert Island Discs* online archive is far less suited to discourse analysis than it is to statistical analysis according to categories already identified on the website – castaway names, composer and performer names, music pieces, and to some extent castaway profession and musical genre. The discussions selected for this chapter emerged from a wide-ranging, though admittedly uneven, analysis of the total number of shows: from a systematic analysis of 'serial castaways', a detailed reading of many of the earliest show scripts, and my note-taking from the programme over a number of years. Once I decided to include non-musical

archive is a rich source of explanations as to how recorded sound might help maintain a sense of self in a setting of geographical and social dislocation, albeit imagined. I will show here that castaways have frequently imagined the desert island endangering their emotional equilibrium and general sense of self by dislocating them from the things that keep them emotionally balanced, the past that defines them, and the social interaction essential to being human. Recognising that you are what your past has made you, castaways have articulated, often in nostalgic terms, their confidence in recorded sound's powers of reminiscence to provide access to the past and its ability to restore emotional equilibrium more generally—and it should be noted that, as castaways are asked which *discs* they would take with them, some have chosen recordings of spoken word and animal or nature sounds. They have then selected a wide variety of recordings that either indexically represent their loved ones, or contain musical representations or other encodings of sociality. Their descriptions not only confirm recent experimental findings about music's importance to the autobiographical self and its power to mediate memories; they also reflect recorded sound's ability to recapture and renew a sense of social belonging essential to one's identity.

2. Emotional self-management

When *DID* castaways justify their selections, the meanings they attach to them are often both personal and emotional. According to Juslin & Laukka (2004), one of the most commonly cited reasons for listening to music *at all* is that it induces strong emotions; this conclusion is hard to avoid when reading DeNora's interviews (2000: esp. 53ff), and lies behind Leslie Perowne's suggestions to Plomley in the quote with which I opened. It is unsurprising therefore that many castaways justify their disc choices in terms of emotional self-

disc choices, I followed up a large number of relevant programmes identified in Symons (2012).

management. Some talk about mood as if it were somehow autonomous and unconnected with feelings of loss and dislocation, others link it with fears of boredom stemming from the expanding horizon of time to fill, yet others to specific anticipations of social dislocation. Nature discs can feature in this connection, as for celebrity gardener Alan Titchmarsh (7 July 2002): he introduced one of his selections saying, ‘It’s the song of a blackbird, simple as that. Of an evening, at the end of the day, when you sit out in your garden, and you hear this little chap on the chimney top, you know that all’s right with the world.’ Some castaways even elide nature and music: ‘this is my idea of heaven’, reflected novelist Mary Wesley (22 April 1990), ‘waking up to hear the dawn chorus of birds, which is, I think, almost the most important music in my life and the most lasting.’

Most choices linked with mood management are musical, however. Early castaway actress Celia Johnson (27 October 1945) commented, ‘Some days, I suspect, in spite of my trials and miseries, I would feel cheerful and gay and want to dance. And for this, I’d want [Carl Maria von Weber’s] “Invitation to the Dance”.’ Valerie Hobson’s explanations (22 October 1954) are similar: ‘I should think I should like to hear, please, “Holiday for Strings” because it’s to me the perfect anti-depression music’. Stanley Holloway (4 July 1951) chose exclusively upbeat music: ‘You don’t find me sitting there playing a lot of solemn stuff... I told you I wanted cheerful records’. Suitably poetic, and despite his later general regrets, Philip Larkin described the mood created by the chorus ‘Praise the Lord’ from Handel’s *Solomon* using a visual metaphor: ‘I couldn’t *not* have one of [Handel’s] great roaring finales, you know: the musical equivalent of sunshine, I think of them as.’³ Julie Andrews (18

³ In a letter to Robert Conquest, 26 May 1976, shortly after recording the programme, he wrote: ‘I must never undertake unscripted stuff again: I just get old-fashioned mike fright and freeze. Everything I remember saying makes me curl up like apple peelings’ (Thwaite 1992: 541).

October 1992) went so far as to liken the effect of Brahms' Violin Concerto in D major on her mood to something stronger:

I chose it simply because when I was in New York for the first time, when I was out of town with *My Fair Lady* and *Camelot*, I used music as a kind of drug to make me forget some of the pressures. I would go home after the theatre and just play Brahms and Rachmaninov, and anything else that I adored, and it would be very helpful to me. ...It took off some of the pressure. And this piece was what I played probably most of all.

Sue Lawley questioned Chief Rabbi (then Elect) Dr Jonathan Sacks (21 April 1991) about his use of music from a different set of assumptions – namely, music's ability to induce imaginative flight ('And will music be an escape to you? ... do you use music in that sense? Can you put on a record and go somewhere else in your head?'). But he drew her back to the all-important mood management: 'Music isn't an escape for me *at all*. Music is for me a way of re-engaging with the world.⁴ You know, I sometimes – in fact quite often – feel quite depressed at the sheer difficulty of some of the tasks that I've set myself. And whenever I fall into that kind of temporary despair, music just lifts me up and allows me to go back fighting into the world.' Ravel's String Quartet is '*the* piece of music of all, which never fails to cheer me up whenever I'm feeling low'.

