

*Railway music in Europe and the USA
in the twentieth century*

This section of the book comprises five chapters covering music most of which belongs to the classical repertoire. The section which follows, 'Railway music in North America in the nineteenth and early twentieth century', covers music in a more popular vein.

The opening chapter examines three British railway pieces from the 1930s: *Night Mail* and *The Way to the Sea* by Benjamin Britten, and *Coronation Scot* by Vivian Ellis. The two composers worked in different fields; Ellis was a major figure in the field of light music and Britten went on to become a leading classical composer.

10 Three British railway pieces from the 1930s, *Night Mail*, *The Way to the Sea* and *Coronation Scot*

***Night Mail* and *The Way to the Sea*. Benjamin Britten and music for film**

IN 1936 THE English composer Benjamin Britten (1913-1976) collaborated with the great poet W H Auden to work on two films about the British railway: *The Way to the Sea*, which celebrates the electrification of the Portsmouth to London railway line, and the much better known *Night Mail*. *Night Mail* tracks the journey of a Postal Special train from London to Glasgow documenting an everyday shift and emphasising the way in which the work of postal workers and railwaymen knit together in a remarkable act of collective organisation. As a marriage of film, music and poetry, the latter is still regarded by many as unsurpassed in its genre.

Britten was a young man at the beginning of his career when he joined the General Post Office (GPO) Film Unit where the poet W H Auden (1907-1973) was also a regular contributor. There Britten was expected to compose precisely timed scores to tight deadlines, an excellent grounding for the 22 year old composer. The GPO Film Unit was set up in 1933 by Stephen Tallents, partly to illustrate and promote the role of its quarter of a million employees. The short but distinctive films aimed to give a realistic picture of British society; they chronicled the working lives of British people, amongst them miners, fishermen, postal workers and railway men. The films were shown in cinemas, but more often in other venues such as factory canteens, schools and village halls and consequently reached a very wide audience.

The film unit was headed by John Grierson (1898-1972) whose vision was for a documentary approach to film making which, as the filmmaker Pat Jackson

(1999) wrote in his memoir, was ‘To inform: to open eyes to new perspectives, new ways of thinking about social problems.’¹ Grierson was joined by like-minded others including the Brazilian-born film maker Alberto Cavalcanti, known for his experimentation with sound and music in film, and their combined output helped to enrich a tremendously innovative era in British film history. In 1939 the writer J B Priestley observed that ‘Grierson and his young men, with their ... taut social conscience, their rather Marxist sense of the contemporary scene always seemed to me at least a generation ahead of the dramatic film people.’² It is this underlying socialist ideology that has led to *Night Mail* being described as borrowing from ‘the aesthetics of Soviet cinema to turn an explanation of the work of the travelling post office into a hymn to collective



Film poster for *The Night Mail* produced by GPO Film Unit, 1936
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labour'.³ Grierson had written the English titles for *Turksib* (1929), a Soviet documentary directed by Viktor Turin, when it was released in the UK.⁴ The film documents the building of the Turkestan–Siberia Railway setting scenes of the open desert against the movement of machines and close-ups of pistons, wheels and machinery. As Scott Anthony writes, "Turin's ability to evoke grand social developments with the Soviet's Spartan film-making resources proved inspirational to the similarly impoverished British documentary movement".⁵

Night Mail was not the first GPO film about trains. In 1934 Humphrey Jennings' short film *Locomotives* about the development of the railway was largely made up of footage of miniature trains at London's Science Museum. It included extracts from Schubert's *Rosamunde* arranged by the composer John Foulds, but music was not a prominent feature of the film.

Night Mail was produced by John Grierson and directed by Harry Watt and Basil Wright. Britten and Auden's contribution was to supply the "Title Music" and the 'End Sequence', roughly three minutes' worth of music to appear at the end of the 22 minute film. The remainder of the soundtrack is more focused on statistics - the millions of letters delivered each year, the number of points along the route at which mail is picked up and dropped off, and so on. Watt told Britten "Now I don't want any bloody highbrow stuff," urging him to make the music jazzy and emphasising the need for the music to be 'rhythmic to go with the beat of the train'.⁶ There is no discernible jazz influence in the finished product, but Britten famously composed music that, along with Auden's verse, captured the rhythms of a train. To familiarise himself with the different characteristics of trains sounds, Britten, a lapsed train spotter, enjoyed evenings at Harrow station accompanied by his film maker colleague Cavalcanti listening to the trains come and go.

