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Hans Keller and the BBC

The Musical Conscience of British Broadcasting, 1959-79

A. M. Garnham

HANS KELLER AND THE BBC

Lithograph of Hans Keller by Milein Cosman

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The musical conscience of British broadcasting, 1959–79

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'Be assiduous in your haunting, lest our conscience fall asleep.'

Tom Crowe, writing to Hans Keller on his retirement from the BBC

For Milein

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Note

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Introduction

This is the story of one remarkable individual's involvement with twentieth-century Britain's most powerful musical institution. It was to many eyes an unlikely relationship – certainly it was never an easy one – but it left the cultural life of this country significantly affected and immeasurably widened the influence of a brilliant and original musical mind. Broadcasting was only a part of Hans Keller's musical life, however; as a critic, teacher, analyst, psychologist, sociologist and polemicist, he was already an important figure in musical London before he joined the BBC and, partly through his association with the Corporation, he became a profound influence on a whole generation of musicians. Nevertheless, as he wrote shortly after his retirement, 'I gave 20 years of my life and its central loves to the BBC',[1] serving a medium which he believed was of crucial importance to the future of music.

Born in 1919 in Vienna, into an affluent and music-loving family, Hans Keller saw his life change dramatically on 11 March 1938, his nineteenth birthday, when the Austrian Chancellor resigned and Hitler entered Vienna the following day. What happened afterwards – *Kristallnacht*, his own consequent arrest by the Gestapo, the death of his father, and finally his escape to England – Keller later made the subject of an unforgettable BBC broadcast in the Radio 4 series *The Time of My Life*.[2] On arrival in London, he joined his mother and sister (who was married to an Englishman) in Herne Hill, South London, where he lived until he was interned on the Isle of Man in 1940. After his release nine months later (apparently at the intervention of Ralph Vaughan Williams), he lived the life of a freelance orchestral and chamber music player in London and in Cumbria, where he travelled to give concerts with Dr Oskar Adler, with whom he had previously played quartets in Vienna. Adler had been a close friend of the young Schoenberg – and effectively his first teacher, as Schoenberg describes in his 1949 essay 'My Evolution':

> Only after I had met three young men of about my own age and had won their friendship did my musical and literary education start. The first was Oscar Adler, whose talent as a musician was as great as his capabilities in science. Through him I learned of the existence of a theory of music, and he directed my first steps therein ... All my acquaintance with classical music

1 Letter to *The Times*, 15 August 1980.

2 'Vienna 1938' was first broadcast on 3 February 1974 and repeated on 24 August the same year. It was reprinted in *The Listener* (28 March 1974) and later as the first chapter of Keller's book *1975 (1984 minus 9)*, (1977).

> derived from playing quartets with him, for even then he was an excellent first violinist.[3]

Keller similarly credited Adler with having shaped his whole future approach to musical analysis:

> From my early childhood I lived in his chamber-musical world, first passively, later actively. He did not care two hoots about analysis, but his uniquely organic and motif-conscious way of playing taught me more about the essentials of chamber-musical forms and textures than any analytical teacher could possibly have done.[4]

Keller was also a prolific writer during these years, but not yet on music. His principal writings during the war were on psychological and sociological subjects, and he was deeply immersed in Freudian psychoanalysis. Although he published little of his work from this time, his 'overriding'[5] psychological interests were to colour his musical writings for the rest of his life. The central plank of his approach to musical analysis – the uncovering of the latent unity behind manifestly contrasting themes – is clearly Freudian, and so, on occasion, was his methodology, as in his explication of a Mozartian parapraxis in his 1956 article, 'A Slip of Mozart's: Its Analytical Significance'.[6]

