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Christina Baade’s Victory through Harmony: The BBC and Popular Music in World War II provides tremendous insight into the British Broadcasting Corporation’s role in regulating the broadcast of popular music during the interwar period up until the end of the Second World War. Throughout its 275 pages, Baade’s monograph draws upon a remarkable depth of archival documents preserved at the BBC Written Archives Centre. She also employs outside observations from one of the BBC’s greatest critics, the weekly Melody Maker Magazine. Baade organizes the eight chapters of her book chronologically, discussing the challenges the BBC faced in providing an appropriate soundtrack to the war.

Being a central institution of British life, the BBC provided news coverage and various forms of entertainment to over eighty percent of Britons by the end of World War II. The BBC did not take this responsibility lightly and assumed responsibility for unifying the British nation, regarding music purely for its functional purpose: as a source of entertainment that would motivate people on the home front and overseas to engage with war efforts. Dubbed the “people’s war,” everyone had a role to play during World War II, whether it be facing the call of conscription or working long hours in factories, and the BBC had the difficult task of appealing to the masses. Baade argues,
“While the BBC’s broadcast of popular music could be understood as furthering unifying, populist aims conveyed in the slogan Victory through Harmony, it also revealed the dissonances and discords of the nation” (4). By viewing the war effort from the perspective of the BBC, we are able to gain valuable insight into World War II Britain and how popular music supported the nation’s efforts toward victory.

Baade begins her book by quoting *Music While You Work* producer Wynford Renold’s slogan “Victory through Harmony.” Serving as the title of her book, the phrase was intended to encourage unity among the British toward a common goal: to end the war. A brief introduction offers an overview of the common themes presented throughout the eight chapters. Each chapter highlights a different program, genre of music, or important event that influenced the BBC’s programming decisions. Being a central institution in British media, the BBC played a critical role in promoting national unity during the war. Conversely, as Baade is quick to point out, “while the BBC’s broadcast of popular music could be understood as furthering the unifying, populist aims conveyed in the slogan ‘Victory through Harmony,’ it also revealed the dissonances and discords of the nation” (4). Baade accentuates the wider effect the BBC’s programming decisions had on such a diverse nation, arguing that the BBC’s wartime approach to popular music “did not merely cater to the majority, but rather it operated in dialogue with the diversity of voices, including listeners, the press, governmental authorities, and the music industry” (5). Throughout the book, Baade traces the BBC’s struggle to provide programming that was representative of British civilians on the home front while also providing morale-building entertainment for the forces.

Chapter one offers a brief overview of the BBC’s transformation during the interwar period. Operating with a set of firm standards, the BBC became the sole provider of radio broadcast programming for Britain when it was established in 1922. Following the model set by Sir John Reith, the BBC strived to provide news, entertainment, and programming that would be uplifting and educational. Baade provides many accounts of the BBC’s awareness of the challenges it faced regarding mass culture, modernity, popular music, and the growing competition of continental stations, drawing from documents preserved at the BBC Written Archives Centre. She describes in great detail how the BBC conceptualized its audience and its concern with ideologies of cultural uplift, promotion of active listening, and advocacy for (classical) music appreciation. The BBC clearly defined and reinforced a sense of hierarchy among musics through the lens of broadcasting, rating the importance of various popular music genres. Classical music, a sign of cultural uplift in Britain, was favoured over

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2 Nicholas, *The Echo of War*, 12.
other types of music such as hot jazz or any music categorized as “American” (which was viewed by the BBC as degrading). Though brief, this chapter provides the foundation required for the reader to understand Baade’s arguments in the chapters that follow.

Chapter two provides further context regarding the state of Britain before the onset of war and explains how the government anticipated the BBC’s ability to unite the nation, inform its people, and maintain morale. Following the declaration of war on 3 September 1934, Britain introduced many defensive measures on the homefront including blackouts and the closure of theatres and cinemas. Baade discusses the issue of morale on the homefront during the phony war (the period when expected catastrophes of air raids, confusion, and civilian casualties failed to materialize).