A further restriction on Britten's brief was the necessity to match the sound exactly to what was happening on the film. At one point Britten wrote in his diary of the difficulties of writing "music" to 'minute instructions, when even the speed of the beat and number of bars is fixed'. An added difficulty was the need to fit Auden's words into the soundscape in strict rhythm with the music. Auden wrote the now familiar poetry at an old table in the noisy surroundings of the Film Unit's office in Soho Square, watching the rough cuts, timing the verse with a stopwatch and chopping and changing his lines accordingly. Britten chose the instrumentalists and conducted them in the recording – all for a fee of £13.10. Auden was taken on for £3.00 a week and was expected to supplement

his poetic work by acting as Assistant Director. In 1936 Pat Jackson was a junior at the GPO Film Unit and was thrilled to be chosen as Harry Watt's assistant on *Night Mail*. He writes of filming 'some miles north of Hemel Hempstead' and how they 'trudged down the main "down fast" line to Crewe'.

The L.M.S. railway company had provided us with a 'ganger' for our safety. He carried a red flag, had a whistle permanently between his teeth which he blew with monotonous regularity. The whistle would then drop suspended from a cord necklace and he would solemnly intone: 'Up fast. Stand clear', or 'Down fast. Stand clear'.⁷

Most of the film was shot as though it was a silent film; the sound was recorded later in various locations in a sound van.

Night Mail is scored for speaker and small ensemble – strings, harp, flute, oboe, trumpet in C and a percussion section (suspended cymbal, sandpaper, side drum, bass drum, and wind machine). The 'Title Music' lasts for 40 seconds. It opens with a roll on the side drum followed by a short, loud fanfare, seven notes on the trumpet with a typical fanfare rhythm. Britten had been instructed not to write 'any bloody highbrow stuff' but the choice of pitches for the fanfare is intriguingly difficult to analyse. Most fanfares are in a major key and clearly spell out the notes of a major chord, but this one has little sense of key and the chord it outlines is unconventional and difficult to classify. This could certainly be described as a nod to 'highbrow' modernity. However, Britten's gift for imitation and his ability to recreate the sounds and rhythms of the train ensured that the musical language was accessible to all. After a pause the music drops in volume and the flute, harp and strings have fluttering lines layered over each other. At the same time the percussion section imitates the sound of a train setting off with thuds on the bass drum which gradually become more frequent until the train sounds settle into a regular rhythm. Soon the sound dies away making way for the voiceover commentary.

The filming team travelled to Crewe where trolley loads of mail came in from all over the country. These were loaded onto the train and the dropped off through the night as the train travelled up to Scotland. Roughly half way through the film, shortly after the train leaves Crewe station, there is a 'Percussion Sequence' accompanying the commentator where the percussion is augmented by seven players producing special effects with 'found objects'. Britten had previously manipulated the sounds of found objects such as blocks of wood, chains and

buckets of water, in *Coal Face* (1935), another Britten/Auden collaboration focusing on the lives of a Yorkshire mining community and their dangerous working conditions. The found objects in *Night Mail* are listed as

- I Steam (compressed air)
- II Sandpaper on slate
- III Rail
- IV Booms (clank)
- V Aluminium on drill/Motor Moy (A hand-cranked, chain-operated camera)
- VI Hammer on Conduit Boom/Siren
- VII Whistle/Coal falling down shaft

One such special effect reversed the sound of a hard beater on a light jazz cymbal to give the impression of a train whooshing through a tunnel. Listening to this sequence, it is hard to believe that the sounds emanate from a percussion ensemble rather than a train.

