

MARGARET GRACE PRUDAMES

My Visit to the B.B.C. 1946

So we were really going to broadcast! It seemed almost impossible that we, insignificant school-girls as we were should have the chance to sing and play to people all over the world!

During the week previous to the broadcast we practised hard, gleefully missing at least one lesson each day. "This is fine", we thought, as, making our apologies, we left the rest of our form to tackle geometry theorems or a passage of French.

The great day, February 3rd, dawned grey and miserable. Wishing the hours of the morning speedily away, we (not feeling at all hungry) endeavoured to eat a reasonably sized lunch at 11.45a.m. All those in the choir and orchestra had been asked to meet at 12.45p.m. At school. We were told that two coaches would take us, while a few girls, not convinced of the reliability of their tummies when travelling in coaches, declined the offer and journeyed to London by train with a few members of staff.

At the arranged meeting-place, Kendrick School, the coaches rolled up and we all clambered in. To our dismay we learnt that the Head-mistress, Miss Towne, was to travel in the same coach as that in which we were travelling! What a blow! Our whole afternoon would be spoilt!

During the journey the rain slashed against the windows of the coach, but in spite of this and the fact that we could not raise our voices above a whisper because of Miss Towne, our spirits were far from damped.

Fortunately, on reaching Broadcasting House, a tall but less inspiring building than most of us imagined, we found that the rain had stopped.

We all jumped from the coach and meekly, with wide eyes, we followed Miss Towne and the members of staff through the glass doors and into a sort of reception hall. This hall looked rather like the entrance hall of a cinema, except, there was no booking office!

Above a door immediately before us was a plaque of stone inscribed with Latin. To the right of the door was a large desk, presumably at which enquires, engagements, etc. were made. While Miss Towne was enquiring as to where we were to go, Josephine Plummer came towards us and hustled us through a long but well-lit corridor which glowed a dull gold in colour.

Breathless with excitement the choir and orchestra, the members of which were still clutching their cellos, cymbals, triangles, violins, etc. were shown into the Concert Hall of Broadcasting House. It was very much like a small theatre: several rows of plush seats, closely resembling those in a theatre, in that each row was raised higher than the row in front; a low platform; a piano; music stands and, most thrilling of all, six microphones, met our gaze.

We were told to leave our hats and coats on the seats and get ready for the final rehearsal. The conductor of the orchestra, who had all the music scores had not yet arrived, so the choir was asked to sing first the songs which were accompanied only by the piano: "The Vagabond" and "Shepherd, Shepherd, Leave Your Labours".

Eventually Miss Tull and the music arrived and the orchestra started to tune up! After a few minutes everything was ready for the rehearsal and the orchestra crashed its way into the first tune: A Peasant Dance, a fine inspiring beginning.

After the orchestra had played three pieces the choir sang "Brother James's Air" with the orchestra. The conductor was Miss Dankworth. The orchestra then played three pieces of music by Handel and finally the Choir and orchestra joined forces to sing "Now Once Again".

During this rehearsal a grey-haired, rather distinguished looking man was arranging the microphones, of which two stood upright in front of the choir, two others were on apparatus vaguely resembling a see-saw, another hung in the middle of the orchestra and the sixth stood beside the piano. This was a balance test as well as a rehearsal, so that all the parts of the orchestra and choir could be arranged in such a way that they were all heard.

After every item we were given encouraging praise by a member of the B.B.C., who sat in a little room beside the concert hall at a miniature receiving station.

After the rehearsal, when the microphones and soloists had been placed in the most satisfactory positions we were shown into the B.B.C. Canteen for tea. The canteen was very similar to a ship's cabin, probably because of the low ceiling. We were astonished to see the plates of dainty sandwiches and cakes, which had been prepared for us on a fixed polished wood table in the centre of the room, and we were offered orangeade, lemonade or tea. We were very impressed by this unexpected sight, and even more impressed when we learnt that we could eat as much as we liked without paying anything for it!

After tea we tidied our hair and washed our hands. We had been told to return to the Concert Hall about half an hour before the broadcast was due to begin and the time which we had to spare was spent in reading the notices on various doors, peeping through key-holes into mysterious rooms, staring through the glass windows at men beside queer gramophone like machines and losing our way about the building!

However, we all arrived with beating hearts and flushed faces at the Concert Hall at the appointed time. The Violins and cellos were tuned as they had never been tuned before. "Everything must go off well", we repeated to ourselves. Miss Towne, unusually elusive, appeared to wish us good luck a few minutes before five o'clock and then disappeared.

We took our positions and cleared our throats for the last time. Then silence. We could see the lights above the doors – one door to the right of us, another to the left. We could hear plainly the ticking of the large clock behind us. The second hand slowly slid round towards five o'clock. One more minute to wait - - twenty seconds - - Josephine Plummer had taken her seat beside a large desk on which stood a microphone - - ten seconds - - Miss Tull was ready with her baton in her hand - - - five seconds - - - the sweat was standing out on our

foreheads - - - two seconds - - - our knees were knocking and our fingers crossed. Someone in the orchestra made a thumbs-up sign to someone in the choir, - - - one second - - - then - - - phew, we were on the air! The red lights above the doors had flickered and now glowed steadily. Then a soft voice said, "Hullo children. Now for Children's Hour today we have a very special - - -". Josephine Plummer was introducing the programme - - our programme. We had all expected her to yell or shout into the microphone, and her intimate whisper steadied our nerves considerably. Then Josephine Plummer nodded her head to Miss Tull, who raised her baton and the Kendrick Orchestra played their first pieces. Their Peasants' Dances were gay and colourful, their minuets were melodious and their use of light and shade was appreciable. On the whole the orchestra played extremely well. And the choir? Naturally we were rather nervous at first and to us our voices sounded unusual and strained, but as we sang we gained confidence so that we were able to put all we had into our last song with the orchestra: "Now Once Again". This was the climax of the whole broadcast. Our voices rang out as they had never rung before, the orchestra put all they could into this inspiring piece of music; the bows slid across the violins and cellos with confidence, the triangles and cymbals flashed.

We played and sang between two talks. The first was a story by May Jenkin, told for the very young listeners (we all considered it an extremely silly story) and the second, a talk about Jerusalem, which might have proved interesting if it had not been given by an old man whose voice we could not hear, bored us a little as we were impatient to sing again.

We did, however, enjoy our visits to Broadcasting House. It thrilled and excited us. The autograph hunters had a lucky day, too. We were able to obtain autographs of "Elizabeth" Josephine Plummer, the grey-haired man whose writing we could not decipher, so we do not know his name even now, and Albert Sandler, who was playing later that evening.

We left Broadcasting House rather reluctantly, glancing around us for the last time. "Would we ever enter Broadcasting House again?" We wondered. Probably not, but who knows?

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