

Postal Music Research Project

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1 Preface

This project is intended to explore associations between postal services and music, and primarily focuses on music written for the documentary films of the GPO Film Unit in the 1930s. The Unit's history has been documented by Ian Aitken, Forsyth Hardy, John Huntley and Paul Rotha among others. Without doubt, the most widely celebrated contribution to these films was by Benjamin Britten; this has been examined in some detail by several figures including Donald Mitchell and Philip Reed. With the exception of Walter Leigh, (whose involvement has been addressed by Chris Banks), the soundtracks for other films made by the Unit have largely been ignored until now. The current project allows an opportunity not only to consider the body of music created for the GPO through the Film Unit, but also to consider the significance of communication in a more global sense, whether through sound or text.

2 Acknowledgements

In terms of research into music with general (if at times tenuous) connections with postal matters, I am grateful for the cooperation of Nancy Pope, a curator at the Smithsonian's National Postal Museum in Washington DC, who has shared the outcome of a related project dating from 1995. My own research within the Library and Department of Portraits and Performance History (DPPH) of the Royal College of Music has thrown some light on items within Royal Mail's own archives (for which I should like to acknowledge the assistance of Dr Peter Horton, Reference Librarian and Oliver Davies, the Curator of the DPPH).

I also wish to thank Dr Paul Banks (Research Development Fellow, RCM) for sharing his insight both on Britten and on British documentary films. I am most grateful to Chris Banks (Curator of Music Manuscripts, British Library) for advice and for making available her research on Walter Leigh. I am indebted to Roy Douglas, whose personal recollections of personalities and conditions of the period have proved invaluable. I am also grateful to Paul Nicholson for his imagination and practical assistance in facilitating this link between music and post. Finally, I should like to thank Libby Buckley (Royal Mail Heritage Services) and her colleagues for their support, encouragement and assistance in this project.

3 Introduction

As the database demonstrates, much music exists that is either related to the postal service itself or has a postal theme of some kind. Some of this repertoire was indeed commissioned by the Royal Mail or its forebears, most notably the music written for the GPO Film Unit's documentary films of the 1930s. Connections between post and music reach considerably further back, however. Perhaps the supreme instance is Schubert's 'Die Post', from the song-cycle *Winterreise* of 1827. An English example is a song of 1855 by William Thomas Wrighton, entitled *The Postman's Knock*. This song, which apparently enjoyed popularity both in London theatres and in parlours and drawing rooms of the time, was dedicated to the great Victorian postal reformer, Sir Rowland Hill. The song's popularity is demonstrated by its publication history, as it continued to be published in various different formats up until at least 1895.¹ It seems that the success of this song persuaded Wrighton to follow it with a further postal reference: in 1857, he published *The lover's letter box*.

A measure of the significance of the postal service to a wide strata of Victorian society is the range of composers to have provided works with postal titles (and sometimes texts); these composers include music hall performers and directors (such as Frank Musgrave and Arthur Lloyd) and at the other end of the spectrum a Professor at the Royal College of Music, Alfred James Caldicott (1842-1897), whose piano piece *Her Majesty's Mail* was published in 1886. (This proved popular enough to be issued in versions for piano duet, septet and full orchestra). Caldicott, though best known for his cantatas, glees and operettas, was another composer to visit the mail theme on several different occasions: the song *Red Letter Days* dates from 1880 while *An Old Letter* was published in 1882. Arthur Lloyd's *The Postman* clearly belonged to the music hall tradition. Lloyd (1839-1904) had written plays and managed playhouses in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and London, and had a sufficiently high public reputation to enjoy the distinction of having his image printed on song sheets. The Galop was a genre which readily lent itself to the idea of postal delivery. Charles d'Albert composed *The Overland-Mail: Galop* for piano, while Frank Musgrave composed the *Limited Mail galop*. Musgrave had been Musical Director at the Royal Strand Theatre in 1865 and produced a large quantity of dance music before turning to operetta. A further instrumental piece is the *Postmen's Federation March* by A.E. Marshall. Such works may chiefly be regarded as curiosities for today's audiences, but nevertheless represent an important tradition in domestic entertainment.

¹ *The Postman's Knock* was originally published in London in 1855 as a song; it was republished in 1871; it was subsequently published as piano solo and piano duet in no. 46 of *Smallwood Home Treasures*, 1872; it was republished as no. 6 of *Smallwood Little Buds*, 1874 and finally republished in the *Second Series of Whittingham School Songs*, 1895.

4 The GPO Film Unit

The GPO Film Unit evolved from a division of the Empire Marketing Board (EMB) under the leadership of the director and producer John Grierson. The EMB had ceased to exist in 1933 and its film unit was transferred to the GPO at that point. Grierson's EMB films (such as *Drifters* of 1928) had been characterised by a distinctive social idealism, no doubt influenced partly by ideas originating in Eastern Europe. By portraying working-class life as fundamentally heroic, Grierson both advocated and encouraged social reform. In financial terms, however, the EMB had been less successful: its budget shrank from £10,000 to £6,000 in the years before it was subsumed into the GPO.

Two practical advantages of the GPO's patronage were the acquisition of larger premises² and of a British Visatone sound recording system. The latter was highly influential in artistic terms: despite its technical shortcomings (and the resultant limitations of sound quality), the system was integral to the Unit's artistic expression. It was at least partly with sound in mind that Grierson appointed the Brazilian director Alberto Cavalcanti to his staff in 1934. Cavalcanti had worked in French avant-garde film in the 1920s, and initially assumed responsibility for sound at the Unit. He was therefore a prime force behind the experimentation in sound that is such a distinctive feature of these films. The significance of sound as a communicative medium (rather than as mere commentary or accompaniment to the visual element) has been noted by Forsyth Hardy:

Earlier films like the Industrial Britain group were essentially silent films with commentaries added at the behest of the distributors. To have control of sound in their films meant a great deal to the directors. It added a new dimension to their experimentation. It also gave them freedom from the cramping conditions which applied to the use of music.³

Grierson's interest in sound was crucial to his creative role at the Unit and to his commissioning policy. According to Paul Rotha,

[Grierson] suggested that the complex use of sound stemmed from *Granton Trawler* and *Song of Ceylon* through *Coal Face* to *Night Mail*. This use of sound images represented noise at various levels of organisation and in various combinations of natural noises and orchestrated with musical effects, rhetoric recitation, poetic recitation as well as monologue and narration.⁴

This essentially amounted to an anticipation of the principles of *musique concrète* which itself achieved attention (if not notoriety) only in the 1950s in the field of electroacoustic music.

² The studios were housed at Bennett Park, Blackheath, in South East London, while the administrative office was at Soho Square, in the West End of London.

³ Forsyth Hardy, 'The G.P.O. Film Unit 1933-1940' (Edinburgh, October 1990, Copyright: The Post Office), 4

⁴ Paul Rotha, *Documentary Diary: An Informal History of the British Documentary Film, 1928-1939* (London, 1973), 276

Despite the support and commitment of the GPO, there were inevitably economic limitations to the Unit's ambitions, and this had both positive and negative implications for the use of sound and music. On the one hand, the British Visatone sound equipment appears to have been inferior in quality to that being used by some of the Unit's commercial competitors. Conversely, a reluctance or inability to pay for the rights to use existing recorded music resulted in an adventurous commissioning policy, favouring (at least in the early years) composers whose abilities had not yet been tested in this area. Grierson demanded absolute control over the Unit's soundtracks, and was shrewdly aware of such commercial considerations. Hardy recalls that Grierson stated that

[if we want] music we find it cheaper to have it written for us. If we want natural sound, the producer drives out and gets it. If we want to orchestrate sound we sit in the sound van and arrange the recording as we think best. If we want to play with sound images, or arrange choral effects, or in any way experiment, we have no one's permission to ask and no considerable overheads to worry about, because we do most of the work ourselves.⁵

Nevertheless, it was also for commercial reasons that many of the Unit's early films were made in both sound and silent formats (which allowed for a wider potential distribution). The short films were distributed in groups, the first of which was known as the 'Weather Forecast Group'. This was distributed by New Era Films, Ltd. and comprised the films *Weather Forecast*, *Spring on the Farm*, *Granton Trawler*, *Six-Thirty Collection*, *Cable Ship*, and *Windmill in Barbados*. These films were made in 1933-4 and their production history straddled the period during which the EMB was handed over to the GPO.

The new Unit's existence was relatively short but extremely productive. Between 1934 and 1940, over 120 films were made. The Unit was ultimately absorbed by the Ministry of Defence in 1940 as a result of the propaganda demands of the Second World War, subsequently becoming known as the Crown Film Unit. Because of the typically convoluted production schedule for such films, the early 1940s correspond to the early 1930s as films commenced by one body (in this case the GPO Film Unit) were completed or marketed under the auspices of another (in this case the Crown Film Unit).⁶

Grierson's ambitions periodically strayed beyond the means of the Unit. *Night Mail* (1936) resulted in a Select Committee enquiry which subsequently restricted the operations of the Unit to post office activities only and prohibited work for other institutions or organisations. This greater degree of institutional control was surely one of the reasons for Grierson's resignation in 1937. Certainly, the social element that had characterised such films as *Coal Face* and *Granton Trawler* became less pronounced in the later (post-Grierson) films of the Unit. Correspondingly, the adventurousness in commissioning work from young, untried composers waned after Grierson's departure.