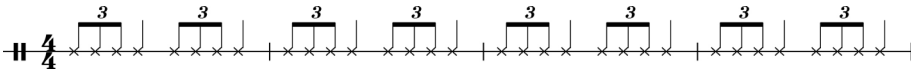
The shots of the 'Night Mail' climbing Beattock and descending to its destination in Glasgow were some of the last to be filmed. The footage was used to carry the opening lines of Auden's verse. The 'End Sequence' falls into four sections. The first section has a purely instrumental introduction where a wind machine and a muted side drum imitate the sounds of a train setting off in a similar manner to the Title Sequence. Once the stuttering train has fallen into a steady rhythm, the speaker enters with the famous words 'This is the night mail crossing the border'. Accompanied by side drum, the rhythm of the words is used to denote the propelling forward motion:

This is the Night Mail cross-ing the bor-der Bring-ing the cheque and the post-al or-der

Next the train climbs up Beattock Summit. This is reflected in rising figures of the strings and an upward leap on the bassoon. In musical terms this would be described as word painting where the music reflects the meaning of the words. The train gathers momentum flying past with a head of steam and the music builds up getting louder and more dense.

A climax is reached and the piece moves on to a new section, faster and with a change of key as the train descends into Scotland. It is on this leg of the

journey that, set against an image of the driver wiping his face, we hear that the climb is over and the train descends into Glasgow. The speaker's pace is now more relaxed and the words less rhythmically tight. All the time the side drum beats out variants on the repeated train-mimicking rhythm:



The pace changes again in the third section, the train has built up speed and the music takes on a new urgency. The strings take on a chugging simple beat, but the words above have a rapid iteration listing the many and varied letters that the train is carrying; those of thanks, those from banks, and letters of joy. There are numerous words, multiple syllables with nowhere for the speaker, Stuart Legg, to breathe until he had a pause before the words 'Dreaming of terrifying monsters'. Britten wrote of this problem and how it was resolved: "There is too much to be spoken in a single breath by the one voice (it is essential to keep to the same voice & to have no breaks) and so we have recorded them separately."⁸

In the fourth and final section, with views of the city, we hear of the thousands dreaming, perhaps of monsters or maybe tea in one of the famous Glasgow tea rooms – Cranston's or Crawford's.⁹ Next the words reflect on the way that the postman's knock quickens the heart with the fear of being forgotten. The music becomes quiet and reflective, only to build up again, the trumpet fanfares become prominent, but this time, rather than the obscure pitches in the opening, the fanfare spells out a triumphant chord of C major signalling the end of the night mail journey.

The premier of *Night Mail* took place in February 1936 at the Cambridge Arts Theatre. It received positive reviews across the national press and it is now acknowledged to be the most critically acclaimed film to be produced within the British documentary film movement. By focusing on the 'unusual and previously obscured skills needed to work at the Post Office' it 'proved extremely popular with both postal and railway workers'.¹⁰

The Way to the Sea

Although *The Way to the Sea* was written to celebrate the new electrification of the London to Portsmouth railway line, unlike *Night Mail*, trains and railway

sounds do not feature prominently in the score. The documentary was made by Strand Films, and directed by John B Holmes. During December 1936, Britten and Auden worked together in what was to be their final collaboration, Auden, at one point, providing an extended verse commentary, and Britten composing the incidental music. It is scored for commentator, woodwind, brass, percussion, harp and piano. The musical style is rather different from that of *Night Mail*. There are no hints of modernism, no infectious rhythms in the text, there is little that is innovative, rather it relies more on musical pastiche. The piece has 11 movements and train references are made in only two of these. In the first of these movements the text excitedly boasts that the train time between London and Portsmouth has been reduced to 90 minutes along with 169 steam trains a week. Here mundane images are underscored by over-the-top pastiche ceremonial music, an unusual juxtaposition.

In the following movement, 'The line waits', Britten provides what can only be described as background music with some nods in the direction of train rhythm, but with Auden's commentary very much in the foreground. The newly electrified railway had opened up a commuter corridor between London and the south coast, and part of the intention of the promotional film had been to relate this to the lives of ordinary people. Auden's text is in parts bizarre and in parts supercilious. He writes of people who 'read adventure stories or understand algebra' or are 'brilliant at tennis' coupled with the need 'to keep respectable' and impress their neighbours. This rather strange choice of words juxtaposed with much use of pastiche has led some critics to believe that in *The Way to the Sea*, Britten and Auden had helped to create a satirical documentary under the guise of a promotional film.