The open-endedness of the island sojourn creates obvious challenges when it comes to mood management. Faced with the prospect of listening to the same recordings over and over

⁴ This observation is quite similar to ethnomusicologist John Blacking's observation (1973/2000: 28) that for the Venda of South Africa music is not an escape from reality but 'an adventure into reality, the reality of the world of the spirit'.

again, entertainer Arthur Askey (23 December 1968) saw soothing vocal timbre as desirable: he knew a Val Doonican record would ‘do the trick’, because whereas he found himself ‘shutting the dressing room door’ to some singers he worked with over long summer seasons, Doonican’s voice was ‘so relaxed that I can sit and listen to him all night.’⁵ But more often castaways seek a solution to the problem of too much time in some kind of activity. Language courses are popular types of non-musical recordings because of their potential to keep castaways practically occupied and mentally stimulated. Conductor Edward Downes (17 February 1969) wanted a Chinese language course, actor Virginia McKenna (26 September 2004) wanted tapes to learn Italian and Swahili (no mention of a tape player), while Terry Wogan (on his 9 October 1988 appearance) sneakily asked for a long-wave radio player plus cassette player and ‘loads of language tapes’. With them, he might pick up long-wave radio, he acknowledged, but ‘I’ve always wanted to be able to speak loads of languages. That would be terrific. That would keep me interested. That would stop me going mad on the island’. A language tape is usually chosen as the luxury, but the Swedish soprano Elisabeth Söderström (8 December 1979) chose a recorded Finnish language course as one of her eight discs, explaining that as a singer she could afford to relinquish one of her music discs. A short excerpt from the language tape was played accordingly.

Music, too, is seen as a means of keeping the mind occupied. Though never actually shipwrecked on a desert island, broadcaster and naturalist David Attenborough – cast away a record four times, equalled only by Arthur Askey – is well placed to appreciate music’s potential in this regard. On his first *DID* appearance (6 May 1957) he drew on real-life experiences of long trips away, noting that the prospect of repeatedly listening to the same musical recordings can affect your choices. His first thought was that ‘the right thing to do

⁵ This and other quotes from episodes not accessible online are from transcripts held at BBC WAC.

was to take a very serious collection of records, ones that you could play hundreds of times and still get something out of'; you could include some 'floss', but 'You really need something you can chew on.' For that first interview he mixed jazz with classical, and included 'The Stars and Stripes' as 'something really brash to remind me of crowds and ceremonials'. In subsequent appearances (10 March 1979; 25 December 1998; 29 January 2012) he maintained a similar stance, prioritizing pieces 'that last', pieces that can be listened to twenty times 'and still there is something really there'—or, as he put it on his fourth appearance, music that has 'some complexity to it'. This preference for musical complexity over simplicity may reflect Attenborough's predilection for a structurally-engaged mode of listening (Subotnik 1988) and with it, a value judgement (Levy 1987: 20–3). Certainly, 'pieces that last' meant to him classical music, with Bach apparently filling the complexity remit particularly well: while his choices changed over time, something by Bach remained a constant – variously the Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue, the Partitas for solo violin Nos. 2 and 3, and the Goldberg Variations.

Plomley limited his castaways to a single track, but subsequent anchors have been more lenient, and guests have sometimes justified choosing very long musical works as a way of maximising the music they would have on the island. But as a way of filling the sheer expanse of time available they have more often cited learning to play a musical instrument, or improving existing performance skills.⁶ Mastering acoustic music-making requires a great deal of exclusively focussed time, of course, and to this end, musical instruments are common luxury items. Some castaways start from scratch and also ask for a set of tutor books (politician Clare Short), more seek to pick up where they left off as a child (actors Alan Howard and Steven Berkoff), while others have asked for the instrument to come with a complete collection of musical works they have long wanted to master (poet Charles Causley

⁶ In his contribution to this volume, Will Straw observes that plans for long sea voyages included musical instruments for the same reason.

wanted all of Chopin's piano works; film director Anthony Minghella wanted all Bach's keyboard works, novelist Catherine Gaskin all his Preludes and Fugues). Piano dominates the wish list, but most have been chosen at one time or another, including a 'mighty Wurlitzer' cinema organ (comedienne Victoria Wood). The fact that castaways imagine themselves using the situation in this way is intriguing and registers something about the cultural positions of these sources of music for the programme's age group and demographic. Castaways don't generally proffer a critique of record culture in parallel, though comedian and musician Michael Flanders (27 December 1965) expressed relief at being limited to eight discs precisely along these lines: 'My solace will be all those thousands of records less this eight that I shan't have to hear. I'm not a great lover of records – almost anything done "live", however badly, I tend to prefer.' Rather, they either claim that studying a musical instrument will serve as a way to fill in the time (Victoria Wood said that it would take her ages to learn to use all the Mighty Wurlitzer's 'bits and bobs') or else—and more often – it is something for which they simply haven't had the time up to now: 'I'm always very sorry that I didn't learn music; I hadn't time', lamented Viscount Montgomery of Alamein (20 December 1969), and others, including actor Anthony Andrews (5 April 1987), have said the same. Comments such as these relate to a perceived utility, but equally express personal regret and an almost nostalgic yearning for pre-gramophone culture when people *made*, rather than passively consumed, music. Musical cultures are changing, and music and video software now enable people to create their own mash-ups of commercial recording—but such developments are yet to register on *DID*.