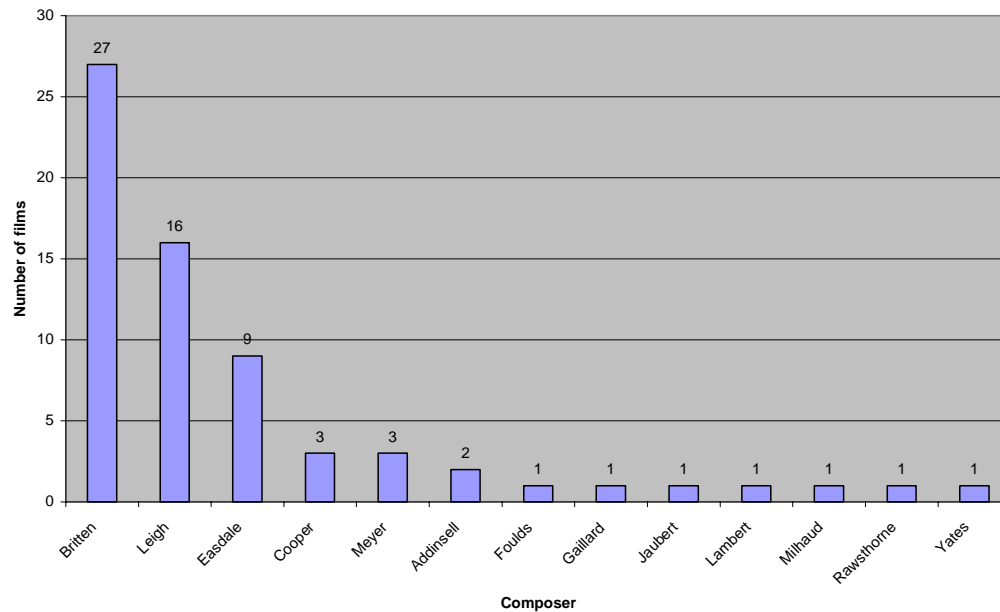
⁵ Forsyth Hardy, *op. cit.*, 4

⁶ *Men of the Lightship* (1940) is a case in point, as it was commissioned by the MoI from the GPO but ultimately credited to the Crown Film Unit. For the purposes of comprehensiveness, such examples are included in this project.

5 Composer selection

Of 121 films made (or proposed) by the GPO Film Unit, 91 used music of some kind. Of these, 66 contained music written or arranged especially for them. Figure 1 shows the breakdown of these films between their respective composers.

Figure 1: Film scores per composer



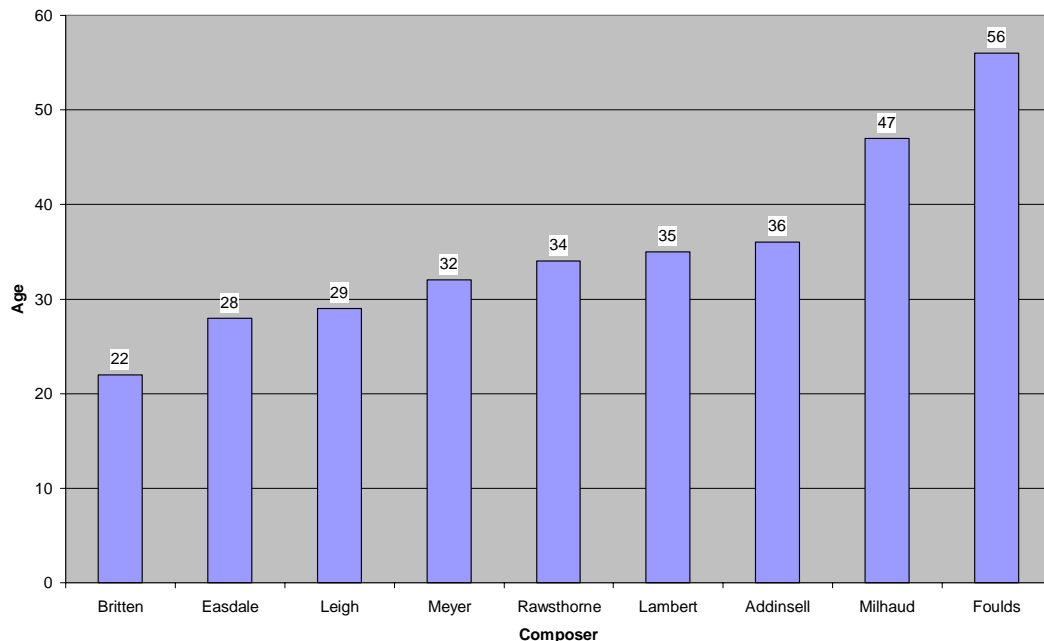
Thus, Benjamin Britten and Walter Leigh were by far the most prolific contributors to the GPO films. Moreover, both composers were involved in the earlier films of the Unit. Kurt London recognised the significance of both these figures as early as 1940:

Benjamin Britten and Walter Leigh have proved themselves real experts in forming the musical elements of a film into universal representations of sound. Their film music transcends the score of musical notes and absorbs within itself the sound of real life (in a stylised form), whether it be of single voices, of choruses, or of natural noises, by turning it to music and giving it rhythm.⁷

This endorsement appears to reflect primarily their contributions to films such as *Song of Ceylon* (1934), *Coal Face* (1935) and *Night Mail*. Britten was the only composer to have appeared on the list of ‘unestablished staff’ as an employee of the Unit (in 1936). Figure 2 shows that most of the composers were relatively youthful, and particularly so in the case of those involved in the early films. Britten (1913-1976) was by far the youngest as he was 22 years of age at the time of his first film (*Coal Face*), whereas Brian Easdale (1909-1995) was 28 at the time of *Job in a Million* and Leigh (1905-1942) was 29 at the time of the ‘Weather Forecast’ group.

⁷ Kurt London, *Film Music: a summary of the characteristic features of its history, aesthetics, technique; and possible developments* (London, 1936), 221-2

Figure 2: Age of composer at first film



As the Unit became more established, the average age of commissioned composers rose, marked by the involvement of figures such as Darius Milhaud (1892-1974) and Richard Addinsell (1904-1977) in 1939 and 1940 respectively.⁸ It is also notable that the composers of later films (such as Constant Lambert) were significantly better known at the time than their predecessors. The involvement of continental European composers such as Marius Gaillard, Maurice Jaubert, Ernst Meyer, and Milhaud undoubtedly owes much to Cavalcanti's connections and influence.⁹ Altogether, the commissioning policy of the Unit appears strikingly enlightened.

Several films featured music contributed by more than one composer. *Weather Forecast* (1934) is a case in point, with 'Title Music' by Denis Arundel, and a 'Fox Trot' and 'End Music' by Walter Leigh.¹⁰ Similarly, *Men of the Alps* (1937) contained music 'specially composed' by Britten (in fact an arrangement of Rossini) as well as music 'specially composed' by Walter Leigh.¹¹ Although this film was made between September and October 1936, the music cue sheet was posted to the SFMB only on 13 January 1938. It appears that the film was edited after Britten had resigned from the Unit, and for this reason additional music was provided by Leigh.

In some of the later films, the sound track appears to have been assembled on an *ad hoc* basis. For example, in *Mony a Pickle* (1938), each of

⁸ It is noticeable from Figure 2 that the older composers tended also to be involved in later films of the Unit. John Foulds composed his film in 1936 and is clearly an exception in terms of age.

⁹ It is possible that this also accounts for the use of Ibert's *Divertissement* in *Love on the Wing*. This matter is further discussed in Section 11.

¹⁰ PRO (INF 6/308).

¹¹ PRO (INF 6/1004).

five sequences had a different director. It is unsurprising therefore, that music was derived from different sources. Music by Britten was taken from *The King's Stamp* (1935) and was combined with work by Victor Yates and John Foulds.¹²

¹² PRO (INF 6/289). This film (as well as the implications of such sectionalism) is discussed further in Section 12.

6 Contracts

Very little production documentation survives from the early films. The only surviving contract from a GPO film is that of Addinsell for *Men of the Lightship* (1940). It appears, however, that this was drawn up by his agents, rather than by the Unit itself. The correspondence between Addinsell and the Production Manager of the Unit reveals that initial negotiations took place over the telephone. The letter of 6 May 1940 reads as follows:

Dear Mr Addinsell,

In accordance with our conversation of to-day's date, it is hereby agreed that for the sum of Thirty five guineas (£36.15.0) you will compose all music for the film provisionally entitled "LIGHTSHIP" and that all copyright of such works remains invested in the Crown.

I may add, however, that we shall have no objection to your Publishing or making any other such use of the aforesaid music subject to our approval in writing.