Coronation Scot by Vivian Ellis

Vivian Ellis (1903–1996) was born in London, into a musical family. His grandmother, Julia Wolf, was a composer and his mother was a violinist. He studied composition and piano at the Royal Academy of Music, the latter under Myra Hess, with the intention of becoming a concert pianist, but he fell in love with the musical theatre while still a teenager. A crucial part of his training as a composer was his work as a reader and demonstrator for the London publisher Francis, Day & Hunter. This meant assessing songs and

piano pieces submitted for publication - up to two hundred a week – as well as playing current publications in the shop to promote them. Next he began a long publishing association with Chappell & Co. and his first major success was *Mr. Cinders* (1929), several other operettas followed including *Bless the Bride*. His many hit songs included ‘Spread a little happiness’ and ‘This is my lovely day’. During the 1960s and 1970s he faded from public prominence, but there was a resurgence of interest in his work when the singer Sting had a hit with ‘Spread a little happiness’ in 1982.

Ellis’s music is melodic, sophisticated yet accessible, a style of popular music belonging firmly to the category of light music. Following in the steps of the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan, and the waltzes and polkas of the Strauss family, light music pieces were composed to appeal to a wide audience. This made them ideal for broadcast throughout the heyday of radio. Many light music compositions are familiar as theme music, and it is for this reason that *Coronation Scot* is so well known. From 1947 until 1968, it was the signature tune for the BBC Light Programme detective series *Paul Temple* and it is safe to say that it would have been heard by millions.

The locomotive *Coronation Scot* has an interesting story. Its arrival made a big impact, but in its short two-year operating span, very few people had the opportunity to travel on it. The 1930s saw remarkable advances in railway technology with faster speeds and better comfort for travellers resulting in intense competition between companies. *Coronation Scot* was designed to complete the 401 mile journey from London to Glasgow in six hours and 30 minutes. It stood out from the crowd with its distinctive blue livery with silver stripes, and luxurious accommodation, and was an immediate success with the public. An opportunity arose to show it off in the USA and as a result a set of coaches, accompanied by ‘Coronation’ class locomotive 6229 *Duchess of Hamilton* (masquerading as 6220 *Coronation*) travelled 3,000 miles around the US before being exhibited at the 1939 New York’s World Fair. However, within months the Second World War started, and the set had to be placed in storage in the USA. In the UK, the three original sets were placed in store where they remained until 1946 when they were repainted in conventional livery for general service.

Ellis wrote the *Coronation Scot* for Chappell’s Recorded Music Library in 1938 and it was recorded by Sidney Torch and the Queen’s Hall Light Orchestra. He was inspired by the rhythm of the train he travelled on between

Taunton and Paddington. This would have been the *Cornish Riviera Express*, but he settled instead for the name of the more prestigious train which was currently in the public eye.

The piece opens with the sound of a train whistle with loud chromatic chords, 'getting up steam' as is written in the score, the rhythm of the train is established by repeated accented chords, gradually speeding up until it reaches the familiar soaring melody on the strings. The journey continues replete with whistles, clanging bells and the occasional dissonant chord acting as a warning sign, until all quiets down and pizzicato strings bring the journey quietly to its end. Ellis was a master of both melody and orchestration, and it is the eminently hummable string tune that so effectively sums up an age of speed and luxury with the steam train in full flight.

Endnotes

- 1 Pat Jackson. *A Retake Please!: Night Mail to Western Approaches* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999): 24.
- 2 J B Priestley. *Rain Upon Godshill* (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1939).
- 3 GPO Film Unit (1933-1940). <http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/464254/index.html>
- 4 The original music to *Turksib* was written by the Soviet composer Vissarion Shebalin (1902-1963). The film was released by the British Film Institute in 2011 as part of *The Soviet Influence: From Turksib to Night Mail* with a newly commissioned soundtrack by Guy Bartell.
- 5 Scott Anthony. *Night Mail* (London: British Film Institute, 2007).
- 6 Anthony. *Night Mail*, 41.
- 7 Jackson, *A Retake Please!*, 25.
- 8 Donald Mitchell. *Britten and Auden in the Thirties: The Year 1936* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1981): 84.
- 9 The tea rooms Auden refers to are in Glasgow and Edinburgh respectively. Catherine Cranston (1849 – 1934) was an influential figure in the development of elegant high-quality tea rooms, some of these were designed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh.
- 10 Anthony, *Night Mail*, 84.