He was concerned not only with the unconscious and preconscious motivation of composers, but also of their critics. Particularly striking is his brilliant 'Resistances to Britten's Music: Their Psychology'[7] in which he applied J.C. Flügel's 'Polycrates complex' to Britten's audience, as well as his own ideas on British musical 'group self-contempt'. This article, together with 'Schoenberg and the Men of the Press',[8] which followed it the next year, both appeared in *Music Survey*, the journal of which Keller became co-editor (with Donald Mitchell) in 1949. Short-lived (it succumbed to financial pressure in 1952), but disproportionately notorious, *Music Survey* plunged into a spirited attack on the musical received opinion of the day. 'The aims I had in mind,' Keller later explained, 'were, simply, the defence of great or substantial composers whom our musical world neglected. Such defence, of course, inevitably took polemical shape, since one fought people who said

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3 'My Evolution' was first published in English (in which it was originally written) in the *Musical Quarterly* in October 1952; it was reprinted in Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, London (Faber and Faber) 1975, pp. 79–92. The other two young friends whom Schoenberg credits with his education were David Bach and Alexander von Zemlinsky.

4 'The Chamber Music', in H.C. Robbins Landon and Donald Mitchell (eds) (1956), *The Mozart Companion*, p. 93.

5 See *1975* (1977), p. 81.

6 Written at the end of what Keller called the 'Mozart/Freud year' – the centenary of Freud's birth and the bicentenary of Mozart's – this article appeared in the Winter 1956–57 issue of *Tempo*.

7 *Music Survey*, Spring 1950.

8 *Music Survey*, Spring 1951.

that those composers were no good or were not composers at all.'[9] The quotation from Isaacs which Keller placed at the top of his 1951 Schoenberg article accurately summarizes his attitude to music critics – 'The critic stumbles along behind the artist' – an attitude which he always retained. The BBC was not exempt from assault during this period: one example is the blistering attack Keller and Mitchell launched on the Third Programme's Schoenberg series in 1952, in an article which could not have opened more dramatically: 'Schoenberg dies. The horde, true to primordial savage precedent, falls upon the father and devours him.'[10]

All this meant that Keller was no stranger to controversy, but there were many who admired his honest and perceptive writing, not least the composers whom he defended. These included Schoenberg himself, who wrote to Keller in 1951 to enlist his support against 'a very unpleasant review, written by one of these non-musicians, who look in my music only for the twelve notes – not realizing in the least its musical contents, expression and merits. He is very stupid and insolent and would deserve a treatment like that you can give him. I hope you are interested! Now sharpen your pen.'[11] Nevertheless, it can not have been easy for the BBC to appoint him, as William Glock later acknowledged: 'No doubt the most controversial decision was to invite Hans Keller on to the staff.'[12] However, the BBC was changing rapidly at that time, and the appointment of Glock himself, then Chairman of the Music Committee of the Institute of Contemporary Arts, constituted a significant move away from the Corporation's earlier rather cautious attitude to contemporary music, particularly Continental composers. (This attitude is well exemplified by an internal discussion from 1956 about the merits of Henze and Boulez: 'On balance, it was felt that to broadcast a few of their better works would not blunt our reputation for acute critical assessment'.[13])

Such 'narrow horizons', as Glock called them,[14] had not always been a feature of the BBC's music policy. Edward Clark, pupil of Schoenberg and husband of Elizabeth Lutyens, had been a BBC programme-builder of extraordinary imagination and enterprise in the inter-war years. The rather more insular atmosphere of the 1950s could be seen as an inevitable result of the war, although the early days of the Third Programme (founded in 1946) were determinedly international in nature. Indeed, Glock himself was sent by the Third's first Controller, George Barnes, on a tour of occupied Europe in 1947, to bring back news of what, musically speaking, had been happening there during the war. The trouble, as Glock saw it, was that while 'the horizons of the programme planners of the Third were European', those of

9 Preface to the collected edition of the journal published in 1981.
10 'The BBC's Victory over Schoenberg', *The Music Review*, May 1952.
11 See 'Unpublished Schoenberg Letters', *Music Survey*, Summer 1952.
12 W. Glock (1991), *Notes in Advance*, p. 103.
13 Quoted in N. Kenyon (1981), p. 278.
14 Glock (1991), p. 100.

