

A History of Test Card Music

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Often incorrectly described as ‘lift music’ or ‘muzak’, the music that accompanied the BBC and ITV test cards is far from bland. Neville Roberts sets the record straight on this very British phenomenon.

OK – I’ll come clean! I’ve always enjoying listening to light music. When I fancy a change from Bach and Vivaldi, I usually turn to jazz, big bands and ‘easy listening’ orchestral music. Up until the mid eighties when 24-hour television took over, there was always the good old test card to fill in the gaps between programmes and the music that accompanied those iconic images was of much higher quality than you might at first think.

The huge diversity of musical genre that was used and the high quality of the musicians and performances may come as a surprise to many who equate the music of the test cards with the piped music that has polluted the audio atmosphere in public places over the years.

In the beginning

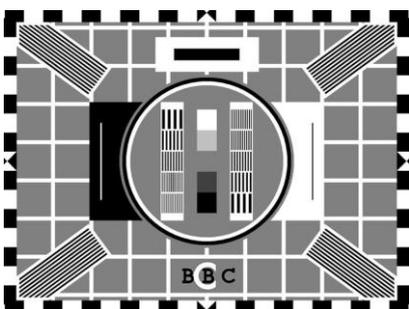
It was in 1936 that television started in the UK. As television programmes were not broadcast continuously throughout the day, something was required to be transmitted between the programmes to allow television dealers to demonstrate their products. It may seem strange to people nowadays that in the forties and fifties you couldn't just buy a television, take it home and switch it on. Indeed it was quite a skilled job to set one up. There were adjustments required for height, width, linearity, synchronisation, contrast and focus before the televisions were usable and those settings often changed as sets the warmed up!



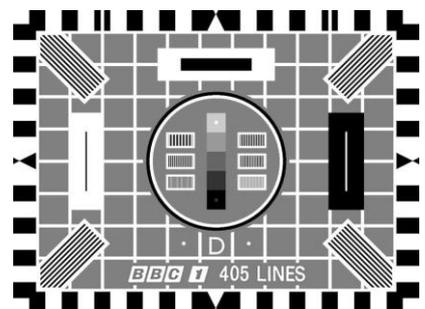
When colour came to Britain in the late sixties, you could easily spend half a day setting up one of those early colour televisions with the myriad of convergence, purity and linearity controls, which all interacted with each other! The half-hour colour trade test films provided by companies like Shell with their imaginative titles of “Paint” and “Prospect for Plastics” and equally riveting epics from BP like “The Tide of Traffic” were great for dealer showrooms, but of little use to television installers.

It was soon realised, therefore, that some form of test pattern to assist with the setting up of receivers was necessary. However, it was not until after the war that the first test card was actually broadcast. Not only was a video test pattern required, but an audio signal to accompany the picture was needed, if only to check that the sound circuits were working. Indeed, a common feature of analogue television was the characteristic ‘vision buzz’ caused by elements of the video signal breaking through into the audio channel, often caused by inaccurate tuning of the channel. Of course, there was always the 440Hz tone (or for the musicians amongst you, the A above middle C!) on BBC or 400Hz on ITA, but that did get a bit boring after a while! It was therefore decided that music should also be transmitted to accompany the test card.

Music for trade test transmissions



The story starts in September 1955 when the BBC changed from the live playing of 78 records in random order to using music recorded on tapes. The tapes were recordings of these 78s that were grouped under either a classical or light music theme. For ITA the first trade test schedule commenced on Monday 17 June 1957 and, unlike with the BBC, it was always the practice to use commercially available records until they started using tapes in the late 1960s.



The music played with the ITA test

cards was all sourced from records that you could buy from your local record shop and spanned classical through to jazz and light orchestral.

In October 1959, the BBC started building a library of half-hour tapes to accompany the famous Test Card C image. The tapes consisted of two or three tunes, similar in style, followed by a BBC Ident (the well-known BBC Chimes played on a celeste and consisting of 3 notes: B-B-C!) and a 30 second silence. Tapes were known by the title of the first track as well as the BBC tape reference, for example, "My Friends" aka Tape BLN22/XE1203a, which was the first of the BBC2 1-hour tapes and was transmitted between 13 June 1972 and 20 June 1973.

One of the problems for the BBC music compilers were the restrictions placed by the Musician's Union on the use of needle-time music, which meant that music recorded in the UK could not be used. As a consequence, the compilers had to go abroad for material and the first stop was France. These early tapes therefore exhibited a distinct French style with titles like "La Foule", which was the first track of BBC TV Tape No. 1, and plenty of accordion music!

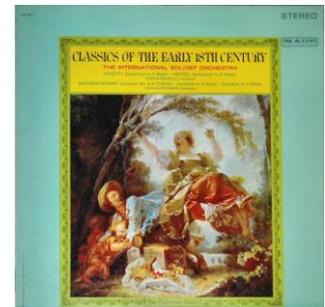


As more tapes were produced, music was sourced from further afield, for example, from Mozart Edition in Germany. The tapes were themed, with some devoted to classical music, such as on the 1962 BBC Tape 17 "Handel's Water Music" performed by the Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra, supported by some Paganini etudes and topped off with some Vivaldi played by the Hague Residentic Orchestra.

The quality of this music was high with superb orchestras and composers such as Roger Roger, Heinz Kiessling, Werner Tautz and our own Frank Chacksfield and Syd Dale. Music was purchased by the BBC from a variety of music publishers and made into BBC LPs and the BBC Coded Music library. In 1972, tapes were doubled in length to one hour compilations and, generally speaking, separate tapes were produced for BBC1 and

BBC2 use.