I enclose a copy of this letter which I shall be obliged if you will sign and return signifying your agreement with the terms and conditions stated herein.

Yours faithfully

[Initialled GHB for George Brown]

Production Manager.

It is clear then that standard procedure was for musical copyright to be retained by the Crown on behalf of the GPO. The composer was merely given a licence to use the music for purposes which would not interfere with the promotion of the film. However, Addinsell's reply of 15 May 1940 to the Unit sets out rather more stringent conditions (see following page):

Dear Sirs,

I have pleasure in confirming the terms of the agreement reached between you and my agents, Christopher Mann Limited, in connection with my services on your film production provisionally entitled "LIGHTSHIP", as follows:-

1. You engage me and I accept the engagement to compose such musical compositions as you may require with a view to their incorporation in the above mentioned motion picture provisionally entitled "LIGHTSHIP".
2. The engagement shall commence from the date hereof and shall continue until the completion of my work hereunder, but not after the 30th May, 1940.
3. As a consideration for my services hereunder you will pay me the sum of Thirty-five guineas (£36.15.0) which shall be payable as to Seventeen and one half guineas (£18.7.6) now and Seventeen and one half guineas (£18.7.6) within three days of the completion of my work hereunder, but not after the 30th May, 1940.
4. If after the music to be provided has been agreed upon between the Musical Director and the Director and/or Producer of the Film [and] it shall be changed or altered or added to at the request of the Producer or Director, then the music so written shall be considered to be outside the terms of this Agreement and shall be subject to a separate Agreement.
5. I will collaborate with the Producer and/or Director of the said film and will use my best endeavours to satisfy their requirements.
6. I hereby agree to grant to you the licence to use my music for the purpose of recording the sound track of the above named film but I reserve the right to publish or cause to be published in the form of sheet music or otherwise than in connection with the exhibition and distribution of the picture any original music composed by me and to receive and retain for my own benefit all monies paid after the release of the picture or with the consent of the Producers (such consent not to be unreasonably withheld). All copies of sheet music so published shall announce the fact that the music from your picture.
7. Notwithstanding anything herein contained it is hereby expressly agreed and declared that I reserve absolutely for all countries, the right of performing in public by any means whatsoever the musical works which are the subject of this Contract, and it is also hereby agreed and declared that such reservation of performing rights shall be deemed to be incorporated in any contract of service or for services under which any or all of such musical works may be written.
8. My name shall appear on every print of the above picture as Composer of the Music.
9. All sums due to me from you under this Agreement shall be paid to Christopher Mann Limited of 40, Piccadilly, W1 and the receipt of the said Christopher Mann Limited shall be a full and valid acknowledgement and discharge therefor.

Yours faithfully,
[Signed, Richard Addinsell]

It is significant that Addinsell specified that he should be acknowledged as the composer of the music in film credits as this had apparently not previously

been guaranteed by the Unit (although such acknowledgement would appear to have been common practice). Furthermore, Addinsell was not content merely with a licence to publish music with the Unit's consent; conversely, he turned the argument around, and effectively demanded that the Unit should relinquish their right to publish the music unless 'in connection with the exhibition and distribution' of the film. The Unit appears not to have disputed Addinsell's conditions as there is no further correspondence on this matter. In this case however, a contract exists for the Musical Director (Muir Mathieson), again drawn up by Addinsell's agents (Christopher Mann Ltd.).¹³ Once again, there is a specific stipulation that Mathieson should be acknowledged in his role as Musical Director: 'On each print of the films mentioned above, you will give Mr Mathieson credit as Musical Director'.

It emerges from correspondence in the same year between the GPO Film Unit and Gaillard that copyright for his score for the film *Forty Million People* (1939) similarly belonged to the Crown. A letter from Ernest Hudson of the Unit to Gaillard informed him that:

as in the case of all music composed specially for our films, copyright is vested in the British Government. Normally our previous consent is required before any use is made of such music but it is agreed that you may use the FORTY MILLION PEOPLE music in any way you desire (except in films) without asking for specific permission.¹⁴

Hudson continued that 'with regard to performing rights, these rest with you. You are also at liberty to publish the music if you so desire.'¹⁵ The reason for Hudson's correspondence subsequently emerges: Gaillard himself had not made any request to use his own music but rather the BBC had asked for permission 'to record for possible future broadcasting their programme "Health of the Nation", in which a short extract from the music of FORTY MILLION PEOPLE is included.' In fact, it emerges that the original contract with Gaillard was purely verbal: a letter from S.J. Fletcher of the Unit to the BBC states that 'our arrangement with Mr Gaillard is a verbal one, and he understands that the music is to be used in our film and for your broadcast.'¹⁶

A subsequent letter from the Copyright Section of the BBC asks whether the recording could be used for other programmes. 'For the purposes of our broadcasts we recorded the music on two discs and we should now like to process these discs for use in other programmes.'¹⁷ Hudson replied on behalf of the Unit (which by this stage had become the Crown Film Unit) to confirm that 'copyright in the music composed by Mr F.M. Gaillard is Crown property and there is no objection to its use by your Corporation in the way you suggest.'¹⁸ Arguably, this usage was by now unrelated to the film itself,

¹³ The agreement in fact covers three proposed films: these are *Squadron 992*, *Lightship*, and *Able Seaman*. The latter appears to have been a working title for the film ultimately released as *Merchant Seamen*, whose music was composed by Constant Lambert.

¹⁴ E. Hudson, letter of 28 May 1940 to M. Gaillard (INF 5/57)

¹⁵ Gaillard's interest in publication possibilities is discussed in Section 11.

¹⁶ S.J. Fletcher, letter to BBC, 29 April 1939 (INF 5/57)

¹⁷ M. Candler, letter to GPO Film Unit, 10 February 1942 (INF 5/57)

¹⁸ E. Hudson, letter to M. Candler of the BBC Copyright Section, 5 March 1942 (INF 5/57)

and yet the principle of copyright remaining vested in the Crown went unchallenged.

A letter of 1938 from the Performing Right Society to the GPO Film Unit reveals that some [unidentified] disputed practice had previously taken place:

With further reference to our letter of 28th July 1936, our attention has been drawn to the fact that certain members of this Society have been required to enter into a contract of service with a film producer which does not contain a proviso that the performing right in works written under the contract shall remain the writer's property. We must therefore inform you that the Society's constitution provides that no member shall enter into any contract under which he may be required to write, compose or arrange musical works of the type controlled by the Society without inserting in such contract an express provision reserving to himself the performing right in such works.¹⁹

Walter continues by stipulating that

in these circumstances, we must ask you to be good enough to note that no member of this society, nor of an affiliated foreign Society, is entitled to enter into a contract of service with a film producer under which he may be required to write, compose or arrange musical works of the type controlled by the Society, unless there is inserted in such contract an express provision reserving to the employee the performing right in musical works written under the contract.²⁰

No reply from the GPO Film Unit survives, but it is possible that this exchange had encouraged them to adopt the more formal position that existed in 1940 to the benefit of Addinsell. By 1943, serious doubts were being aired regarding the issue of copyright. A memo circulated within the Crown Film Unit (the successor to the GPO Film Unit) revealed that their opinion by that stage was that copyright could only be owned by the production unit where the composer was a salaried employer thereof:

Under the copyright Act 1911, Part 1, section 1(2) the owner of the copyright in a musical work has the sole right of performing or authorising the performance of the work in public. The primary owner of the copyright is the composer, but in practically every case, the composer or his publishers or both are members of the PERFORMING RIGHT SOCIETY and that Society is "invested with powers to exercise and enforce on their behalf all rights and remedies in respect of public performances of their works and to grant licences and collect fees for the same." I believe a production unit would acquire Performing Right in music specially composed for it, only if the composer were retained at a regular salary for the purpose of composing music.²¹

¹⁹ H.L. Walter (Secretary of The Performing Right Society), letter of 8 November 1938 to the GPO Film Unit (INF 6/279)

²⁰ H.L. Walter, *loc. cit.*

²¹ INF 1/204, Ministry of Information Memo 5 October 1943 from Mr E. Hudson to Mr Nunn May.

It appears that the latter condition had only been met by the GPO Film Unit in the case of Britten. The Unit's assumption that copyright was automatically vested in the Crown would thus seem to be erroneous.²²

All surviving production sheets show details of whether and when the music cue sheet was posted to the SFMB (Sound Film Music Bureau, Ltd.).²³ In several cases, the date of clearance for music rights is subsequent to the date of the film's release. For example, the music cue sheet for the film *Rainbow Dance* (1936) was posted to the SFMB on 31 October 1936 and the music rights were cleared on 6 January 1937, but the film had already been released in November 1936.²⁴ Music rights were cleared only for the use of pre-recorded items. In this case, for example, the 'Title Music' was by Walter Leigh, but no notification to the SFMB was necessary for that, as it had apparently been 'specially composed'.