the rest of the BBC were not, 'which brought the most violent opposition from many provincial factions both outside and inside the BBC'.[15]

The Third Programme, 'conceived in war as an act of faith', as one BBC staff member put it,[16] was a most extraordinary (and probably rather un-English) creation, about which the BBC seems to have started having second thoughts almost immediately. By the time Keller began broadcasting in 1956, it was approaching a crisis. Despite the palpable success of the Third – its tenth anniversary celebrations that year only emphasized the extent to which it had become an international byword for excellence in broadcasting – the atmosphere in Broadcasting House was then one of anxiety and retrenchment, with widespread uneasiness about the rather patrician and didactic features of Sir William Haley's original vision. Television had swiftly overtaken radio as the prime medium and, in 1955, commercial television had broken the BBC's broadcasting monopoly. The spectre of commercial radio had long haunted the BBC, and although it was not to gain substance for many years to come, it was a growing factor in the Corporation's policy-making. The BBC followed the tenth-anniversary celebrations with a major review of sound broadcasting which culminated in a drastic cut in the airtime allotted to the Third Programme. Many of the public and private arguments over that decision mirrored those which took place during the BBC's next big review of its radio policy, *Broadcasting in the Seventies* (1969), when the Third finally disappeared altogether, and Keller's life as a BBC rebel began.

To Hans Keller, *Broadcasting in the Seventies*, which was published half-way through his BBC years, was a disastrous turning point, and marked 'an abrupt change of corporate personality'[17] on the part of the BBC. It caused profound changes to his relationship with the Corporation, as well as bringing him to consider, for the first time in such depth, issues of broadcasting beyond the musical. Yet, as will be seen, most of the ideas contained in this document were not new; indeed it could almost be said that the battle which preoccupied Keller during his second decade on the BBC's staff was already lost before he arrived at the Corporation in 1959.

Even so, it was not in Keller's nature to give up. 'He was,' says Susan Bradshaw, 'the only person I ever met to whom everything (particularly, of course, musical things) really *mattered*.'[18] The BBC was abandoning principles of fundamental significance and, given Keller's conviction that radio was vital to the very survival of music as a living art, political and pragmatic arguments could do nothing to dissuade him from struggling

15 Ibid., p. 45.

16 Unsigned undated memorandum to the Director of Sound Broadcasting (BBC Written Archive Centre, henceforth WAC, R34/1022/3, The Future of Sound Broadcasting in the Domestic Services: Working Party, 1956–57).

17 'Fare Better, BBC', *The Spectator*, June 1979.

18 Susan Bradshaw, in Wintle (1986), p. 377.

against reforms which he thought would guarantee the demise of radio as a major cultural force.

One of the most important characteristics of Keller's life and thought is its unity. Thought *is* life, and it cannot be divided or compartmentalized. He even disliked categorizing music as an art: 'I should prefer to call it a mode of thought, and hence of life,' he wrote in 1970.[19] His conviction (formed partly as a result of his early psychoanalytical work) of the unique and separate nature of musical thought had, therefore, for him an inevitable practical application. If music does indeed convey truths which are incommunicable by any other means, the BBC's duty as a powerful musical patron was clear. Particularly at a late cultural stage, when a long-standing and rich musical tradition was breaking up, it was insupportable to Keller that the BBC should seem to want to hasten its decline.

Keller never gave up on the BBC. Even after his retirement, he continued to encourage and admonish his former colleagues. Having promised Glock on the very day of his arrival 'I shall put my whole mind and heart into the BBC job,'[20] he continued to do this, without reservation, for the next 20 years and beyond.

19 'Towards a Theory of Music', *The Listener*, 11 June 1970.