As this music came from abroad, it was not commercially available here. However, much of it would have been available from abroad - if you knew where to look! For example, the half-hour tape used in 1965 of the Rosetti Symphony in C Major (Murray AI) from the publishers Mozart Edition was not commercially available in the UK. Only a mono recording existed, which was fine for BBC use since television was mono in those days! It was not until a few years ago that I managed to track down a stereo LP recording in Australia of the exact same performance on the Mace record label that had been released commercially over there.



As alluded to earlier, these were not tin-pot recordings by third rate musicians. Many of the orchestras included the cream of library session musicians who were assembled abroad to record the music. One such orchestra was the Oscar Brandenburg Orchestra. In fact, Oscar Brandenburg was not a person, but a name conjured up from the OB nature of the recording – 'OB' standing for Outside Broadcast!

At this point, I should also mention that equally high quality music was used for other purposes, such as programme theme tunes and as other interval music. The composer Syd Dale, for example, wrote a piece called "Walk and Talk" that was the tune used as interlude music before the BBC transmitter information bulletins. Going back to the fifties, the British film composer and conductor, Charles Williams, wrote "The Young Ballerina", the background music for the famous Potter's Wheel interlude film, as well as the theme to the BBC Farming programme entitled "A Quiet Stroll", played by the Queen's Hall Light Orchestra of which he was the conductor.

Moving across to ITA music, this was sourced from commercial LPs with styles ranging from easy listening music such as Mantovani, Michel Legrand, Frank Chacksfield and Robert Farnon to classical pieces performed by the Halle Orchestra, the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, to mention just a few. Many of these recordings are still available, albeit second-hand, from dealers such as GEMM.com.

November 1982 heralded the arrival of Channel 4 and this new channel was keen to establish an identity of its own. The music chosen to accompany test card transmissions was also very different from that of the BBC and ITA. Channel 4 used UK library LPs from publishers like KPM, Joseph Weinberger and Ready Music. Moog and ARP synthesizers were the order of the day and the music reflected the modern era featured Reggae and funk music interspersed with other styles. The first track of the first C4 test card tape entitled "The Theme" was a synthesizer piece written by Val Podlasinski, who was an associate of Robert Moog. Other tracks featured works by Francis



Monkman, Andy Clark, Richard Harvey, Bob Morgan and Keith Mansfield from the KPM 1000 series library, Anthony Mawer and David Snell (the Joseph Weinberger Programme Music label) and original piano compositions by Kathleen Crees in the style of classical composers sourced from a delightful Standard Music library LP.

As the eighties progressed and improvements in the design of television sets meant that less work (if any) was required to set them up, the poor old test card was squeezed out to make room for the altogether inferior material that is – daytime TV! What gaps there were between programmes were filled with CEEFAX in Vision on the BBC and the music used tended to be tapes of single albums, rather than the varied musical programmes of the test card tapes. By the 1990s, BBC1 had completely filled its daytime slots and there were only a few remaining slots on BBC2 for CEEFAX.

What is available today?

With the advent of organisations such as the Global Electronic Music Marketplace (www.gemm.com) and those specialising in rare and out of print classical records like Parnassus Records (www.parnassusrecords.com), it is possible to find quite a lot of material. As radio stations turf out their old LPs, many find their way to these dealers where they become available to buy, often for the first time.

To cater for the resurgence in interest in light music, a number of CDs have been made in recent years containing remasters from the original source material used by the BBC. Collections of such CDs are available from Apollo Sound (www.apollosound.com) and two from Chandos Flyback and, in particular, the registered charity Winchester Hospital Radio (www.whr.org.uk). The WHR CDs are worthy of note as the quality of the remastered recordings is extremely high and often familiar tunes are heard in stereo for the first time.



CDs from overseas are easy to get hold of nowadays and a fine example of the Heinz Kiessling recordings used on BBC trade are available from Bliss Records in Germany via the Brilliant Musik website at www.brillant-musik.de.

Like the BBC, Channel 4 music was library music from a variety of music publishers and was not, on the whole, commercially available. There were a few exceptions, however, and Gordon Giltrap (www.giltrap.co.uk) released a great CD entitled “Airwaves” in 2000 (La Cooka Ratcha LCVPI08CD) that contained the tracks from the LP TIM1038 released by Themes International, including “Heroes” used as track 2 of the first C4 test card tape, “El Greco” as track 6 of the third tape and “Rainbells”, which was track 4 of the fifth tape.



As the IBA music was sourced from commercial LPs, much of this material is readily available in its original LP format from GEMM and the like. In addition, an increasing number of CDs are emerging containing re-issues of the original material from Amazon. Just go to the CD section and search for Manovani, Bert Kaempfert, Herb Alpert and so on.

No article on test card music would be complete without a reference to the Test Card Circle. This organisation was formed in 1989 when a few people discovered they were not alone in enjoying the music played during BBC and ITA trade test transmissions. Amongst other things, members have access to a database that they have compiled containing details of all the BBC trade test tapes from the start in 1959 until 1982. Apart from links to CDs of the music there is also a wealth of information on test cards which, if you are anything like me, you will find fascinating! Have a look at www.testcardcircle.org.uk for more information.

For me and many others, the Golden Age of test card music was from the mid sixties to the late seventies. Even for those of you who don't remember that far back, the enormous variety of material, ranging from the traditional to the downright quirky, is a musical feast waiting to be discovered. Because of this, I am absolutely certain that there will be something for everyone, so dig in!

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