A similar example was that of *North Sea* (1938), which was 'finished and censored' on 26 April 1938, and distributed by Associated Film Distributors for a period of 18 months from 1 June 1938. This was before musical rights were cleared (which was on 19 August 1938).²⁵ The film *Love on the Wing* (1938) used Ibert's *Divertissement* (from *Un chapeau de paille d'Italie* of 1929–30) as background music, but it appears from the production sheet that music rights were not acquired for this.²⁶ Thus, it appears that contractual issues were not taken as seriously by the Unit as was the case with the Crown Film Unit.

²² A draft of a 'suitable form of contract' was sent on 28 July 1944 by G.H. Hatchman (Assistant General Manager of the Performing Rights Society) to E. Hudson of the MoI. This was in an attempt to standardise MoI procedure. It does not seem that such an attempt was made during the history of the GPO Film Unit. INF 1/204.

²³ The SFMB's address at this time was 9a Sackville Street, Piccadilly, London, W1.

²⁴ PRO (INF 6/320). The film included a 'calypso jazz' number entitled 'Tony's Wife', by an unidentified composer from H.M.V. Record G.V. 37.

²⁵ PRO (INF 6/294). Meyer composed music for this film, which also used the following items: 'Gimme a Break, Baby' by Franklyn (Decca, 02192-1) and the Hymn 'Eternal Father' as a 'vocal bkgd'.

²⁶ PRO (INF 6/317).

7 Economics

Fees varied considerably between composers for GPO films. Britten had been employed on 2 September 1935 as Musical Director at a salary of £5 per week.²⁷ In 1936 he was re-employed at a 'salary [of] £8 p.w. or 30/- a day when working on a daily basis'.²⁸ In fact, the same remuneration was paid at the same time to a cameraman.²⁹ This probably reflects the rarity of specialist camera skills at the time rather than any lowliness of the composer's position. Britten's employment was described as 'temporary employment for composition of music for Calendar of the Year, Fishing Village and Road Transport films'.³⁰ The arrangement was terminated on 3 November 1936.

No figures have survived for the following few years, but in 1939, Ernst Meyer was paid £20 for the music for *British Made*.³¹ Maurice Gaillard was paid £50 for *Forty Million People* in the same year.³² A year later, Addinsell was paid £36.15.0 for his score for *Men of the Lightship* (1940).³³ For *Merchant Seamen* (1940), Constant Lambert was paid £65 for composing the score and for conducting the recording session. According to the Unit's letter of employment for Lambert, 'we discussed by telephone the question of your fee for composing the music for our Merchant Navy film and for conducting the orchestra at the recording session. It was agreed that you would undertake this work for a total fee of £65'.³⁴ In fact, the original budget had been for £60 for composer's fee and £11 for a musical director, so the Unit benefited from Lambert's joint role. A later letter within the department gives a breakdown of the exact length of Lambert's contribution as used on screen. This was as follows:³⁵

Reel 1	Music by Constant Lambert	266 secs.
Reel 2	Music by Constant Lambert	130 secs.
Reel 3	Music by Constant Lambert	110 secs.

The total length therefore was 506 seconds, or 8 minutes and 26 seconds. Lambert's earnings for his joint role thus work out at £7.71 (in metric currency) per minute of music used. For the originally estimated figure of £60 for the composition alone, the rate falls to £7.12 (again in metric currency). Such a method of calculating fees may seem artificial, but duration in fact emerges as

²⁷ Report, P3699/39, formerly File no. 5, 37582/39

²⁸ Report, POST 3699/39, formerly 37,582/39, File no. 1, 7 October 1939

²⁹ The cameraman was A. Jeakin.

³⁰ Report, *loc cit.*

³¹ According to estimate of 7 June 1939. INF (5/62)

³² According to GPO Film Unit memo of 4 March 1939, INF (5/57). In fact, £100 had originally been budgeted for 'composer and copyist's fees' according to a letter of 18 October 1938 from A.G. Highet of the Public Relations Department of the GPO to G.C. North of the Ministry of Health. It is not known who was responsible for copying parts, but it is unlikely that this activity would have been generously remunerated. Most of the remaining £50 then, was probably absorbed into the general budget or used as a contingency. An extra expense was that of paying for Gaillard's travel from Paris (£2.17.6) and presumably for his accommodation.

³³ Letter of 6 May 1940 from George Brown of the GPO Film Unit to Addinsell. INF (5/66).

³⁴ Letter from S.J. Fletcher to Constant Lambert, dated 19 July 1940.

³⁵ Memo of 2 April 1941 from Miss Wright to Mr Hudson (of the MoI).

an important consideration in subsequent negotiations between the Musicians' Union and the employers of the GPO Film Unit's successor, the Mol.

A meeting was called in 1945 (well after the demise of the GPO Unit) by the Arrangers, Composers & Copyists Section of the Musician' Union with the Mol to discuss the employment of composers for documentary films.

After consideration of the valuable contribution which specially composed music can and does make to films in general, and to documentary films in particular, the question of adequate remuneration for composers was debated; and it was decided to ask you to receive a deputation to put forward the conclusions reached at the meeting. The elected deputation consists of: Dr Vaughan Williams, Dr Hubert Clifford, Messrs. Francis Chagrin and Roy Douglas....³⁶

This meeting was duly arranged and three resolutions were passed. These were as follows:

- 1 That the unit for computing minimum rates should be a fee per minute of commissioned music.
 - 2 That the minimum fee for official documentary films per minute of commissioned music should be five guineas with a minimum of 25 guineas to include composition and orchestration, and that all rights, apart from the licence to use the music in the film for which it was composed, be retained by the composer.
 - 3 That a lower fee be allowed in the case of those writing film music for the first time; namely, three guineas per minute with a minimum of fifteen guineas.
- I understand that, by an oversight, the latter half of the second resolution was not read to you. I should like to explain that the Performing Right Society does not allow its composer-members to cede any other rights than those mentioned above.....³⁷

Thus, Lambert's fee for *Merchant Seamen* had been above the later-proposed minimum fee, but the conditions of his contract were not in his favour. At the time of the first meeting between the Mol and the Musicians' Union, relations were amicable, but an acrimonious disagreement was to emerge in prolonged subsequent correspondence. The Crown Film Unit consulted Muir Mathieson (by this stage their Musical Advisor) for advice on this matter. Mathieson was reluctant to reply but eventually did so, rejecting the notion that music should be paid for 'by the minute'. Because of Mathieson's earlier involvement in GPO films, his argument is quoted here:

What is worth paying for is not "music" by the bar, or the so-many notes, or the minute of time, but the quality of a musician's mind brought to bear on the problems of a film, his powers of perception and expression, and his skill as a craftsman. One apt musical idea, fitting the mood of the film and skilfully

³⁶ INF 1/204, letter of 16 April 1945 from Phil Cardew (President of Arrangers, Composers & Copyists Section of the Musician' Union) to Jack Beddington, Esq. (Director of the Films Division, Mol).

³⁷ INF 1/204, letter of 24 May 1945 from Phil Cardew to Jack Beddington.

executed, though in terms of time on the sound track it may occupy less than a minute, is “worth” far more than twenty minutes of uninspired composition.³⁸

Moreover, Mathieson considered arranging to be a potentially challenging task. His aesthetic position on arrangement was as follows:

I do not think it is possible to distinguish between “original composition” and what you refer to as “adaptation of existing music”. When it comes to writing music for a film there may well be as much hard, tedious, painstaking work in the latter as in the former, and in my opinion the minimum wage scale should apply equally to both.

A further dispute arose when the MoI consulted the BBC regarding common practice in paying composers. According to MoI documentation, ‘current rates paid by the BBC work out at around 3 guineas per minute. Rates have gone up in recent years, and they would now hardly offer anybody a fee amounting to less than 3 guineas a minute.’³⁹ The MoI’s source at the BBC was a Miss Candler (the Director of the BBC Copyright Department), who felt that ‘even a beginner in films could fairly be paid at the 3 guineas rate, but she did not see why a beginner should be raised out of the lower class as soon as he has written music for one film.’⁴⁰ Miss Candler felt that there should be four classes of composers:

- A) Composers who have not yet made much of a name for themselves: 3 guineas.
- B) established composers who might be the largest class - including such composers as C. Armstrong Gibbs - four guineas.
- C) fairly eminent composers such as Alwyn and Addinsell - five guineas.
- D) very eminent composers such as Dr Vaughan Williams: special fees to be agreed in individual instances.

The MoI exploited this opinion to suggest that a rate of 3 guineas should apply for film work, which precipitated an argument over the respective difficulties of film and radio work. It would seem, then, that the rates paid to Britten and his colleagues in the mid-1930s by the GPO were relatively low for the type of work they were expected to produce, despite their relative inexperience.

Some measure of music’s status within films may be gained from comparing the costs of the music to those of the total film. For *British Made*, the following figures applied:⁴¹

Sound recording music (1500 feet)	£18 15 –
Orchestra at £2. 2. per person per session (3 hour)	£21 (one session)
Music Composer. Dr Meyer	£20

The total cost of the film was £944.0.3.⁴² Thus, the musical costs (including recording costs) amounted to just over 6% of the film’s total cost. (The initial

³⁸ INF 1/204, letter of 6 August 1945 from Muir Mathieson replies to Nunn May.

