Michelsen Morten

***Radio’s contributions to the interbellum institutionalization of musical life***

It is hard to decide if broadcast radio just happened at the right time in history (the 1920s) or if the communicational logics connected to it were so convincing that it would break through no matter what. I will not try to answer this question, assuming that both theses have their merits, but I would like to discuss how radio in a matter of a few years became the main cultural, and in this case musical, institution in many European countries, especially those who subscribed to what has later become known as public service radio. One aspect is quantitative. Thanks to the license fee system, the corporations collected huge sums to build up the whole broadcasting infrastructure and to pay for the musical content, normally played live. This entailed the corporations becoming the largest employers of musicians, and because the copyright system began to work in earnest in the 1920s composers and lyricists received royalties like never before. Another quantitive aspect is the sheer amount of music becoming available for listening as European broadcasting corporations broadcasted between 1500 and 7000 hours of music per year (IBU 1936 numbers). Another aspect is qualitative, and I will focus on this, especially on these new institutions’ choices when deciding what music to broadcast. They became a major force in defining what music actually was and how the field of music was constituted, for example by organizing more ‘rationally’ the distribution of musical values within a closed system of programming dominated by a high/low paradigm. I will discuss how this institutional gatekeeping principle was not a simple either/or but a continuously changing set of complex negotiations among many actors within an outside the institutions. The example will be how discourses regulated by national radio managements argued for serious music while the actual programming practices demonstrated that various popular music genres was the musical bread and butter of radio. In such ways, radio as institutions contributed crucially to the formation of a musical culture that is still with us today.

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