Periodising the endless temporal horizon is another consideration to have influenced disc selections, and is tangible when choices are intended to facilitate religious ritual. Roy Plomley as castaway (12 May 1958) asked for music to accompany his 'devotions and contemplations' (Magee 2012: 74). Philip Larkin (17 July 1976) chose a performance of 'The

Coventry Carol' 'for Christmas', though admitted that he'd probably listen to it more frequently; he also chose Thomas Tallis's *Spem in Alium*, saying that he 'should want something for Sundays which suggests church music'. As Tallis's 40-part Renaissance motet is one of the last pieces likely to be sung in a church on an average Sunday in Britain, the poet clearly had a quite personal Sunday ritual in mind, not least because he is widely regarded to have been an atheist. But discographic imaginings of religious function such as these might also be understood in another way: they reflect a socialised human being, soon to be alone, anticipating how to recreate rituals that are customarily social.

3. Autobiographical memory and the social self

Mitigation of social dislocation is indeed the most common function that castaways anticipate their discs serving, and keeping memory (rather than ritual) alive is their favourite means for doing so. Memory is of course a complex aspect of human experience; it is part of our neural hardwiring, but is equally embedded within social experience.⁷ Autobiographical memories narrated by public figures on such entertainment programmes as *DID* can hardly be approached as if untouched by the media context in which they emerge, and yet it would be equally absurd to deny that they aren't heavily inflected by real events and real personal experience. Given that recorded music is a powerful trigger for autobiographical memory (Cady *et al.* 2008) the *DID* format is tailor-made to prompt discussions about music's role in their formation. Though Plomley had musical excerpts cut into the interview later, Michael Parkinson had the discs played as the programme was recorded to serve as a potential memory prompt during the conversation (Parkinson 2008: 307–8), and this remains the practice today. After a researcher has conducted a preliminary interview with the castaway about areas that the programme should cover, they draft a summary of what was said which

⁷ For an introduction to the range of current research, see Tota & Hagen (2016).

tries, as Magee puts it, ‘to capture the subjects that made your eyes light up, the moments when you were lost in thought and the reflections about pieces of music that captured *very vivid and significant memories*’. All this is then given to the presenter and producer so that, ‘You can chat with Kirsty as each track is playing, or remain locked into that music *with your memories*. ... Sometimes the music acts as a time-shift, bringing an event from years ago right to the front of *the castaway’s memory*’ (Magee 2012: xi, xiii emphasis added).

Psychologists understand autobiographical memories to be part of a complex memory system (Conway, Singer, & Tagini 2004), of which ‘self-defining memories’, the sort that often feature in a castaway’s disc justifications, are part: they possess an emotional dimension and link to enduring concerns (including unresolved conflicts), but are also highly vivid and retrievable (Singer & Moffitt 1991–2). Recordings of all types mediate such memories on *DID*. Comedians and satirists often speak of comedy tracks in this way, sometimes hinting that the artist was formative for their own professional work. Michael Palin (17 November 1979) introduced his recording of *The Goons* saying that it was, ‘in memory of those nights when I used to race home from school. If the bus didn’t arrive on time, I would run almost two miles, and I would arrive totally breathless; the taste of blood in my mouth, in order to hear this show’. Sound effects and nature discs have been explained in a similar way. Creator of *Thomas the Tank Engine* Reverend W. Awdry (19 October 1964) described three train records as reminding him of ‘some of the stages in my career’: “‘Rhythms of Steam’”, he said, referring to a well-known LP, ‘reminds me of the background I had as I grew up from the age of 5 to 17, where we lived within sight and sound of the Great Western Main Line between Paddington and Bristol.’

Musical discs are nevertheless dominant among those mediating self-defining memories. Those who appear on the programme more than once – whom we might call ‘serial castaways’ – typically alter most of their disc selections while retaining one or two which fall

into this category. Comedian Barry Humphries appeared once as Dame Edna Everage (essentially spoofing the programme), but also twice as himself, and for the two straight interviews retained one special disc:

When I first came to London, the first theatre I went to was the Metropolitan Theatre in the Edgware Road. There on the bill were many of the artists that I'd listened to as a child on old records, still doing their acts but at a great age. The audience were ancient, mostly women. Many of them had taken things with them to do, like knitting; one woman next to me was shelling peas into a colander. I joined this crowd, and the act that impressed me most was an old guy called Randolph Sutton who'd been in the music hall for many many years. And when he sang his great hit number 'Mother Kelly's Doorstep', the whole audience joined in. It was like a prayer. (24 May 2009)

Only the images of women shelling peas and knitting were absent from his earlier description (24 November 1973). Here the music is itself the self-defining memory, marking a key stage in the development of Humphries' own performing career and reminding both him and the audience of the great entertainment tradition of which he is a part.