³⁹ INF 1/204, note of O.C. Watson of the MoI Finance Department 17 November 1945.

⁴⁰ INF 1/204, note of O.C. Watson of the MoI Finance Department 17 November 1945.

⁴¹ INF 5/62, taken from Estimate of 7 June 1939.

⁴² INF 5/62, according to a memo to Mr Primrose from Hudson of 26 February 1940.

budget for this film had been £692. For the film, *Forty Million People*, an altogether more generous budget existed⁴³:

Stock including all processing charges	£965
Music score and copyists [sic] fees	£100
Orchestra	£100
Salaries	£550
Travelling and subsistence expenses	£130
Location expenses	£100
Sound recording costs	£450
Contingencies including Post Office	
Overhead charges	£1105
[at this point the letter is annotated in pencil]	£2935
	£400 contingency
	<u>£705</u> PO overheads
	£3500

On the basis of these figures, the music amounted to 5.7% of the total cost. This, however, excludes the costs of sound recording as the quoted figures do not itemise such costs. In fact, the composer's fee in this instance amounted to only £50, although extra payments were made to Gaillard to cover his travelling expenses and copyist's fees: £17.5.9d was paid to Gaillard 'in respect of his expenses incurred on three trips from Paris to London', and a memo requests that 'in addition he should be paid £4 in respect of copyist's fees, making a total payment to him of £21.5.9d.'⁴⁴ In fact, Gaillard also conducted the orchestra for the recording session, but no mention is made of any further fee to cover this service. A Rev. A.J. Klaiber of Upper Holloway Methodist Church, Holloway Road was paid five guineas 'in respect of his services in connection with the shooting of the Grandfathers' Club.' This payment was for the singing of traditional music for the film. Finally, members of the BBC North Regional Orchestra were paid £3.3- each for their recording of Gaillard's music. (This was a higher than usual rate, on account of the proposed use of this sound track for a BBC radio documentary).

For the film *Men of the Lightship* the entire cost of the film was £2500, and the music itself cost £160 (inclusive of recording costs). This represents 6.4% of the film's total cost. The following table represents a breakdown of the musical costs:⁴⁵

Full cost of Musical Recording for 'Lightship'

1 session of 18 Players @ £2.2.-.	£37.16.0.
1 session of 12 Players @ £2.2.-.	£25.4.0.
Composer	£36.15.0.
Musical Director	£12.0.0.
Copying	£7.0.0.
Porterage	£4.0.0.
Hire of Theatre	£30.0.0.

⁴³ INF 5/57, taken from a letter of 18 October 1938 from A.G. Highet of the Public Relations Department of the GPO to G.C. North of the Ministry of Health.

⁴⁴ INF 5/57, Memo from S. Fletcher dated 15 May 1939.

⁴⁵ INF 5/66, production documentation.

Phone calls, etc.	10.0.
Petrol and oil for van	10.0
	<hr/>
	£153.15.0
Contingencies	<u>£6.5.0</u>
Total	£160.0.0.

However, *Men of the Lightship* was to make a profit for its makers (by then the MoI): its topicality ensured that there was much demand from cinemas. By 17 August 1940, 1652 bookings had been made for the film at a rental of £3382.10.0.⁴⁶ By 18 September 1940, 2366 bookings had been made, making a rental of £4047.10.0 and a profit over £1500.

The most expensive of the GPO films was *Night Mail*. The original production budget was £2000 but the final cost was £3546. This resulted in an investigation by the Accountant General's Department.⁴⁷ Another production that ran over budget was a film with the working title *BBC Television Film* (1939). This was ultimately cancelled owing to a dispute with the BBC over excessive cost. At the time of cancellation, no music had yet been commissioned. However, the singers Jack Buchanan and Frances Day had been already been contracted to appear in 'a revue' in the film. The cost of the revue was estimated at £100 for the orchestra, £100 for royalties and £50 for the (unspecified) composer. Frances Day's fee for one day was to have been £20.⁴⁸ This eclipses many of the composer's fees for these films.

Despite Grierson's views,⁴⁹ the costs of using recordings of previously composed works for background music was generally less expensive than commissioning specially composed music. For the film *Her Last Trip* (1939), the sound track included an excerpt from Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance March no. 1* as well as the 'Barcarolle' from Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann* and several Mediterranean folk-songs. A licence in from the SFMB cost £6 and 4 shillings. (The Licence covered distribution only the British Isles). A further licence from the SFMB (costing 24 guineas) allowed the GPO Film Unit to use actual recordings of these works (all on the HMV label). For the use of the record of Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance March* for 'dubbing', the licence fee was £4 and 4 shillings (paid to The Gramophone Co. Ltd.). For the recording of the work, the licence fee was £1 (paid to the Mechanical-Copyright Protection Society, Ltd.). The total licence fees paid for recordings used in this film amounted to £31.8.0.⁵⁰ This equates to about a fifth of the cost of *Men of the Lightship*.

⁴⁶ INF 5/66, according to a letter from Ben Henry (General Manager, Associated British Film Distributors) to Sidney Bernstein (MoI) of 17 August 1940.

⁴⁷ *The Post Office Film and Library Catalogue* (GPO, 1994/5), 31.

⁴⁸ INF 2/???, The undated typed balance sheet was probably drawn up in early June 1939. A report on the causes of the cancellation is dated 6/06/39. Production had started on 19 May 1939 and the final shooting took place on 25 May 1939.

⁴⁹ Quoted on page 7

⁵⁰ PRO (INF 6/1000), The GPO Film Unit was not able to ascertain copyright status in the *Valse Lento*, *Amor Gitano*, *Taksim Surnaki* or the *Hpak eiotikoe Nentoza He*. The SFMB Licence was dated 2 February 1940 (SFMB Ref. No. S12735).

8 Working conditions

Early on in the history of the Unit, composers had the opportunity to work very closely with the directors (as in the case of *Night mail*, for example). It seems that later on, however, the musical (and indeed sound) considerations of the films were less integral to the end product. Few, if any composers after Britten had the luxury of working closely with the director or of any involvement in the editing process. Britten had had a comprehensive involvement in *Coal Face* and *Night Mail*.

Music was commissioned for certain films that were not completed. For example, *The New Operator* was originally made as a silent film by the EMB Unit, and a score was written by Britten that was recorded for the projected sound version but never used as this was not completed.⁵¹ Similarly, *Sorting Office* featured a sound-track by Britten but the film was never released.⁵² The film *God's Chillun* likewise featured a soundtrack by Britten but was not released at the time.⁵³ Although most of the music for this film was composed between September and November 1935, the score was revised in January 1938 and the soundtrack recorded on 8 January 1938.

The *Line to Tschierva Hut* was similarly composed between September and November 1936, but the music cue sheet was only posted to the S.F.M.B. on 12 January 1938.⁵⁴ There was therefore a considerable delay between composition and release in this instance. This, however, was an exception, as most films were made before the music was composed. According to the composer and arranger Roy Douglas, composers seldom had a chance to view films before composing the music. 'Occasionally we had a chance to see the "rushes", but mostly, things were done in a great hurry.'⁵⁵ It appears then, that the time and opportunities allowed to Leigh and Britten for editing soundtracks for films such as *Song of Ceylon* and *Night Mail* was exceptional, and that the commercial pressures of the Unit in its later years militated against such painstaking artistic collaboration.

⁵¹ PRO (INF 6/291). The silent version had been made in 1934 and the film sound track was recorded on 1 Oct 1935.

⁵² Britten Pears Library, BPL - ID: 2-9300829.

⁵³ This film was produced under the working title 'Negroes'. Britten-Pears Library, BPL - ID: 2-9300829.

⁵⁴ PRO (INF 6/284).

⁵⁵ Interview with the author, April 2003.

