

Memoire 3. Leaving London.

I left London in 1976. People ask me why a musician would desert a supposedly thriving musical metropolis for the assumed cultural desert of Australia. There are many personal and professional reasons: depression, the onset of yet another grey winter, and I like deserts. The final straw, however, was the Kafka-esque experiences of the job I had at the time.

My official title was 'Recording engineer and video operator at The Royal Academy of Music'. Sounds impressive enough, except it wasn't. I found the job in the small ads at the back of my local rag, along with opportunities for traffic wardens, toilet cleaners, street cleaners, night watchmen, and other activities designed to keep the capital from settling into third world status. Being unemployed and having gained some useful experience in recording studios, I thought I could bullshit my way into this job. And so one day I sat in front of Sir Anthony, the principal of said prestigious music institution. How to describe him? A man of the lost empire, patronising, not so abrasive as the Queen's husband Phillip, but with a serious posh accent and attitude. A man comfortable in his born-to-rule skin. He looked through you as if he were addressing someone in the next room. The interview rambled for ten minutes without so much as a word about music or how to record it. Anything else? he said looking at the house manager. Eh ...what about music, Sir Anthony? Ah yes, like the stuff, do you? I nodded. OK job's yours.

I was taken down to the recording studio to meet the retiring engineer by the name of Lofty. Lofty, a quintessential Cockney gent, had been at the Academy forever, and he had built the studio by hand. The mixing desk, painted in waiting room green and possessing huge wheels instead of faders, looked like it had been stripped out of the cockpit of a World War II fighter aircraft. I noticed that the ageing Ferrograph tape recorder was set to run at 3 3/4 inches per second - to ration the tape, Lofty assured me. (I was used to multitrack studios running at 15 inches per second, mixed down to 7 1/2 two track). So all this was quite a shock. In a high decibel voice, Lofty repeated Sir Anthony's enquiry - Like music, do you? Sit down there young Jon, and I'll play you one of my favourites. He slowly wound up the wheels, and the Ferrograph spluttered into play. Ah, I love a bit of Verdi, young Jon, yes I do. From the homemade speaker cabinets emerged a loud rumbling sound, the rhythm of which gave away its origin - 'Dies Irae' from the *Requiem Mass*. It rumbled on: the choir sounded like they held cushions in front of their stifled mouths. Lofty, the treble frequencies sound a little distant, I cautiously suggested. Lovely, isn't it, Lofty contentedly beamed as he enjoyed his hand-crafted work. It was then I realised that the recording engineer of The Royal Academy of Music was deaf!

The institution may not have had money for recording tape, but they spared nothing in printing the program for the Wednesday lunchtime concert. Behind this one-page weekly epic functioned a whole printing department with four or five ancient hot type printing machines and two full-time employees. Once a year they printed the program for the student opera production. They always greeted me with a knowing smile, as if to say, you too will become as inefficient and obsolete as us once you've settled down and learnt the rules.

It wasn't all Kafka. I had access to a basic electronic music studio, which I explored in the evenings with gusto, and the keys to a roomful of exotic ancient keyboard instruments upon which to experiment. I got to play on Stradivarius and Guarnerius violins owned by students from the ruling classes who thought it was quite normal to walk around with several hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of instruments under their arm. Once my credentials as a quiet weirdo became known, I was approached by students wishing to perform the endless list of 1960s pieces for solo instrument and tape - Luciano Berio's *Sequenzas* and the like. Out of the blue came a whole festival dedicated to the music of Edgard Varèse. The staff and most students hated it, but I lapped it up, making recordings with first edition scores in front of me - protein. (I spent any spare time self-educating because I had access to all kinds of scores and recordings.)

Every so often, I would be summoned by Sir Anthony to his rooms on the first floor to play back recordings posted in by optimistic applicants to the Academy. These were tapes from across the world (notably Asia), professionally and no doubt expensively recorded in studios at 7 1/2 inches per second. Sir Anthony kept a little domestic Phillips tape recorder upon which these tapes had to audition. The Phillips machine would only play at 3 3/4 inches per second (the Academy

standard) with tracks one and three running in one direction and tracks two and four running in the contrary direction. I pointed this incompatibility out to Sir Anthony and his astonishing reply was: Throw them in the bin; there'll be plenty of others.

Part of my job was a sort of education assistant. Terrified student conductors would be verbally assaulted and humiliated by irritated old conductors who hadn't made it big time. I faithfully videoed the carnage, so the distasteful torture could be analysed at the next session. The same students were subjected to recordings of the western canon, performed by full orchestra with wrong notes and more subtle 'wrongness' such as chords which were inverted beyond the composer's intention. As I played these 'spot the mistake' gems back to the classes, I realised they were classics in their own right, and it is to my eternal regret that when I finally and spontaneously walked out of the Academy and my job, I failed to take them with me, as they would have made a fantastic box set - *The Spot the Mistake Classics*.