The Allied Forces’ withdrawal from Dunkirk in 1940 signalled a major paradigm shift in the war effort, giving the British people a new sense of hope. Immediately following Dunkirk, the BBC launched the program Music While You Work (MWYW), which Baade presents in Chapter Three. Baade discusses the significance of MWYW as a program that reached and affected millions of lives in Britain, while also showing how it raised concerns about mass modernity, and background listening—two practices the BBC rejected since its founding. With its focus on industrial production, the Second World War engendered a range of social instabilities. For example, like never before, women were conscripted into factory work, which had been traditionally open exclusively to men. Baade presents a detailed exploration of the official documents, revealing the BBC’s utilitarian agenda of MWYW’s programming as it related to these social shifts. The BBC implemented rules for broadcasts, defining appropriate music as rhythmic, non-vocal, interruption free, and loud—to overcome factory workshop noises. MWYW was created to deal with the dehumanizing aspects of warfare, but it was also recognized as a way of increasing efficiency by disciplining workers’ bodies. Baade provides a powerful account regarding the effectiveness of MWYW: “Like a trumpet call to action, the martial melody echoed through the shop, and then I witnessed a transformation scene—tired faces breaking into smiles, the squaring of bent shoulders, chins uplifted, and suddenly voices, singing voices” (60). The program, as


Baade points out, “evoked the unity required by the war effort, it also helped the listener enact the practice of community” (81). MWYW, arguably the most important program the BBC launched, provided the vital function of supporting the collective spirit so central to national unity during the peoples’ war.

Baade’s vivid imagery is especially effective in revealing the gruelling routine that came to define the lives of musicians working in London. Throughout the Blitz, German bombs hailed down on London nightly, introducing many problems for musicians who continued to play the music so critical for sustaining national morale. Many valued the contribution musicians made toward the war efforts, whose strenuous routines are described magnificently in Chapter four. Dance music for example, as Baade argues, “was a difficult profession to value within the framework of wartime masculinity built upon fitness, temperate emotions, and sacrifice” (84). Debates often surrounded this type of music, with those questioning whether dance music was essential or even appropriate to the war effort. As Baade outlines, there were many problems that plagued dance bands such as the call-up of over eighty percent of its musicians into the forces. In reaction to the loss of many popular civilian dance bands, the BBC responded by introducing their new, successful, “dance band Scheme,” providing long term contracts to its most talented dance bands leaders—Victor Sylvester, Jack Payne, and Geraldo Vandre. At a time when civilian dance bands were increasingly feeling pressured loss of personnel, the BBC’s change in format ensured the continuation of quality dance music so important for supporting the nation’s morale.

Being the BBC’s first dedicated outlet for swing and jazz, Radio Rhythm Club (RRC) was a program that signalled many changes about views toward race, swing, and the authenticity of Jazz. Launched in June 1940—alongside MWYW—RRC’s programming was in many ways the opposite of MWYW, attracting a greater proportion of male than female listeners. Analogous to classical music aired by the BBC, its producers encouraged attentive listening and provided background information to educate its listeners. In Chapter five, Baade describes the RRC as being materially and symbolically important because “it signalled a shift in policy in a way that previous jazz records series and transatlantic relays had not” (105). The airing of the RRC only a few months after the Forces Programme was established, she argues, was no coincidence. As the BBC’s listener research organization discovered, its base of listeners was growing, primarily consisting of young men who wanted to hear jazz and swing. Baade provides

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9 Baade, “‘The Dancing Front’,” 351.
strong evidence of the RRC’s expanding listener base by citing Mass-Observation’s published figures.

Baade presents a compelling view of how the BBC’s introduction of the Radio Rhythm Club (RRC), regarded through a racist lens, came to represent a significant attitude shift toward a genre it previously viewed as immoral, primitive, and alien. In the section entitled “Obviously Coloured: Race, Representation, and Performance” she discusses the RRC’s approach to black cultural production that set it apart in many ways from the BBC’s domestic shows. The RRC’s shift was revolutionary; like the BBC’s approach to classical music and its composers, Jazz was now viewed as a genre to be taken seriously. The program discussed “the historic, cultural, and stylistic complexities of black cultural production to a greater degree than other BBC programs” (123). Throughout the chapter, Baade succeeds in portraying the importance of the program as a representation of British citizens working actively to make sense of a foreign culture.