9 Benjamin Britten

There is some dispute as to Britten's (1913-1976) introduction to the Unit. According to Paul Rotha, Grierson had asked the RCM if they had 'a bright young student who could write a little incidental film music for a forthcoming film.'⁵⁶ However, as Walter Leigh's widow recalled, the older composer had originally been engaged to compose the music for *Night Mail*, but had lacked sufficient time:

Actually Walter Leigh had been asked to do it but even though he agreed, he had finally to accept some theatre work which was infinitely more lucrative. I clearly recall him setting out to see Grierson (or Wright, or who?) to tell him that he could not do the job. He did not feel he was letting them down as he was going to recommend a most brilliant and talented young man, Britten in fact.⁵⁷

In fact, Britten's first film was not *Night Mail* but *Coal Face*. Kurt London wrote of *Coal Face* that

Britten formed a unity of music, words spoken in chorus, and stylised noises. It is astonishing to observe how, with the most scanty material, using only a piano and a speaking chorus, he can make us dispense gladly with realistic sounds. This stylisation makes a much stronger impression than a normal musical accompaniment. The commentator's explanations are cut to extreme brevity and limited to such information as by its context may knit the connection between the sound-groups still more closely together. The atmosphere of the dark world of the work in the mines, the grim monotony of the miner's hard life, but, notwithstanding, the vital importance of that work, exclude any lyrical feeling. The rhythms of this life are hard; hard likewise is the music and its interweaving with the speaking choruses. The general atmosphere of the film is dark, and its music neither makes it brighter nor does it underline the shadows superfluously. In a word, the power-ratio between picture and music is always most ideally balanced.⁵⁸

Thus, the significance of Britten's work was established and acknowledged virtually as soon as the film was released. *Coal Face* opens with male and female chorus, piano, cymbals and timpani. The opening commentary is accompanied by a rising chromatic line from the piano. As statistics are monotonously recited, the chorus re-emerges, as if to counteract the inhuman nature of the employment. As the voice fades out, percussion rhythm and spoken chorus rise in volume. The piano is heard in low register as working conditions are described. As the miners eat, an eerie humming chorus penetrates the gloom. The description of machinery is accompanied by an ominous side drum. The startling statistic of four miners being killed every working day is marked by a brief outburst from the chorus. As the miner's shift ends, a rising passage depicts the rising lift cage. As the cage emerges, a

⁵⁶ Rotha, op. cit. 122; Rotha quotes a letter of 15 July 1970 from Britten.

⁵⁷ Benjamin Britten, *Letters from a Life: the selected letters and diaries of Benjamin Britten 1913-1976*, vol. 1, 388

⁵⁸ John Huntley, 'The GPO Film Unit', *British Film Music* (London, 1947) p. 102; quoted from Kurt London, *Film Music*, London, 1936.

dazzling (and apparently acoustically-enhanced) piano tremolo is heard. Women's voices are heard in a more tonal setting as housing conditions are discussed. For the transport commentary the side drum is again heard. Even for horses' hooves, the rhythmic impact is acute and integrated within the larger structural schema. When statistics of coal for industry are recited we hear a type of *musique concrète*. The line 'there was a miner' is an appropriately heroic chorus with which to end this remarkable film.

Not all Britten's contributions to GPO productions were quite so enthusiastically received, however; for example, a piece in the journal *Film User* states that the film *The King's Stamp* (1935) 'has... a score by Benjamin Britten; one says guiltily but confidently that this is not one of its better points.'⁵⁹ This seems a harsh judgement. Whilst the film may not have aged as well as *Coal Face* or *Night Mail*, the score is nevertheless innovative and compelling. Britten's soundtrack opens with a melody in unison and later in bare fifths in the piano part with sparse woodwind and side drum accompaniment. The artist's descent down stairs is shown by a descending diatonic passage on the piano. Mostly, however, the piano part is challengingly dissonant. Bitonality is employed in the clarinet and flute dialogue. The intricate editing of the film and soundtrack results in numerous visual correspondences: for example, as the postman walks away from the artist's apartment block, his footsteps are comically synchronised with the piano chords. In the 'Lithograph' scene, the piano part features lean, open fifth chords: this sparse texture is reminiscent of Copland's style in his *Piano Variations* of 1930. For the reference to Queen Victoria, a pastiche of nineteenth-century piano music is heard, complete with some gentle ornamentation. As the industrial revolution is mentioned in the commentary, the underlying repeated note theme is appropriately heard in bare fifths. The scene relating to Rowland Hill is characterised by piccolo, piano and side drum. The piano predominates in this film: there appears to be a greater proportion of solo piano writing here than in any other GPO film.

Night Mail enjoyed an immediately enthusiastic reception, and the significance of the sound track within the film appears to have been quickly understood, as may be seen from the 'Film Society' Programme for the film:

This is presented as a new experiment in sound. A very simple visual band was taken and an attempt to build up by the use of natural sound, music and chorus, a film oratorio. The usual method of speaking a commentary to a background of music was avoided and commentary and music were composed together.... To this foreground of sound were added a recitative chorus of male voices and a choir of male and female voices. The recitative chorus was used to fill out, by suggestion, the direct statement of the commentary. The choir was used to create atmosphere. The poem was sung by the female voices on the return of the miners to the surface and was written by the poet W.H. Auden for the film.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ *Film User* (April, 1965)

⁶⁰ Paul Rotha, *op. cit.*, 131

According to Rotha, *Night Mail* not only enjoyed a wide 'a critical success' but also had 'a considerable showing in public cinemas through ABFD [Associated British Film Distributors].'⁶¹ The importance not only of this exposure but more importantly of the critical attention was no doubt appreciated by the relatively inexperienced Britten, especially after the release of *Coal Face* which – according to Rotha – had very little critical comment 'except from within the Unit itself'.⁶² It appears that the collaborative nature of the Unit has been underestimated in subsequent perception. According to Rotha, 'Cavalcanti's fertile imagination contributed much to the elaborate sound track' and, although Britten had sole credit for the music, Grierson remembers that Walter Leigh had many original ideas, especially for the *musique concrète*....⁶³

For *The Saving of Bill Blewitt*, very little music exists: there are colourful title and ending sections with harp glissandi and compound time signatures. The textural extravagance of these short excerpts seems quite at odds with Britten's style elsewhere. Rotha has written that 'after *Night Mail*, there was some talk of another film in which Auden and Britten were to be jointly concerned – an elaborate experiment about the negro in Western civilisation – but in the end this was abandoned'.⁶⁴ In fact, Britten did produce a score for this, and the film was made with Britten's music, but it appears that it was not released at the time. Britten worked on this between September and November 1935, and revised it in January 1938. There can be no doubt that Britten's involvement in the GPO Film Unit was of lasting influence in his career, not merely in terms of the alliances formed (important as these were), but in terms of his forging a distinctive musical language. In a sense, this was a highly productive apprenticeship for him.

⁶¹ Paul Rotha, *op. cit.*, 132

⁶² Paul Rotha, *loc. cit.*

⁶³ Paul Rotha, *loc. cit.*

⁶⁴ Paul Rotha, *loc. cit.*

10 Walter Leigh

Of all the GPO Film Unit composers, Leigh (1905-1942) was perhaps the most versatile. This versatility was noted by contemporary critics such as Roger Wimbush:

He is an artist with his own ideas, but he is also an artist who has to make a living, and while every artist has ideas, it is not everybody who can sell his work. It is not extravagant to say that Leigh resembles Liszt in his versatility, although his spirit would probably rebel at every other Lisztian principle.⁶⁵

He had the ability to produce music that very neatly suited its context and purpose, and this sense of *Gebrauchsmusik* was no doubt influenced by his period of study in Berlin with Hindemith (from 1927-9). This was noted by his obituarist after his untimely death in Libya:

Walter Leigh approached the composition of [music] with the craftsman's spirit and the artist's perfect instinct for style. This approach Leigh learned from Hindemith; and yet Leigh's was hardly what is called *gebrauchtmusik*: it was less terrifying, less self-conscious. The cardinal point of his artistic philosophy was suitability of medium and idea to purpose. He bridged the gulf, so yawningly wide to-day, between 'classical' and 'popular' music, writing both kinds – I should say all kinds – with excellent skill and imagination.⁶⁶

Leigh had been fortunate to start working for Grierson at a time when experimentation in sound was in demand. This was recognised by his contemporaries, such as Kurt London, who commented that

Leigh has realised that the sound-film, a new art, requires a new musical technique. His music departs from tradition, not only in its form but in connection with the tonality of the whole film; his instrumentation also displays in its transparent economy a striking understanding of the special requirements of the microphone.⁶⁷

London proceeded to note (apparently with reference to *Song of Ceylon*) that 'wind, above all wood-wind, dominate in delicate contrapuntal sound-texture, even in combination with strings, used solo.'

Song of Ceylon was one of Leigh's earliest films, which, although not begun by the GPO itself, nevertheless used much of the infrastructure that was to become the GPO Film Unit, and was completed by the Unit.⁶⁸ The GPO records in fact show the existence of four films:⁶⁹ these are *The Villages of Lanka*, *Monsoon Island*, *Negombo Coast* and *Dance of the Harvest*. These are presumed to be working titles for the four separate reels of *Song of Ceylon*. In fact, in the finished film, the different sections are titled as follows:

⁶⁵ Roger Wimbush, 'The Younger English Composers. II. Walter Leigh', *Monthly Musical Record*, June 1938, 138

⁶⁶ Hubert J. Foss, Walter Leigh Obituary. *The Musical Times*, August 1941, 255.

⁶⁷ Kurt London, *Film Music* (London, 1936), 222

⁶⁸ Paul Rotha, *Documentary Diary: an informal history of the British Documentary Film, 1928-1939* (London, 1973), 123.