20 Letter from Keller to Glock, 1 September 1959 (Cambridge University Library, henceforth CUL, Keller Archive).

Chapter 1

In the Beginning

In February 1946, Hans Keller made his first approach to the BBC, offering a talk on Freud. Freud's ninetieth birthday would have fallen on 6 May that year and, taking advantage of the perennial interest in anniversaries, Keller suggested that the occasion might be marked by a talk 'on, say, Freud's position in the development of our culture'.[1] Although this idea came to nothing and it was to be another ten years before he actually began broadcasting, the story of Keller's association with the BBC does nevertheless begin in 1946, and their later relationship is much illuminated by the events of the decade before they came together.

It was a momentous year for both Keller and the Corporation. For the BBC, 1946 was the year in which its unprecedented experiment in cultural broadcasting, the Third Programme, with which Keller was later to be so passionately allied, first went on the air. For Keller, it was the point at which he fundamentally redefined himself as a writer and musician, switching both from playing to writing as his main source of income and, in his writing, from psychoanalytical to musical subjects. This was also the year in which he first heard *Peter Grimes*, an event which appears to have affected him so profoundly that it might actually have been the catalyst of his change of direction.

Keller's suggestion to the BBC of a talk on Freud is indicative of his predominant intellectual preoccupations up to that time. Throughout the early 1940s, he had read widely in psychoanalytical literature, corresponded and collaborated with professionals in the field, and even undertaken an extended self-analysis. He took Freud's own self-analysis as a model, although his original motivation had been his discovery that 'it was impossible to obtain a training analysis without paying for it – what to me, then, were unfathomable sums of money'.[2] The self-analysis took the form of an hour's writing down free associations, and then analysing them, every day for five years. It is not clear exactly when he began and ended this process, but the five years certainly included 1943 and 1944, during which time he was apparently considering a career as a psychoanalyst.[3]

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1 Letter from Keller to the Director of Talks, 14 February 1946 (BBC WAC Talks Contributor File: Hans Keller, File 1, 1946–62).

2 *1975* (1977), p. 87.

3 See Keller's correspondence with Margaret Phillips (CUL Keller Archive). Keller later recalled that his interest in psychology had dated back to his schooldays, remembering that, for part of his school matriculation examination, he had written an extended essay on

Keller wrote a number of essays on psychological subjects during this period, but most of them remained unpublished. Their subjects are varied and include 'War, Peace and Psychology', 'The Psychology of Leadership', 'Peace and Pessimism', 'Apropos of Beauty and Reflection', 'A Sixteen Months Old Boy and his Mother Substitutes', 'Self-Knowledge', 'Religion' and 'The Need for Pets'.[4] The issue which engaged his interest above all others, however, and which he made the subject of prolonged and detailed study, was the psychology of different social groups – and in particular a phenomenon which he identified as 'group self-contempt', or, more technically, 'nemesistic displacement'. In a letter written after he had been considering this idea for some time, he defined it as follows:

> As a result of studying the psychology of certain Jewish attitudes (I'm a Jew), of certain common traits in prostitutes, and in women, I have come to feel justified in assuming the existence of a phenomenon which could be called group self-contempt, or, in more exact language, nemesistic displacement. (In adopting the term nemesism as designating inturned aggression I follow the suggestions of Rosenzweig and Flügel.) It seems to me that this phenomenon always appears in groups whose members are, or regard themselves as being, in some way persecuted by members of other groups which occupy an authoritative position. Margaret Phillips (*The Education of the Emotions*), with whom I am working on group research, has drawn my attention to the appearance of 'group self-contempt' in teaching groups, and Meerlo's 'Psychopathic Reactions in Liberated Countries' (7.4.45, *Lancet*) seems to confirm my assumption.[5]