The power of Humphries' narrative, one that foregrounds the importance of discographic mediation, is enhanced by the fact that *DID*'s editors fade the music in while he is still speaking his final words. Here the sonic overlap is minimal, but sometimes a song's whole instrumental introduction accompanies the castaway's reflections. At such times the programme begins to resemble a radio equivalent of the biopic, a film genre that depends on carefully chosen biographical moments, such allusions being especially strong when castaways are performers and musicians—perhaps because their discs often mediate colourful *musical* autobiographical memories. Broadcaster and disc jockey ('Whispering') Bob Harris's

third track (2 February 2014) was Paul Anka's 'Diana': its instrumental introduction starts softly as Harris describes a young Bob, on holiday with his mum and dad, hearing 'Diana' while walking along the street past a coffee bar, 'and thinking "Wow"'. The simultaneous overlaying of music and spoken narrative encourages the listener to visualise the anecdote, as if it were a radio play. Thus the genre link. Biopic traits had already been hinted at by Harris's first selection: Mark Germino's 'Rex Bob Lowenstein', the story of an independent-thinking American DJ ('I really identify with this fellow'), which almost serves as Harris's theme song. Comedian Jack Dee's interview (11 May 2014) elegantly wove the desert island and biopic narrative types together. Kirsty Young comments that Dee would surely be miserable 'cast away and alone on the desert island', but he replies that he likes to find solutions to problems and thinks he would be building a boat quite quickly. His last disc, Neil Young's 'Good to See You', follows, and is described by Dee with reference to memories of returning home in the middle of the night after being on tour, but we seem equally invited to listen to it as his fictive home-coming after he rescues himself from the island.

Keeping memories of people and life events alive is one thing, maintaining a sense of oneself as a social creature is another. Soprano Victoria de los Angeles' requested 'all kinds of noises: songs of birds, sounds of animals, the cars crossing, all kinds of sounds that will remind me that there is a world that still exists' (3 June 1978). Her generalised but telling request for the discographic memory of a world of people and places beyond the island points to one of the essential dimensions of personal identity that recording technology enables, namely, the recapturing and renewing of a sense of human sociality. Sound recordings were seen from the beginning as a means of preserving lost, even dead voices (Edison 1878), and from almost as long ago were claimed to provide a reasonable substitute for the real thing. Discs were heavily marketed via claims to realism – they were 'lifelike', 'a true mirror of sound', 'the real thing' – and in the 1910s and 1920s the Victor Talking Machine Company

and others made even stronger assertions: ‘Both are Caruso’ (quoted in Katz 2010: 2). Only with mobile musical devices was a brake applied to ever-steepening claims to high fidelity. The fact that the acoustical properties of the desert island playback systems have never been a major topic of discussion on the programme only serves to confirm the longevity of such underlying assumptions: any recording of absent sounds and voices might substitute for the real thing. Yet Ian Cross (2010: 77) suggests that recordings might operate on a more symbolic level: ‘even physically inert but intent listening, even to recorded music, might best be thought of as covert *interaction* with the traces of human behaviour that are evidenced in the sonic surface of the music’. According to Cross’s argument, all recorded musical selections might serve a social role on some level.

It has been possible for certain castaways to be specific, and to choose recorded versions of family, friends and artists with whom they have worked. Robertson Hare (17 January 1951) chose a tune that his daughter wrote herself, then recorded and gave him for a birthday: ‘when I played this record I could close my eyes and imagine I was away from that wretched island and sitting in my own chair in my own flat in London’. Neil Kinnock (1 May 1988) couldn’t help chuckling about his final record, which came

from an eminent artiste, my own daughter Rachel, back when she was two and a half. I used to play around with a tape and record her saying things, same with Steve [his son], but very few have survived for a variety of reasons. And her great favourite at the time was a song called ‘Horace the Horse’ [*laughs*]. And although she was positively adenoidal with a dreadful cold, I recorded this [*laughs*], and everybody who hears it still, these years later, can’t help laughing. And I think that laughing and loving are the two greatest things that human beings can do, and I’d really need a laugh on a desert island.

The charming recording fades out to reveal both castaway and interviewer chuckling – though slightly embarrassedly, as if Lawley felt, and Kinnock could sense that she felt, that this was not quite the sort of disc that an aspiring leader of the country might choose. As Tia DeNora shows in this volume, politicians on the programme have tended to opt for highly calculated performances of the self. The personal, and specifically domestic sonic record of sociality that ‘Horace the Horse’ embodied was probably therefore somewhat risky.