⁶⁹ PRO, (INF 6/1015, 1022, 1023, 1024)

'The Buddha', 'The Voices of Commerce', 'The Virgin Island' and 'Apparel of a God'. Each of these sections features music specially written by Leigh, as well as traditional music recorded by a group of musicians brought to England especially for the recording.⁷⁰

The significance of the film in terms of its influence on GPO productions is immense. Leigh's music is simple but effective in its Orientalism. The break between the indigenous chanting, drumming and sitar playing and Leigh's own music, though discernible, is by no means disruptive. There is considerable use of woodwind in this film. In the second section ('The Virgin Island'), muted trumpets are combined with cor anglais for an elephant scene. In other sections, gong and marimba are combined to create the requisite exotic flavour. The importance of the soundtrack was recognised by Grierson in the means of production. John Huntley has described how the composition of the music actually preceded the editing of the film:

[This] was a dialectic film of old and new Ceylon, showing the influence of Western civilisation on native life. Without Walter Leigh's music it might have passed off as an ordinary, competent travelogue. Many innovations were used by Leigh for this film. The music was written first, and then the picture was cut - un-heard of at this time. The sound track involved seven channels, as Leigh worked solidly for over three weeks on a long series of recording studio experiments - again a technique many years in front of its time. The native music was made with a troupe of Singalese dancers and drummers, who were brought over from Ceylon for the greatest single musical experiment in the history of early documentary.⁷¹

London predicted that 'the scoring of *Song of Ceylon* points [to] the path which real film music has to follow'. Despite this, most of Leigh's GPO work is less distinguished and certainly less exotic in style, though no less suited to its purpose. The film *Pett and Pott*, for example, belongs to an utterly contrasting style, one more closely related to Leigh's comic opera, *Jolly Roger* (1933). This film was intended to illustrate the usefulness of the telephone. Elizabeth Sussex has suggested that (as in *Song of Ceylon*) the soundtrack was recorded prior to the editing of the film:

One of Cavalcanti's earliest experiments at the GPO was a fantasy called *Pett and Pott*.... According to Basil Wright the idea of recording the soundtrack first and putting on the picture afterwards was Grierson's as well as Cavalcanti's; it was a way of getting the unit accustomed to using its newly acquired sound-recording equipment....⁷²

The title music (in compound time) assumes a fairground style. The only characteristic shared with *Song of Ceylon* is the predominance of woodwind, this time for comic effect (and with a sense of French neoclassical style). In terms of cinematic technique, Leigh exploits a change from digetic to non-digetic use of music early on in the film: after the title music, there is a shot of Mr and Mrs Pett's daughter playing the piano (in same key of A major), after

⁷⁰ John Huntley, 'The GPO Film Unit', *British Film Music* (London, 1947), ??

⁷¹ John Huntley, 'The GPO Film Unit', *British Film Music* (London, 1947), ??

⁷² Elizabeth Sussex, 'Cavalcanti in England', *The Documentary Film Unit* (Edinburgh, 1998), 188.

which an orchestral rendition of that theme is heard non-diegetically. The scene of domestic bliss in the Pett household (with children saying their prayers) is followed by a comically dark tango scene in the house of Mr and Mrs Pott. The style of harmony and orchestration is reminiscent of Kurt Weill's *Threepenny Opera*. A spoken (and highly rhythmic) chorus is used for the men's homeward train journey (rather like a patter song). This sense of using spoken rhythm to evoke the monotonous rhythm of train wheels on tracks must surely have influenced the later *Night Mail*. Conflicting musical styles are constantly juxtaposed, as when the concertina is heard as Mrs Pott climbs the stairs, but fife and drum are used to accompany the fight between her and the comically slothful servant. A piccolo melody with piano accompaniment (and birdsong) is suggestive of Papageno's material in Mozart's *Der Zauberflöte*. The music of a dance band is then used for the dance rehearsal scene. The circus is suggested by a drum roll as a tin can from Mrs Pott's shopping basket falls down a steep flight of stairs to the street below. A moment of preposterous comedy is the *a capella* chorus of singing policemen who arrive to apprehend the burglar. The film's reception was not entirely positive. Paul Rotha clearly felt that it overreached itself:

...there were some errors of judgement, which was inevitable. The pretentious *Pett and Pott* and the meretricious *Fairy of the Phone* were whimsical attempts at comedy reminiscent of amateur charades. They showed Cavalcanti's influence at its most mischievous, and are at best mislaid.⁷³

A short score and sketches survive for *Under the City* (1934) which shows a fairly typical instrumentation of oboe, clarinet, trumpet, trombone, saxophone, strings and harp. The short score is notated on two staves and has instrumentation marked. No key signatures are marked (indicating the speed at which the music must have been composed, and also perhaps to make the task of copying more straightforward when producing parts for transposing instruments). The duration is marked for each scene, apparently indicating that the film was already edited before the music was composed. The instrumental parts are written in ink (apparently by Leigh himself) with pencil annotations suggesting that the score was altered during the recording session itself. Leigh's ability to be a chameleon is demonstrated by his changes in harmonic idiom during the course of this short film. The title music (for full orchestra) is atonal, but for the section about suburbia a diatonic major key is used, whereas for the 'commuting' section, bitonality is employed. Gracious music describes the West End, with lush string *portamenti*, whereas a far more abrasive musical language (reminiscent of Prokofiev) is used to depict traffic jams in the city (with piano, woodwind and cymbals). For post office administration, marimba and woodwind together conjure up a sense of energy and excitement. Dance-band music is employed for the night-life section, before a reassuringly tonal conclusion (featuring a plagal cadence). The music for this film is rather sporadic.

Leigh's affinity with popular idioms is demonstrated by the film *John Atkins Saves Up* (1934) which features a foxtrot (for 'Just Telephone') with

⁷³ Rotha, op. cit., 142.

syncopation among its numbers. For this film, a scenario survives that lists details of script, camera technique and sound effects. As Chris Banks has pointed out,

what is clear from this early script, and what happens in the final film is that while sound is used, no direct verbal synchronization of sound (speech and 'background' noise) and picture has been attempted: the visual element of the film has been recorded entirely separately, and the sound tracks (variously, and sometimes in combination, narrative, appropriate background noise and music) have been each been laid down separately.⁷⁴

For *Fairy of the Phone* (1936) Leigh used an instrumentation associated with the dance band. Here there were no strings, but flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, horn, saxophone, trumpet, bass, piano and guitar. Forsyth Hardy described the film as 'a fanciful musical comedy on how to use the telephone'⁷⁵ and remarked that 'distance has lent enchantment to what was regarded at the time as rather an amateur effort'. Leigh uses some stereotypes for his characters here: his sketch for the 'Old Man' is in compound time, for clarinet and bassoon, while the 'Old Lady' is depicted by a waltz for flute, oboe and clarinet. A 'Statue' is given a chorale-like theme in E flat major, while a melody is sketched for the 'Orientale' scene that includes flattened second and sixth degrees.

It appears that certain films for which Leigh composed music may not have been made, or otherwise the music may have been used elsewhere. An example is *Just Telephone* (1935) for which a full score and parts survive. The scoring here is for trumpet, alto saxophone, tenor saxophone, guitar and piano. Sketches and discarded instrumental parts also exist for a film titled *The Glorious 6th of June* (1934).⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Chris Banks, *Walter Leigh and the G.P.O. Film Unit* (Paper given at the RMA Conference, 2001)

⁷⁵ Forsyth Hardy, *op. cit.*, 15

⁷⁶ PRO (INF 6/1014). It is not clear whether this film was released.

11 Brian Easdale

For *A Job in a Million*, the arresting title music features added-note chords from piano, percussion and trumpet. As the apprentice boy's application is being written, flute and clarinet are heard. The flute reappears for his first day at work – now with piano. For a street scene, an ominous ostinato passage is heard, whereas for the exercise scene, counterpoint comes into play. In the exam scene, a clock ticks – providing much the same rhythmic tension that horses' hooves produce in Britten's *Coal Face*. The melodic theme is reiterated by the woodwind in triumphant diminution when the exam finishes. The film's ending is a similarly triumphant march.

12 Continental European composers

Ernst Meyer (1905-1988) had studied in Heidelberg with Eisler and Hindemith, but emigrated to England in 1933. It is likely that he had known Leigh in Germany and it is therefore possible that he was introduced to the GPO Film Unit by Leigh, although no proof of this has been discovered. His score for *Roadways*, however, was far more in the tradition of Britten's style as employed in *The King's Stamp*, *Coal Face* and *Night Mail*. The title music has a contemporary feel to it as a result of the use of bitonality and dissonance. For example, traffic jam scenes are depicted by bitonal arpeggios in the piano part. It appears that at least part of the score for *Roadways* may have been recycled at a later stage. A concert work dedicated to Cavalcanti by Meyer was performed in London in 1944. This was the Suite for two Trumpets, Two pianos, Percussion. The programme indicates that 'most of these pieces were written for films, but have been adapted for concert performance',⁷⁷ and it would seem likely that *Roadways* may have been the score in question, partly because of its futuristic orientation. The programme also states that the introduction was composed in 1937 (while the Finale dated from 1944).

