

# Music 2017

## *A British dystopia by Philip Tagg*

*This paper was originally written for a conference at Salford in September 1993. This revised version (still unpublished) was used by Copenhagen Wild Cards as press release material for their exhibition and events in June 1996.*

It is September, 2017 and I am 73 years old. Although suffering from a minor heart condition, I still refuse to sign the BUPA Euthanasia for Responsible Senior Citizens form and I am writing this on a clattered-out ten-gigabyte IBM-clone from the late 1990s whose replacement chips were manufactured illegally at an underground workshop near Bolton that was raided and burnt down by the fire service five years ago. I will not sign the form until I have described the state of music in Britain today.

Everything is privatised. The Arts Council disappeared in 1998 and all local councils were sold off by 2007, along with all regional and local arts authorities. Liverpool City Council was bought by Kodak-McCartney and Littlewoods in 2004. This takeover meant that Liverpool City Council changed its name to Beatlewood Municipal Welfare p.l.c. — BMW for short. Kodak-McCartney has since been sold to Hamamatsu International who now own a 36% controlling share in BMW. Liverpool has a 95% unemployment rate. At the national level, the Tory-New-Labour coalition are still in power after more than twenty years and are the only electable party. Apart from the nation's traditional income from international financial piracy, our only positive trade balance is derived from selling cultural goods and services, more specifically from the export of TV programmes and our language. British music is no longer a viable export. But more about that later.

Let's look at music in Britain today. Hardly anyone plays, sings or dances any longer. Most of the country's population have no work to go to, no money to spend on sport or culture. People only leave home to do the odd bit of shopping. Music and TV are available by cable on the huge pick-and-mix system installed and owned by *Freechoice Music Systems* (U.K.) p.l.c. (FMS™ for short).<sup>1</sup>

You pay for what you use from the 48 music menus available on the FMS™ terminals rented by practically every household in the country. Full access to the cosmopop menu costs £500<sup>2</sup> a year for sound only, £1200 with video. Similar figures apply to most other popular channels such as the rock and heavy metal menu, the classical FM menu, the top thirty menu, the MoR and Eurovision menu, the operetta and musicals menu, the Hindi and Arab menu, the Latin-American menu, etc. The baroque-rococo menu, the medieval and European folk menu, the Viennese classics menu, the Afropop menu and the world music menu<sup>3</sup> are all more expensive in relation to their

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1. FMS™ saw its humble beginnings in the Music Box phone-in playlist started as long ago as 1992.
  2. All prices are pre-devaluation September 2017.
  3. Based on the Alan Lomax Global Jukebox facility, invented in 1992, this menu contains the oldest material in the whole FMS service bank.

lower number of subscribers, the most expensive being the avant-garde and experimental menu (£1000 a year sound only, £2200 with video). The Heritage Ministry runs a free service of 'classical standards' mixed with British folksong, brass band contests, etc., all interspersed with government propaganda shows like *The Cultural Standards Quiz*, *What's My Melodic Line?* and *Heritage Ahoy!*

The more money you have, the more menus you can subscribe to. The filthy rich subscribe to the Executive Eclectics Silver Link Super Club™ which gives you access to all menus. This costs £5900 a year, £11950 with video. You get everything at half price if you are prepared to put up with ten minutes advertising every hour but be warned that the system locks during commercials and you cannot switch it off until the next tune comes up. The services are available at 25% of standard rate if you can stand 20 minutes of advertising every hour and you can get the most popular menus for free if you don't mind adverts (and the system lock) for two thirds of your on-line time (forty minutes in the hour). Obviously, most of the population, being unemployed, are exposed to inordinate amounts of advertising which has largely lost its original purpose of persuading people to buy commodities because most of the people watching or hearing adverts can't afford the goods displayed. The main point of advertising now is

'to maintain and develop standards of ownership aesthetics and culture' ... and to 'encourage individual enterprise by promoting desirable services and commodities as reward'.<sup>4</sup>

Anyhow, the argument goes: no-one need miss anything provided you can pay for it or put up with advertising.