Yet in Kinnock’s case the selection and slightly coy explanation rang entirely true.⁸ They were revealing of the family man, and confirm that homemade recordings are ‘document[s] of domesticity and togetherness,’ as Jonathan Sterne observes (2003: 209): ‘While a family making its own records would likely have played them for guests as well as for one another, the homemade phonograph record offered a more inwardly oriented set of identification processes’. Although Sterne is ostensibly referring to technologies of the 1920s, what he says rings true across a wider time span. But direct musical mnemonics for absent loved ones need not be home recordings, as musicians and comedians have often demonstrated. Stanley Holloway, appearing for the second time aged 72 (12 February 1962), confessed that he found himself becoming nostalgic at his time of life, and used this to explain why many of his discs included the voices of people he would like to have with him. Billy Mayerl (‘one of my greatest friends’) playing the piano was one of his choices, a duet that he recorded with Elsa McFarlane another, Gracie Fields yet another. Paul Robeson’s first choice (1 December 1958) was the spiritual ‘Steal Away’, sung by himself but chosen ‘not to hear myself so much as because I want to carry with me the memory of these years with a great musician’ – pianist and friend Lawrence Brown (Magee 2012: 78).

⁸ Kinnock’s choice of a home recording was subsequently imitated by other politician castaways, including Tony Benn and Charles Kennedy.

Recordings need not directly be of loved ones, but may serve more broadly as sonic and musical representations of sociality. Comedian Rob Brydon's comedy selection did not involve his family, but was associated with interactions he had had with his father (16 May 2010): 'This is just one of my favourite sketches: Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, who I grew up loving. And this is a sketch that I'd have because it reminds me of my childhood. It was a big hit in our house and my dad and I still use these phrases. [*From here imitating the characters:*] "And I can't talk now he's here." "I love you too".' A large number of castaways have justified comedy tracks with more generalised social reasoning. Creator of Paddington Bear Michael Bond (11 September 1976), Margaret Thatcher (18 February 1978), and Sir Ralph Richardson (4 August 1979) all chose some Bob Newhart sketches, explaining that comedy and laughter – both their own and that of others – fulfilled a basic human need, thereby claiming for comedy an essential role not only in managing their moods but also in confirming their very existence as human beings. Bond extended this to his appreciation of how a comedian used language itself, which the recorded skit enabled him fully to grasp: 'I don't think I could exist very long on a desert island without hearing the sound of human laughter, and I think that the one record which I can play over and over again, and in fact, the more I play it, the more brilliant I think it is in the sense of timing and the use of words, is The Driving Instructor by Bob Newhart'.

Vocal, especially choral, music can serve a similar function. One of the many who chose an excerpt from Handel's *Messiah* was Eric Sykes (22 June 1997), who was unusually eloquent in explaining how he felt that the sound of a chorus of singers might serve as substitute for a group of people: 'I think sometimes during the nights on this desert island it would get a bit lonely, so I'd like something to lift my spirits. What I've chosen is the Halleluia chorus. ... I think I'd play that every night. ... I might join in too.'

4. Nostalgic longing and the idealised home

Of the attitudes towards memories attaching to discs explored on the programme, nostalgia features the most frequently. Nostalgic longing suffers bad press, being commonly understood to involve a negative judgment of the present – finding the present somehow lacking in view of the past. Experimental psychologists are starting to understand it differently, explaining nostalgia as a healthy response to major moments of mental dislocation. For them, it is ‘an affective process that can accompany autobiographical memories’ (Barrett *et al.* 2010: 1, citing Batcho 2007; Leboe & Ansons 2006; Wildschut *et al.* 2006) – a bittersweet and complex emotion. It primarily gives rise to positive affect, but can often be accompanied by negative affect – such as a sense of loss – while also serving to *counteract* sadness and loneliness (Wildschut *et al.* 2006).

Usually triggered by some sort of negative affect, such as separation or loss, and typically involving picturing the self surrounded by close friends at personally important junctures such as weddings and holidays, or in settings such as sunsets, lakes and making or listening to music, nostalgic reminiscences are starting to be thought of as fortifying feelings (Wildschut *et al.* 2006). Focussing existentially on the past in this way makes people feel less lonely, and helps to protect positive feelings of the self via memories of experiences that assure them they are valued and have worthwhile lives. It may even make them feel physically warmer. Music has long been associated with nostalgia, and it has recently been shown that when autobiographically significant music is played, nostalgia is stronger (Barrett *et al.* 2010).⁹ Yet such reminiscences can be somewhat idealised. Remembering is already in constant danger of being confused with imagining, as Paul Ricoeur (2004: 7) points out, but

⁹ For Swiss doctor Johannes Hofer, who wrote about nostalgia in his medical dissertation and considered it an illness, gastronomic and auditory stimuli, especially musical stimuli, were particularly important triggers (Boym 2001: 3–4).

nostalgia depends upon a particular type of remembering. As Boym writes (2001: xiii), nostalgia is ‘a sentiment of loss and displacement, but ... also a romance with one’s own fantasy’; ‘The nostalgic [person] desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition’ (xv). For Boym (2001: xiii), nostalgia (*nostos* – home; *algia* – longing) is not so much a question of memory, it is at base ‘a longing for a home’. The crucial point, however, is that it is a home ‘that no longer exists or has never existed’.

