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The British Music Information Centre

EMERGING FROM THE HORROR of concrete and 'temporary surface' that one day will be smoothed into the rebuilt Bond Street tube station, one finds it a relief to look across Oxford Street and into Stratford Place towards the elegance of Lord Derby's former home which now flies the elephant flag of the Oriental Club. If you enter Stratford Place, passing on your right the limousines of the Kuwait Embassy and on your left the offices of Polydor, you will arrive at number 10, the home of the Royal Society of Musicians, in which are also housed the Incorporated Society of Musicians, the Composers' Guild of Great Britain and the British Music Information Centre.

The Centre will celebrate its tenth birthday on November 7. Its purpose is to facilitate performance of 20th century British music by providing a reference library of scores, recordings and biographical information, and mounting occasional events. It is open to the public, 10am to 5pm, Monday to Fridays.

The scores are in browser boxes arranged according to their performance requirements, e.g. orchestra, brass ensemble, solo instrument, opera, church choir, songs, school music. All the scores have been given to the Centre, mostly by composers or publishers. There are roughly equal proportions of manuscript and printed scores. They begin with composers working at the beginning of the century — Elgar, Delius, Stanford. (This we owe largely to a windfall which arrived when the British Council decided to disband its library of scores and discs.) And they carry on right up to the present; new composers are always emerging to contribute scores. It is to the emergent composer, not always young, that the Centre feels its most crucial responsibility. In most cases a publisher will not promote a composer unless he has already achieved some notable performances, and the Centre is the only place where his work can be on permanent display. Who can submit scores? If the composer is a member of the Composers' Guild, which set up and to some extent supports the Centre through a levy on subscriptions, his scores go in automatically. Scores sent by publishers are also accepted without question. In other cases there is a scrutiny panel which exists not to make an 'artistic judgement' but simply to preserve the objective integrity of the collection. The question of just who is a British composer is more awkward. So many Commonwealth composers are resident at some stage in Britain, and so many British composers reside for a time in other Commonwealth countries that we accept them both ways. This seems to make sense, though not so much for North America.

The records are all long-playing and all given by composers or record companies. Some have intrinsic interest as recordings, but our main interest in them is simply to have a recording to back up a score. Recordings of contemporary music are not best-sellers and are deleted pretty quickly: more than half our discs are now unobtainable though they may have been the only recordings ever made of a work.

The tapes are all large-size open-reel. (We have just obtained a grant from the Leche Trust for further equipment, including a cassette unit.) Apart from a few from Novello or private donors, all the tapes are owned by the composers and simply housed here for study. We record performances onto the tapes from recordings supplied by the composers or their publishers, or directly from radio.

It is as well to point out that we never allow any score or recording to leave the Centre or any copying to be done without the express permission of the copyright owner. If you wish to obtain performance material you can go directly to the publisher, or in the case of works in manuscript, we shall put you in touch with the composer.

As for listening facilities, in 1967 the fashion was for housing everything in a wooden cabinet: we now call this multiple unit the coffin. It can record onto tape or cassette from tape, cassette, radio or disc. It is connected to loudspeakers, but we normally use headphones, and the two separate record players and tape decks can only be used with 'phones, allowing everyone to listen undisturbed. The piano may be used for trying things over.

Scores, discs and tapes are indexed on cards. The Centre has also published five catalogues: *Orchestral Music* vols. 1 and 2 (1958, 1970), *Chamber Music* (1969), *Instrumental Solos and Duos* (1972) and *Keyboard Solos and Duos* (1974). A complete set costs £2.40 (\$7.50) post free, or they may be had singly.

For composers who are already established, biographical information may be obtained from books, articles and record sleeves. But the Centre provides access to information on emergent, unpublished and unrecorded composers that would otherwise be unobtainable.

Special exhibitions are put on frequently at the Centre by publishers and the BBC for composers receiving notable anniversaries or significant first performances. This year we have already had Elizabeth Maconchy at 70 and John Joubert at 50, the one from Chester and the other Novello, and we shall have Wilfred Josephs from mid-June. During the Proms each year the BBC displays a score of each of its newly-commissioned works for public inspection. Record companies have so far been slow to see the value of this facility.

The Centre is available free of charge to performers, either individuals or groups, wishing to present programmes in which 20th century British works predominate. We have had performances by well-known improvisation groups, of electronic tapes as well as more orthodox recitals. These are informal occasions and may include scheduled discussions; the value of a friendly try-out both for composer and performers is inestimable. In the evening the Centre makes a very pleasant music room and has a faultless acoustic. Anyone who is interested should contact the Librarian at least three months in advance of the proposed date.

As well as material on British composers, the Centre regularly receives discs, scores and biographical information from the music information centres of other countries promoting their own composers. Though we can do nothing like this ourselves we can't stop the stuff coming in, and I for one wouldn't want to. The discs have all been catalogued, but the scores and pamphlets have still to be put in order.

There are of course other information centres nearer home. The Scottish Music Archive is part of the University of Glasgow campus, the Welsh Arts Council is setting up a centre as part of the University College, Cardiff campus and Dublin is also looking to do something of the sort. (There is of course no English Centre.) These other institutions are essential to our functioning as the British Centre and we in turn are able to direct special interest towards them.

A count was first made of visitors in 1969, when it was 354; in 1976 it was 1,323. They come from Greater London most frequently, but also from all over Britain, the Commonwealth, the USA and Europe. About half are students. Taken a different way, about half are looking for performance material: instrumentalists, singers, conductors, television and radio producers, many of whom come from continental stations. Some come specifically to look for a composer from whom to commission a work, something being done more and more by schools today. We see journalists, musicologists, librarians, musicians engaged in research, students with projects. There are also teachers, sometimes in groups. We have a special section where works intended for school use or for beginners can be browsed through — not that teachers ever confine themselves to that section.

As it comes to the end of its first ten years, the Centre is having to undergo a reappraisal of itself in order to prepare for its teenage. The principal factors here must be its potential for growth and its relationship with other bodies upon whom it must depend for financial aid. If the present ethos is to be maintained it must continue with its present services and say with double meaning, 'Everything given free'.

The Centre was originally furnished by a grant from the Gulbenkian Foundation. Since then it has existed on an Arts Council grant (£1,000 in 1967, rising to £3,500 in 1976) and a covenanted grant from the Performing Right Society (£1,000 per annum for seven years from 1971 yielding £1,640 per annum). Other small grants and donations brought the total income up to just over £6,000 for the first time last year. The staff consists of secretarial services provided by the Composers' Guild and a Librarian with a part-time assistant. The Arts Council has had to warn all recipients of grants that it may not be able to maintain them in the coming year and the Performing Right Society is not intending to renew its covenant. Discussions are now taking place under the auspices of the Arts Council; universities have been approached; certain trusts have shown cautious sympathy.

It is probable that the Centre must, like any ten-year-old, now enter a decade of growth. As the 20th century goes on, the material of the fairly constant number of living composers is being buried by that of the growing toll of dead composers. As the end of the shelving space comes within sight should we not enter the world of the microfiche? There is no doubt that the Centre's work for the living composer will have to be supported by specially interested parties; its growing value as a national archive may be a wider responsibility.

The British Music Information Centre (10 Stratford Place, London W1, tel. 01-449 8567) is open to the public Monday to Friday, 10am to 5pm.