Of course, only those in the Executive Eclectics Silver Link Super Club™ (3% of the population) can afford to avoid adverts and access any music they like in FMS™ central memory. It is also only they, along with those attending governmentally approved 'colleges of musical excellence' (CMEs) like the McCartney College of Performing Arts in Liverpool (McCoPA) or the Salford Hacienda Conservatory (SHaCo), who are given computer clearance to access the sampled-sounds memory bank and to actually *produce* music via the FMS™. (Here it should be remembered that no-one can really afford instruments any longer because of unemployment and poverty. Also, according to unofficial underground surveys, only 0.5% of those who said that they would 'like to play a musical instrument' actually get to a CME and thereby acquire computer clearance to FMS™ sampling and sequencing banks).<sup>5</sup>

Access to FMS™ digital mixing memory is prohibitively expensive and non-paying computer clearance is only assigned to those graduating with distinction from CMEs. In fact, CME magnetic card fraud is quite a widespread underworld industry and one of the few glimmers of hope in this brave new world. This is one reason why new FMS™ cards now expire after only three months instead of after a year.

While on the subject of music education I ought to mention the conservatories. Officially these sort under the same legislation as CMEs. In Liverpool we have the Brighthouse and Rastrick School of Brass and Big Band Music

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4. Guidelines for National Commodity Information Enterprises, paragraphs 14b, 27. *Parliamentary Cultural Standards Bulletin* 12/2 (September 2012), pp. 44-49.

5. For obvious reasons I cannot disclose the source of this or any other unsanctioned information.

(BARSOBBAM for short). To get an 'A' grade there you have to play Rimsky-Korsakov's *Flight of the Bumble Bee* at 212 b.p.m. in all keys on the E flat cornet or to score *Yesterday, My Way, God Bless The Child* and *Some Enchanted Evening* for fifteen different college band setups at five different levels of performance prowess. Liverpool also hosted for short periods the Kiri Te Kanawa Coloratura Conservatory and the Lloyd-Weber College of Musical Masterworks. These were short-lived ventures because the McCartney niece sponsoring the Coloratura Conservatory abandoned her Donizetti scales to become a Bagwam in Bhutan while the Hamamatsu boss pulled out of the Lloyd-Weber college when his two-year old son died of plutonium radiation. In this way, funding was withdrawn and rechannelled to matters religious and ecological.

Primary and secondary education, sold to private interests in the first decade of this millennium and recently declared voluntary under the 2016 *Freedom from Education Act*,<sup>6</sup> no longer have to include music on the curriculum. When they do, it is of course tailored for the relevant parent-pupil market. Thus, in the few struggling schools left on the proletarian Wirral, pupils get no more than a basic orientation in how to use computer terminals for music menus, while in fancy city centre schools or in arty-farty ghettos like Bootle, pupils may learn instruments, sing in choirs and to master the techniques of synthesizing, sampling, mixing, recording, picture sync., etc., etc. These days 30% of the population is illiterate (another statistic on the increase) and FMS™ popular music menus have become more expensive because screen graphics and icons have had to replace text.

Of course, the consumerist target group segmentation of society just reflects its inequalities. Not only do the haves get more and the have-nots less, the haves, musically speaking, can do more and more while the have-nots cannot afford to make any music at all. There are, however, a few encouraging pockets of resistance.