Given how powerful a trigger music is for nostalgic thinking, it is perhaps small wonder that many on *DID* engage in it while simultaneously telling their life story and imagining being in exile. Castaways tend to express, and use music for, what Boym would describe as ‘restorative nostalgia’ – that is, a nostalgia that stresses the *nostos* of nostalgia, the home, rather than the longing itself. Few embrace the idea of separation from their former lives and families, though comedian Spike Milligan claimed (4 February 1978) that he would ‘cherish loneliness’, and children’s writer Roald Dahl confessed (27 October 1979) that he ‘would love it’. Instead, discs are selected to mediate a psychological return ‘home’, variously defined, and I would argue that they are especially well-equipped to do so. For Boym a fundamental artistic expression of nostalgia is the cinematic double-exposure, or superimposition of two images – ‘of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life’ (2001: xiv). *DID* affords a similar opportunity for cognitive double-exposure. If sound recordings facilitate memory recall because their outputs are constant whenever they are listened to, they may also encourage the mind to wander back and construct an idyll, a past that never was. Within the programme’s fantasy world, a recording could be played on that geographically and socially isolated island and yet – potentially at least – create a sonic output identical to what it produced in times past, in that other place, in that other social circumstance. Recording technology does not just mediate memory; to rehabilitate a term

favoured by its early inventors, it ‘freezes’ sounds at a particular time and place (Sterne 2003: 71, 319), moments of sounding and listening that are socially and culturally specific, and it typically presents those moments at their best. Recordings are arguably nostalgia-ready.

On *DID* the person nostalgically longed for has sometimes been a version of the castaway him/herself. Elizabeth Schwarzkopf has been mocked as a narcissist and self-publicist because she chose only recordings of herself, but others have also taken this route, claiming a desire to reminisce nostalgically about a sonic representation of what we might call their own ‘peak selves’. On her second appearance at age 63 (28 July 1979), pianist Moura Lympany described her decision to take only recordings of herself as follows: ‘since I would be on my own on a desert island I would be looking back on my life, I would reminisce about the 50 years of concert giving that I had had. And I thought: wouldn’t it be nice to reminisce with my own records’. What at first glance seems like narcissism can also be read as nostalgia for a self then genuinely under threat. Lympany had a second operation for breast cancer that year. Even though she did not ultimately retire, the conjunction of her personal circumstances and the invitation to imagine being cast away on a desert island (again) proved a recipe for genuine reflections upon her own mortality and nostalgia for her then fading powers.

Principally, however, castaways anticipate nostalgic longing for loved ones and familiar locales. Actress Valerie Hobson (22 October 1954, her second appearance), immediately invoked the concept: ‘I don’t know whether all your other customers to date felt as nostalgic about this as I do, but I have a feeling that if I found myself in that very unfortunate position I should want to get back anyway in memory, if not in physical being, to the life that I left behind.’ She was right to describe as nostalgic her desire for discographic memory triggers; ‘in memory’, home was an ideal, precisely the sort of mythologized past that Boym identifies as the domain of the nostalgic. Hobson said she’d love to have lived in the countryside, not in the kind of urban context in which she grew up, and for this reason

chose Butterworth's 'The Shropshire Lad'. Another example is Petula Clark, who has appeared three times on the programme. For her first two appearances (2 May 1951, when she was only 19 years old, and 20 February 1982) she chose quite contemporary discs, and indeed stated in 1951 that selecting discs proved difficult because her tastes frequently changed. But at her third appearance (24 December 1995) she was suddenly nostalgic, referring for the first time to being half-Welsh. For one of her discs, she chose the Morryston Orpheus Choir singing 'Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau' (Land of my Fathers), explaining fallout from the wartime bombing of London in oddly idealised terms. She and her sister were sent to Wales to stay with their grandparents, 'and we loved it. [*The music starts up as a soundtrack underneath her speaking.*] And I used to roam around the mountains like something out of *The Sound of Music* and sing. I used to sing all the time.'

As a Briton who has long lived abroad, actress-singer Julie Andrews (18 October 1992) may have a special insight into listening to music while nostalgically longing for home, not least because for her the powerful memories of a lost geographical home intersect with memories of childhood. For her imagined island exile, she chose a number of very British pieces, the first of which (John Ireland's 'Amberley Wild Brooks') she remembered listening to her mother play, the second (Vaughan Williams's 'The Lark Ascending') to help her remember her father, who loved nature and the countryside. Emu comedian Rod Hull (9 April 1977) chose a recording of an actual bird for reasons of similar geographical nostalgia, saying, 'if I were on this desert island, locked off from the rest of the world, nothing would endear me more to Kent, which is where I was born, and which is where I now live, than to hear the sound of a skylark.' Given Hull's bird-call choice, it is interesting that Vaughan Williams's 'The Lark Ascending' also proved the most popular listener choice when Radio 4 conducted a *DID*-themed listener survey in early 2011 and broadcast the results as *Your*

Desert Island Discs.¹⁰ In fact, eight of the top ten listener choices in 2011 were specifically British tracks: two were by Vaughan Williams, two by Elgar, and one each by Handel and Holst, and by rock groups Queen and Pink Floyd. *DID* listeners seem *en masse* to have sought to be reminded of Britain in some way.