Keller's work and correspondence with the educational psychologist Margaret Phillips was very significant in the development of his psychological interests. They met in August 1943, but had been corresponding for a year before that, ever since Keller had sent her a lengthy reply to the research questionnaire on social groups which she had been circulating the previous summer.[6] They corresponded frequently and at length, discussing their current studies and wider ideas, with the result that Keller abandoned the work on shame with which he had been previously involved (fragmentary drafts for 'The Psychology of Pudency' dating from

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'*The Brothers Karamazov*: A Contribution to Dostoevsky's Depth Psychology'. He later described the title as 'pretentious', adding that 'nowadays ... I'm not interested in my contribution to Dostoevsky's depth psychology, but in his to ours.' (Letter from Keller to Mrs G. Learner, Librarian of the British-USSR Association, 24 March 1981, CUL Keller Archive). Keller appears not to have begun his serious study of psychology, however, until after his release from internment.

4 The last three of these pieces have been published posthumously as an appendix to Keller (1995) *Three Psychoanalytic Notes on Peter Grimes*.

5 Letter to Dr Rickman, editor of *The British Journal of Medical Psychology*, 3 April 1947 (CUL Keller Archive).

6 The social groups which Keller took as his subject on this occasion were the string quartet and the internment camp.

1942–43 are still extant in CUL Keller Archive) and joined Phillips in a long study of small social groups in wartime Britain.[7] The study of teaching groups to which Keller refers in the letter quoted above was a joint project which resulted in a 96-page report, drafted by Keller, on the 'Psychology and Ethics of School Staff Groups'.[8] As he explains in the Preface to this report, central to their method of collaboration was the contrast between their two approaches to the task: Margaret Phillips embarked on it 'without being attached to any particular psychological school', while Keller, who was deeply immersed in Freudian literature (to the extent that the psychoanalyst Willi Hoffer considered his knowledge to be 'unequalled'[9]) provided an alternative psychoanalytical view. Working in this way, Keller hoped, would mean that 'the resulting treatment of evidence will perhaps be marked by a greater degree of realism than would be possible without that kind of collaboration. The occasions on which conclusions compatible with each other were arrived at by the investigators were numerous.'[10] To increase this 'realism', Keller concluded the report by presenting the reactions of other psychologists who had read it in draft.

As well as their observation of school groups, Keller and Phillips also looked at the dynamics of such groups as fire brigade staff,[11] youth clubs, evening classes and bridge parties (Keller defined the latter as 'sadism on a sublimated level'). On a more theoretical level, on 29 September 1945, they presented to the British Psychological Society a joint paper on 'The Psychological Significance of some Sociological Conceptions of the Group' in which, during alternate presentations, they outlined the different ways in which 'associative' and 'community' groups are related to the family pattern, with Keller concluding that the development of 'community' groups into 'associations' is a natural transition, paralleling the development of the individual from childhood to maturity.[12] Keller later presented to the Society

7 Their work together took place principally in 1944–47, during which time their main project was a joint book, 'The Psychology of Social Unity', of which a large proportion survives (CUL Keller Archive). Their collaboration became more sporadic after 1947, by which time Keller was turning his attention increasingly to musical subjects, but it was still intended that he should make a contribution to the book as late as 1960. Eventually, however, Phillips published her research alone, as *Small Social Groups in England* (1965).

8 The unpublished report is undated, but was probably written early in 1946, as a footnote on page 80 refers to Keller's 1946 article 'Male Psychology' as 'going to press as I write'. It contains a chapter on 'group self-contempt' as observed in teachers (CUL Keller Archive).

9 See *1975* (1977), p. 87.

10 From the Preface to the report.

11 It was 'in the diary of an Auxiliary Fire Brigade's group life during the war' that Keller says he first encountered group self-contempt. ('Resistances to Britten's Music: Their Psychology', *Music Survey*, Spring 1950.)

12 The definitions of 'community' and 'association' are missing from Keller's copy of the paper, as Margaret Phillips gave the opening section which defined these terms. However, the same terms are used in their report on school staff groups, in which Keller