Recently, a group of unemployed black twenty-year-olds from Wavertree were taken to court for hacking their way into FMS's™ national music and notation bank. Using out-of-date notation software and MIDI interfaces, they were able to reconstruct Beethoven's Quartet in C# minor Op. 131 on condemned synthesizers with sequencing memories interlinked via an old ten-gigabyte PC like this one. They caused havoc on the cable network by butting into Liverpool's local cosmopop menu. Hundreds of young people poured spontaneously out into shopping malls shouting slogans like 'fuck the musical sewage farm' and 'roll in Beethoven'. BMW security ('the police' in local slang) made several arrests under paragraph 35 of the 1999 *Protection of Individual Choice Act* and the culprits had their on-line licences and menu cards revoked for one year.<sup>7</sup> Their Bodycare™ units, about which more below, were also confiscated for six months.<sup>8</sup>

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6. 'All persons between the ages of six and sixteen have the right to primary and secondary education' (article 1). 'Parents are responsible for deciding whether or not their children shall exercise the right laid down in article 1' (article 2).

7. The 1999 *Protection of Individual Choice Act* states: 'Freedom of the individual to choose whatever pictures, music, words he or she desires is enshrined in the citizen's charter of rights' (§1). 'Exchange, insertion, deletion or any other undue manipulation of cultural materials resulting in incompatibility with established freedom-of-choice categories is punishable under the Trade Descriptions Act' (§35).

8. *The Beatlewood Truth*, 18 September 2016, screen 12, menu 3, option 5.

From a critical viewpoint, what has happened over the last 25 years is that amateur music-making has basically disappeared. As early as the 1970s, musicologists had noted that almost no-one whistled tunes any longer. By the 1990s, practically nobody hummed or sang to themselves, let alone to others. Even the short-lived karaoke boom declined as fewer and fewer people could afford to go to the pub. With increasing unemployment, most people could not afford to buy manufactured instruments and, with the complete sell-out of public institutions to the private sector, there was no money for amateur music which has anyhow always been a totally unviable business venture. Apart from Heritage Ministry projects, business ventures are now the only form in which cultural production and distribution are possible.

Another reason for musical development and innovation grinding to a halt was the tight target-group segmentation already mentioned and its inscription into the citizen's charter via the 1999 *Protection of Individual Choice Act*. This act aggravated social inequality and reinforced the watertight compartmentalisation between haves and have-nots. Initially, target groups were maintained to make advertising turnover more reliable but, as parliamentary surveys show,<sup>9</sup> the haves choose to avoid adverts while the have-nots can afford neither to buy the products advertised nor to pay for programming without adverts. Before advertising reached this crisis, however, mixing musics was deemed counterproductive for the industry and without any interface between musics and the people those different musics represented, both musical and social change were virtually impossible. Of course, there are still those who insist on singing or on making their own instruments from bits of scrap plastic tubing and obsolete computer or video chips. But such people are treated as marginals and regarded as quaint and rather pathetic DIY eco-freaks.

Music education is geared to maintain this status quo of social and musical segmentation. Indeed, national curriculum directives stipulate:

'Music teaching must be voluntary' ... 'Areas of musical specialisation should reflect the relevant parent-pupil market profile of each school in keeping with the general intentions of the 1999 *Protection of Individual Choice Act*'.

The directives also state:

'All wilful confusion of music with politics is punishable under the 2010 *Protection of Leisure and Enjoyment Rights Act*'.<sup>10</sup>

This latter clause has made all discussion of music's uses, effects, meanings and functions virtually impossible. It prevents people from understanding what is going on in music and society and consequently impedes all efforts to improve the situation. In fact, Britain has today a music culture as boring and as impotent as the life situation of 95% of its population. All this has had a disastrous effect on the British music industry.

As late as 1998, music was still one of Britain's few foreign money earners. With the gradual rise in national unemployment from a mere 30% to an average of 75% around the turn of the millennium, the old commodity forms (cassettes, CDs and videos) were no longer affordable to the vast majority of the population. As money got tighter, so did music industry policies and

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9. *Parliamentary Cultural Standards Bulletin 11/1* (March 2011), p. 12.