In light of this listener survey, the results of which reflect the programme's conservative Radio 4 listening audience, I would go so far as to argue that *DID* is now its own nostalgic British ready-made. Perhaps it always has been. *DID* emerged during wartime, and although it was free of the wartime specificities that characterised other disc choice programmes on the Forces Programme, at the heart of the programme was an imaginary space where military personnel stationed abroad and home audiences could meet. There is nothing to suggest that BBC programmers had this in mind when they enthusiastically accepted the programme, but as we have seen, memos confirm that Perowne, at least, wanted island exile and the potential utility of discs to be foregrounded. A desert island was certainly a more pleasant scene of (imagined) exile than the one military personnel had to endure in reality.

Or did the desert island stand for the sceptered isle itself – then a space unoccupied by foreign troops, but isolated from the rest of continental Europe and even from its own men? The show's light music theme song with its added overlay of herring gulls certainly helps to construct the impression. Though Plomley (1977: 14) claimed to have initially wanted an introduction to the programme comprising only 'surf breaking on a shore and the cries of sea birds', Perowne felt that the greater definition provided by a piece of music was necessary. From a shortlist of three broadly seaside-themed pieces (two by British light music composer Eric Coates plus Norman O'Neill's incidental music to J.M. Barrie's play *Mary Rose*), they chose Coates' *By the Sleepy Lagoon*, presumably because it had the more striking melody and no vocal encumbrance. Coates was a well-known composer of British 'light music', a pre-pop

¹⁰ This special programme is available on the *DID* website.

style of melodious orchestral music, and one of his tunes had already served as the theme tune for the BBC's *Music While You Work* (from 1940); another would be similarly employed later for *The Forsyte Saga* (1967). The fact that *DID* seems in no hurry to replace its 'light music' theme tune may add to the show's nostalgia today. By contrast, the British herring gulls were once briefly changed to 'sooty tern chicks and white-tailed tropic bird chicks', but were changed back to the herring gulls because, Plomley claimed, 'the sounds of the tropical birds meant nothing to the listeners in Britain'. In his memoir Plomley defiantly recorded: 'By now every amateur ornithologist must have written to point out that on a tropical or sub-tropical island of the type I envisage, one does not hear the sound of herring gulls. I can only reply that one does on my island.' (Plomley 1977: 202).

Whether 'Plomley's island' was intended to be Britain so straightforwardly cannot be fully answered, but the context of wartime 1942 mandated that a BBC programme such as *DID* fulfil a function, even if only the creation of an imaginary meeting place for audiences at home and abroad. Perowne's insistence that castaways describe their disc choices in utilitarian terms relates to this. By asking *DID*'s guests and listening audience to think about the potential function of sound and music, the BBC effectively invited them to think as the BBC itself had to do, though to opposite ends. *Music While You Work* featured rhythmical music designed to encourage workers involved in the war effort (Magee 2012: 11), but *DID* featured music intended for an opposite state –where there was no war, and yet home could be remembered, indeed could only be remembered, fondly, nostalgically.

5. Conclusions

Over the course of its 73 years in the hands of four presenters and their producers, *DID* has moved some distance from the format that Plomley and Perowne initially imagined. The programme is now quite flexible about how castaways select their eight discs, and we the

listeners can usually sense when a list reflects genuine favourites, is a parade of musical erudition or the self-conscious media performance of a professional self, or has been chosen to mark stages in a biographical narrative. Yet prominent among the possible approaches remains imagined utility within the fictional desert island space, above all for managing time, mood and feelings of isolation—the themes that recur in castaway justifications of their recordings of music, sounds and voices. Because discs are entwined with the autobiographical memories drawn out during interview, they can and frequently do trigger forms of nostalgic longing.

If *DID* now exemplifies ready-made nostalgia for Britain, as I have argued, this is so equally because many of its listeners have tuned into it for decades and count it among their own autobiographical memories. We also know there is a strong likelihood that castaway stories will resonate with our own histories and, in doing so, prompt nostalgic reflection; some of the records chosen might even be associated with our own past; and the picture of a castaway on a desert island, with sufficient time on their hands to finally learn an acoustic musical instrument or master a foreign language may chime with our own nostalgic yearnings for more time. In light of the perspectives on nostalgia's restorative powers discussed above, it is useful to remind ourselves of its idealising other side. Underlying the home-spun montage of pop music that Arthur Askey selected for his fourth appearance (20 December 1980), and from which he said he would be glad to escape, was nostalgia for what he considered to be a more sonically civilized time before pop music took over the airwaves. Yet he introduced his mash-up of pop and rock music as a form of aversion therapy:

Yes, it's a new group. The Running Sores. The point being, if I was wrecked on the desert island and I was sitting very despondently one day, and wishing I was back in civilization, when I hear records like that played, I think: 'Well I can't be so badly off, being here, stuck on a desert island, nice and quiet'.