Meyer's score for *North Sea* was conventional, to the point of sounding as if it were composed in the nineteenth century. The film is scored for full orchestra and the opening title music makes dramatic use of the diminished seventh harmony. As the boat sets out from the harbour, the music (in compound time) is reminiscent of Schubert with its lyricism. As the storm sets in, a duo of bassoon and oboe are used in ominous fashion. Meyer uses percussion (for example, timpani) to evoke the hostile weather conditions. When the camera cuts back to the Aberdeen skyline, the hymn 'For those in peril on the sea' is heard, with all its associations of maritime distress. When the ship is saved, there is a reprise of the fair-weather sailing theme to close the film. Meyer is reputed to have sailed on the North Sea to experience such conditions first hand before composing this score.

It appears that the involvement of the French composers Gaillard, Jaubert and Milhaud (as well as the use of music by Ibert) was entirely due to Cavalcanti's influence, and to his Parisian associations from the 1920s. Letters from Gaillard to Cavalcanti indicate that the two men were on familiar terms and were working on French projects simultaneously with the GPO films. In a letter of 4 May 1939, for example, Gaillard chides Cavalcanti for not having been in touch with him and reveals that the French producer d'Espinay urgently required a synopsis of a film to be based on a book of Alain Fournier and wished 'to know what you're [ie. Cavalcanti] going to take from the book.'⁷⁸ This coincided with the first screening of the film *Forty Million People*, for which Gaillard regretted he could not be present. He asked Cavalcanti to 'invite Mr Stein of Boosey & Hawkes who could edit the score'.⁷⁹ He also

⁷⁷ Ernst Meyer, *Kontraste, Konflikte: Erinnerungen, Gespräche, Kommentare*, ed. D Brennecke and M. Hansen (Berlin, 1979), 14. The concert was one of the 'Konzerte des Freien Deutschen Kulturbundes mit Werken E.H. Meyers in London'

⁷⁸ Francois Gaillard, PRO INF 5/57, letter of 4 May 1939 to Cavalcanti. The book is unidentified.

⁷⁹ Francois Gaillard, PRO INF 5/57, letter of 12 May 1939 to Cavalcanti. 'Voulez-vous ... inviter Monsieur Stein de la maison d'édition Hawkes, qui **pourrait** bien fais editer cette partition'.

asked Cavalcanti for the ‘titles given to the different pieces of the suite for the recording’.⁸⁰

Gaillard appears to have held Britten in high esteem: he mentioned to Cavalcanti in a letter of 1938 that he had decided to go ahead with mounting a concert in Paris on 9 December 1938 of Britten’s *Soirée Musicales*,⁸¹ and asked Cavalcanti to persuade the ‘English musician’ [presumably Britten] to send scores. He also mentioned that he wanted ‘to please him’ with this performance.⁸² In the postscript to a letter of 4 January 1939, he disclosed that the performance was successful and that the works were well received.⁸³

Cavalcanti’s influence on Gaillard is most evident, however, from the latter’s comments regarding the production of *Forty Million People*. He thanks Cavalcanti for his assistance ‘in the studio and in the office’ and elaborates by stating that ‘it was very useful for I was able to establish the important and ideal moments for the interpolation of the music both for film and radio.’⁸⁴ Thus, it seems that although John Monck was the film’s director, Cavalcanti nevertheless retained a significant influence on the film’s structure and soundtrack.

Perhaps the most significant Parisian connection of Cavalcanti was Darius Milhaud, who had composed his first film score for Cavalcanti’s *La P’tite Lillie*. Although Milhaud wrote around 20 film scores, it seems that commercial concerns may have encouraged this profusion: his widow pointed out that ‘it was not easy to earn your living as a composer before the war’.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, Milhaud considered screen music to be a personal statement, and in this respect he considered French composers to have an advantage:

While the [scores of Roland-Manuel, Ibert and Delannoy] contained all the simple elements needed to attract the general public, they remained personal works, stamped with their author’s personality from the very first bars. French musicians are accustomed to orchestrate their own scores, a fact which helps to preserve the personal aspect of their works, contrary to what usually happens in Hollywood where there are professional orchestrators who churn out on a commercial scale musical pathos à la Wagner or Tchaikovsky.⁸⁶

Milhaud discussed his views of orchestration with regard to Claudel’s play *L’Annonce faite à Marie*, revealing that certain instruments were (in his view) more suitable for microphone recording than others: ‘I scored my music for the instruments that are most suitable for the microphone (organ, piano, flute,

⁸⁰ Gaillard, *loc. cit.*

⁸¹ This work was composed using material from Britten’s Rossini arrangements for *The Tocher*.

⁸² Francois Gaillard, PRO INF 5/57, letter of 12 November 1938 to Cavalcanti. ‘Incitez la musicien Anglais – envoyer de partitions: vous voyez ... a leur faire plaisir...’

⁸³ Francois Gaillard, PRO INF 5/57, letter of 12 November 1938 to Cavalcanti. ‘Avec grand succes...’

⁸⁴ Francois Gaillard, PRO INF 5/57, undated letter (presumably of 1938) to Cavalcanti. ‘j’ai au[?] mettre au point l’importance et le moments choisis pour l’intervention de la musique dans le Film. Tant pour la film piu pour la Radio.’

⁸⁵ Roger Nichols, *Conversations with Madeleine Milhaud* (London, 1996), 49

⁸⁶ Darius Milhaud, *Notes Without Music* (London, 1952), 204

clarinet, two saxophones, two Ondes Martenot and percussion)...'⁸⁷ In fact, in *Islanders*,⁸⁸ Milhaud uses strings instead of Ondes Martenot, but piano and woodwind are highly important within the score's texture. A plaintive bassoon is heard as the earth's geological history is discussed in the opening commentary (perhaps influenced by Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*). The strings are used expressively later to illustrate the words 'mysterious and inaccessible' in the Hebrides section of the film. Milhaud uses a completely different rhythmic style for the Guernsey section, featuring lively, strong offbeats. For the 'Inner Farn' section, there is a return to woodwind, here pairing flute with saxophone and solo strings. As birds take off on screen, there is a corresponding flurry of activity in the strings. For the beginning of the 'Britain' section, brass is added to symbolise an appropriate sense of national pride. The shots of a steel mill feature marimba, timpani, brass and piccolos with strikingly discordant harmony. Milhaud achieves a suitably joyful ending for the film by means of harmonic resolution in a major key.

⁸⁷ Darius Milhaud, *op. cit.*, 207

⁸⁸ This score is erroneously entitled 'Islands' in Paul Collaer's catalogue.

13 Arrangements and use of pre-recorded music

In *Mony a Pickle*, the music was supplied by Britten, John Foulds and J.E.N. Cooper. In fact, it seems that excerpts of Britten's music for *The King's Stamp* were used without his knowledge. The resultant soundtrack is highly inconsistent and lacks integration. Certain sections (such as the shower scene with its ominous clarinet and side drum) appear to point to Britten, but are incongruous within the context of the more diatonic language favoured by the other two contributors. The reason for this incongruity was that each sequence of the film had a different director. These were Watt, Massingham, McLaren, Holmes and Harvey, although the film was assembled by McLaren and supervised by Cavalcanti.

The film *N or NW* used a soundtrack comprising popular songs. These were 'I'm gonna sit right down and write myself a letter', by Young and Ahlert (Sterling), 'T'aint no use', by Magidson and Lane (Chappell) and 'Give me a break, Baby', by Franklyn (Decca). News for the Navy, though largely silent with limited commentary, did incorporate some choral title music.

Spare Time clearly demonstrates public taste and expectation in music. The film opens with Jeremiah Clarke's 'Trumpet Tune', which, besides presumably being instantly recognisable to its audience, symbolises the sense of joy and release at leaving work. The 'Steel' section featured a brass band, the 'Cotton' section a carnival band, and finally the 'Coal' section showed a male voice choir in a performance of music by Handel.

14 Popular song

A musical introduction to (or advertisement for) technology had surfaced in the USA as early as 1898 with Charles D. Bingham's *Papa's at the Telephone*. Nevertheless, it is the letter which dominates musical references to communication. War-time songs are particularly poignant: the First World War spawned Sigmund Romberg's *Won't You Send a Letter to Me* (1917), while the Second World War gave rise to Frankie Brown's *No Letter Today* (1943) and *The Letter Marked Unclaimed* (1947). Later conflicts show similar trends, epitomised in Bobby E. Stanley's *Last Letter from Vietnam* (1975). Most of all though, it is love letters that that are captured in song. The words *P.S. I Love You* were set by Gordon Jenkins in 1943 and again by Paul McCartney in 1961. The latter song was written in Hamburg for McCartney's then girlfriend, Dot Rhone. Two years later, McCartney was again inspired by love and letters when he wrote the song *All my Loving*, with the words 'And when I'm away, I'll write home every day, and I'll send all my loving to you.' (This time the recipient of the letter was Jane Asher).

15 Conclusion

The significance of postal repertoire may lie for future listeners in its curiosity value than in its profundity or universal popularity. Nevertheless, as a social document, such music has considerable importance, as it registers in sound the importance of communication to human beings. The agency of postal institutions, either as deliberate commissioners of music or as the unwitting subject and representation of music is indeed worthy of future study by social historians and musicians alike.

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