10. *The Right to Choose Right — National Music Curriculum Directives*, p. 52. Parliamentary Stationery Office White Paper 1063. London, 2010.

strategies. In efforts to salvage whatever was left of the music industry, stringent copyright laws came into effect. All phonograms contained an anti-piracy code which blew up any apparatus used for copying. Of course, this meant a bootleg boom and innumerable cottage industrialists (the 'media locksmiths') who charged extortionate amounts for cracking codes, removing copy protection notches, etc. Samplers were also taken off the open market after Hamamatsu (who own Yamaha and Korg) had acquired CBS-Sony, after Nippon Digital had bought out Warner and after Akai-Roland had merged with Philips-Polygram. It was no longer in the interests of these Japanese megacorporations to produce instruments capable of emulating sounds in the phonogram products that were the mainstay of their income. 1998 amendments to international copyright legislation stated quite clearly:

'Any copying of existing musical structures and their subsequent reproduction and/or distribution in any form is punishable by confiscation of the offender's musical instruments and apparatus'.<sup>11</sup>

Musical structures — chords, sounds, melodic progressions, harmonic progressions, etc. — became in other words private property that could only be re-used by someone else than the copyright holder if the 'borrower' paid the musical property owner the proper fee according to a complex system of tariffs drawn up by the IMPPS.<sup>12</sup> This made composition an extremely difficult and expensive matter. For education and research it was a catastrophe: nothing could be quoted or played or reperformed without paying extortionate one-off music property rental fees. And only schools in rich areas could afford the annual blanket sum of £25000 for a full musical quotation license. This all put paid to the composition of new music. Moreover, the process of audience segmentation mentioned already had progressed so far that the homogeneous target groups for music were considered essential to preserve intact. In an initial period (1995-2007) they were the only certainties in the uncertain days of post-Thatcherite recession. And when advertising ceased to be a viable business venture, it was taken on board by the Heritage Ministry to 'preserve the variety and range of options in British culture and society'.<sup>13</sup>

As we have seen, this meant keeping ethnic groups, the sexes and the rich and poor in mutually exclusive cultural ghettos. Without the mix of musics, no new music could exist. It all meant that the music market totally stagnated and that Britain no longer had any interesting popular music to sell to the rest of the world. In fact, many British musicians emigrated to the boom economies of India, Indonesia, China, Azania and Argentina. A few of them became successful in establishing music production companies in societies where mixture, acculturation and dynamism were the order of the day. Those that might have helped make this country a musically lively place (like Vienna in the late eighteenth century, Chicago in the 1950s or Liverpool in the 1960s) quite understandably fled Britain in desperation.

Before signing my BUPA Euthanasia for Responsible Senior Citizens form, now that I have committed all this to stainless steel bubble memory, I have to add that it isn't just music that has suffered badly. Anything to do with

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11. *Manila Convention*, §141, amendment 13. On IMPPS Databank, menu 2, submenu 4, screen 3.

12. International Music Performance and Property Society.

13. Guidelines for National Commodity Information Enterprises, § 22. *Parliamentary Cultural Standards Bulletin 12/2* (September 2012), p. 48.

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the connection between body or emotions and mind and society has met an equally ignominious fate. For example, dancing in public has generally been regarded as old-fashioned, unnecessary and embarrassing since the mandatory introduction of Bodycare™ units into every household.<sup>14</sup>

These are wardrobe size furniture units that simulate a vast number of different virtual realities. So you can choose between 128 current sexual stimulation and satisfaction routines, 128 aerobic and dance packages, 64 bathing and showering alternatives, 64 individual sports participation routines, etc., etc. These packages and menus are updated all the time and linked to FMS™. As the British Bodycare p.l.c. advert goes:

'Got a headache again, has he? Don't worry. Make love to any of our fantastic hunks! Doo-doo-doo-da-doo' ... (pictures of hunks accompanied by orgasmic sounds and lush music) ... 'Who cares about your body? You care. We care. Bodycare'.

I wish I'd been able to see where things were going in the early nineties. I would have signed the BUPA form then or bought an active share in Bader-Meinhoff (U.K.) p.l.c.

[2937 words]

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14. Bodycare™ Installation Act, 2013.