In other words, it was a sonic warning against nostalgic thinking. He chose it not to mediate nostalgic, idealized thoughts of home, but to serve as a reminder of their seductive power.

The home you long for might not be the idyll you mentally and discographically reconstruct.

But there is perhaps another reason why *DID* continues to seduce audiences: because it upends expectations about things and music. Audiences understand well that the luxury is a material object of no practical use as far as escaping the island is concerned. As we create our own lists of desert island discs and listen to those of others, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that, unlike the luxury item, such lists were from the start supposed to be partly utilitarian and not constructed purely according to aesthetic merit: the music was partly intended to help the castaway deal with their fate. In prompting this sort of thinking about music and sound, albeit within a fantasy frame, *DID* has pioneered a musical and more broadly discographic conversation on the airwaves, one that has been a rare alternative to discussions about aesthetic value alone.

References:

- Barrett, F.S., Grimm, K.J., Robins, R.W., Wildschut, T., Sedikides, C., & Janata, P. (2010), 'Music-Evoked Nostalgia: Affect, Memory, and Personality', *Emotion*, 10 /3: 390–403.
- Batcho, K.I. (2007), 'Nostalgia and the Emotional Tone and Content of Song Lyrics', *The American Journal of Psychology*, 120/3: 361–81.
- Blacking, John (1973/2000), *How Musical Is Man?* (Seattle: University of Washington Press).
- Boym, S. (2001), *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York, Basic Books).
- Cady, E.T, Harris, R.J. & Knappenberger, J.B. (2008), 'Using Music to Cue Autobiographical Memories of Different Lifetime Periods', *Psychology of Music*, 36/2: 157–78.
- Conway, M.A., Singer, J.A., & Tagini, A. (2004), 'The Self and Autobiographical Memory: Correspondence and Coherence', *Social Cognition*, 22/ 5: 491–529.
- Cross, Ian (2010), 'Listening as Covert Performance', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 135/S1: 67–77.
- Edison, T.A. (1878), 'The Phonograph and Its Future', *The North American Review*, 126: 527–36.
- DeNora, T. (2000), *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
- Juslin, P.N., & Laukka, P. (2004). 'Expression, perception, and induction of musical emotions: A review and a questionnaire study of everyday listening', *Journal of New Music Research*, 33/3: 217–38.

- Katz, M. (2010), *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music*, rev. edn. (Berkeley, University of California Press).
- Lawley, S. (1990), *Sue Lawley's Desert Island Discussions* (London, Hodder & Stoughton).
- Leboe, J.P., & Ansons, T.L. (2006), 'On Misattributing Good Remembering to a Happy Past: An investigation into the Cognitive Roots of Nostalgia', *Emotion*, 6/4: 596–610.
- Levy, J.M. (1987), 'Covert and Casual Values in Recent Writings About Music', *The Journal of Musicology*, 5/1: 3–27.
- Magee, S. (2012), *Desert Island Discs: 70 Years of Castaways* (London, Bantam Press).
- Parkinson, M. (2008), *Parky: My Autobiography* (London, Hodder & Stoughton).
- Plomley, R. (1977), *Desert Island Discs* (London, Fontana).
- Ricoeur, P. (2004), *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. K. Blarney and D. Pellauer (Chicago, University of Chicago Press).
- Singer, J.A. & Moffitt, K.H. (1991–2), 'An Experimental Investigation of Specificity and Generality in Memory Narratives', *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, 11/3: 233–57.
- Subotnik, R.R. (1988), 'Toward a Deconstruction of Structural Listening: A Critique of Schoenberg, Adorno and Stravinsky', in E. Narmour & R.A. Solie (eds), *Explorations in Music, the Arts, and Ideas: Essays in Honor of Leonard B. Meyer* (New York, Pendragon), 87–122.
- Sterne, J. (2003), *The Audible Past: Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Durham, Duke University Press).

- Symons, M. (2012), *Desert Island Discs Flotsam & Jetsam: Fascinating Facts, Figures and Miscellany From One of BBC Radio 4's Best-Loved Programmes* (London: Bantam).
- Thwaite, A. (ed.) (1992), *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin* (London: Faber).
- Tota, A.L. & Hagen, T. (eds) (2016), *Routledge International Handbook of Memory Studies* (New York: Routledge).
- Wildshut, T., Sedikides, C., Arndt, J., & Routledge, C. (2006), 'Nostalgia: Content, Triggers, Functions', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91/5: 975–93.
- Young, K. (2012), 'Foreword', in S. Magee, *Desert Island Discs: 70 Years of Castaways From One of the BBC Radio 4's Best Loved Programmes* (London, Bantam), vi–ix.