In Chapter six “Sincerely Yours: The Trouble with Sentimentality and the Ban on Crooners,” Baade addresses the backlash the BBC experienced in 1942 as a result of the never-ending argument concerning which music was considered appropriate for wartime efforts. As discussed in the opening chapter, Baade shows the BBC’s “dance music policy” had tremendous jurisdiction over what music people could or could not listen to. As evidence of this policy’s power, this chapter provides many accounts of songs and vocalists banned from performing what the BBC considered questionable music. During a time when Britain suffered major surrenders, she argues “a consensus emerged within the BBC that sentimental songs and crooning were a serious problem, undermining the wartime mission of boosting the nation’s morale” (135). As a result of setbacks suffered by the military, dreary, slow-tempo, sentimental music and crooners became easy scapegoats. The most common argument against the genre was it was “divorced from the reality of the times,” and as Mass Observation explained, the “songs have nothing to do with the war” (135). Following a series of military advances in 1943, the concerns of sentimental music negatively affecting troops abroad began to decline and so too did the BBC’s “anti-slush” campaign. The BBC’s decision to ban crooners can be regarded as a direct display of its power to dictate appropriate music (music evoking qualities of masculinity, and sacrifice) that they felt Britons at home and abroad should be listening to.

For the final chapter Baade does a wonderful job of illustrating for the reader the many different perspectives concerning the relationship between America and Britain. After the arrival of more than a million American troops in 1943, British civilians became even more ambivalent toward American culture. Since the origins of the BBC, the American style of radio was detested, viewed as over commercialized and ill mannered. The establishment of the American Forces Network proved the BBC’s growing sense of anxiety, as Baade explains, “within the BBC, the July 1943
commencement of the AFN served as a catalyst for those worried about Americanization, which they regarded as a threat to the survival of a distinctly British culture” (177). In response to this major threat, the BBC acted to discourage or even ban vocalists and band leaders who adopted American traits. Geraldo, one of the BBC’s most popular house band leaders, was given notice of termination because he was viewed as possessing an American style. With the growing awareness of the AFN’s popularity, the BBC avoided competition from American radio by providing a distinctly British national performance practice that would help lead to a post war program “firmly British in character” (182).

In Victory Through Harmony, Christina Baade effectively provides a thorough analysis of the BBC’s relationship to the musicians, audiences, and popular music of the World War II era. She summarizes the works of several British World War two historians such as Angus Calder, Sian Nicholas, and Sonya Rose but also delivers a fresh perspective on BBC programming. What makes her book so interesting is her focus on the beginning years of the war; instead of a broad overview, she provides a more thorough analysis of the BBC’s programming decisions at the start of the conflict.

She also examines most topics presented by the authors cited throughout this review, yet, one wishes she would have delved further into relationships between the BBC and competing continental stations. The BBC became increasingly threatened during the 1930s by commercial radio stations such as radio Luxembourg, a situation examined in detail in James Nott’s book, Music for the People. Nott’s rich explanation of how commercial radio stations were particularly popular with the working and lower-middle classes, who made up 75% of the BBC’s listeners, adds an element to Baade’s work that was otherwise lacking. Another topic that would have further enriched Baade’s book is the BBC’s relationship with the government and use of broadcast radio as a medium for propaganda. In many ways Baade indirectly details the BBC’s propaganda agenda but does not seem to tie these ideas together very clearly with her arguments. I found myself instead referring to The Echo of War by Sian Nicholas for clarification.

Overall, Christina Baade’s Victory through Harmony contributes an extensive amount of information concerning the BBC’s war agenda along with a fresh perspective on the BBC during its most difficult period historically. She effectively shows how popular music broadcast by the BBC, which was meant to unify the people of Britain, drew controversy at every turn. Ironically, as Baade successfully shows, the BBC’s wartime goal of unifying the people also revealed many fundamental differences between the classes of Britain’s hierarchical system. Drawing heavily on material from

the BBC Written Archives, she uses her primary research to bolster her claims where there might otherwise have been confusion. There are some sections of her book, although, where one must sort through extensive details concerning every BBC music policy, but in the end her analysis of this data is exceptional. Baade’s *Victory Through Harmony* has much to offer readers who have a particular interest in the field of British Popular culture surrounding the Second World War.

For further reading:


