

A CASE STUDY– A PROGRAMME FROM IDEA TO TRANSMISSION

A programme starts as an idea which is then researched, developed, produced and finally broadcast. This case study follows a feature programme proposed by the independent production company Soundscape Productions based in York and commissioned by BBC Radio 4.

'The First Song' was broadcast to BBC Radio 4 listeners on April 11th 2002 at 11.30am. Produced by Andy Cartwright and presented by singer Catherine Bott this recorded production asked 'who or what sang the first song?' The programme process from idea to airing took about two years work by the production team of producer, presenter, scriptwriter, technical support. The time-span was unusually long because the proposal was resubmitted with variations after it was originally turned down.

Once the original idea had been approved by the company a proposal that would be submitted to the Commissioning Editor of the network is prepared. Then they wait for the next commissioning 'round' which starts when the commissioning editor provides a list of the sorts of programmes and programme series slots that the independent production companies will be invited to fill.

In 2004 BBC Radio 4 was commissioning 15,000 programmes across 14 different genres each year. The network runs a Registered Supplier List which is reviewed annually and will not consider ideas from independent companies not on the list.

All the BBC networks produce guidelines to suppliers which outline the slots available, the kind of programmes being looked for and guide prices. A deadline for proposals is set

after which they draw up a shortlist. After discussions (the 'offers' meeting) on programme content, delivery dates and the budget the final list is drawn up.

It is imperative that the companies are fully aware of the network's audience and schedule. Their programme proposals need to reflect the networks aims to 'fuel the intellect and the imagination'. The companies also need to be sure that they can deliver on time and to stringent technical specifications. Like any other business they need to make sure that they will make a profit once they have paid all the staff involved, overheads and expenses so deciding and managing a budget is an important part of the process.

Preparing a proposal involves plenty of research time and documentation preparation.

The Commissioning Brief issued to all Independent Production Companies states that: Proposals need to include a clear date for any topical peg that the programme may relate to. Proposals should also indicate which time-slot is thought appropriate for the programme.

The proposal should be a brief synopsis that explains the focus of the idea with an indication of style and treatment.

Suggested presenters should be included where appropriate with a note on whether they have been approached or involved in developing the idea. It is not essential to sign up a presenter before initial discussions with the Commissioning Editor.

Proposals for series should give an idea of the breakdown into episodes.

The proposal is a selling document so needs to demonstrate why the network needs this programme, it should show evidence of research both of the topic and the potential audience, it should give an indication of how the programme will be structured, its content and its contributors, it should outline what questions the programme will ask and how it will answer them. The proposal will involve a lot of work if it is to successfully convince the Commissioning Editor that they should buy it for their listeners. Does the wording of the proposal enable the Editor to hear that programme in their head? Will you be able to speak convincingly to your proposal and supply supplementary information off the top of your head if asked to do so at the offers meeting with the Editor and his team?

Here is an extract from the 700 word proposal for *'The First Song'*:

'The programme will be challenging but also entertaining. It will be a highly crafted piece of radio, which will weave together the presentational narrative with interviews, musical illustrations and actuality. Use will be made of aural comparisons by, for example, juxtaposing a child's song with whale song and cross-fading between the sounds of animals and man's imitation of these sounds.'

'The First Song' started out as a proposal for a three part series but as a result of feedback from the offers meeting it was resubmitted as a one-off feature. The programme was made up of links from Catherine Bott, clips from interviews with music ethnologists, scientists, scholars, musicians and singers plus of course music, sounds, animal calls and bird song. Between the time of the proposal submission and the broadcast the choice of

presenter and some of the originally named contributors had changed. This is quite common as sometimes they may not be available to take part or even approached at this stage. Names may be submitted to illustrate the calibre or qualifications of those who will eventually be contributing. The Commissioning Editor needs to be notified of any changes to the conditions laid down about contributors or material as part of the offer that the producers need to implement. However, in this case as in others the basic premise and quality of the programme remains the same with contributors of equal standing.

After the Company have their offer accepted and are commissioned they need to start work on the production. Approaching and booking the presenter, getting copyright clearance for music performances and material, arranging and conducting interviews and editing their recorded material eventually working up that all important script. Here is a short extract from the thirteen page working script which was originally planned to run for 28'49" but was eventually cut down to 27'41". It contains links read by the presenter (CB), details of how a music extract and sound effect (FX) are to be included and clips from an interview with a composer (DF) plus the durations of these inserts and the time from the start of the programme they appear. So CB link 32 appears at 16 minutes and twenty four and a half seconds into the programme.

CB 32 16.24.30 The composer David Fanshawe burst onto the music scene in the early 1970's with his 'African Sanctus' – a dramatic blending of the English Choral tradition with his own recordings of indigenous music and traditional African songs.

Music 16.39 (Music fade up as before but add extra time so music up approx 16.30)

16.55.30 Since then Fanshawe has dedicated his life to recording ethnic
music from all around the world (Pause)

17.06.30 And his studio in Wiltshire is an Aladdin's cave of tapes containing,
he believes, some clues to the origin of song.

Music 17.08.30 (Music as before but add extra time so music up for approx 16.30. Music up again
to hit Sanctus hold at level until Deo then dip under so music up for approx 6.30. Then be out by excelicis
same place as before so music goes out earlier at 'by nature'.)

DF2b(i) 17.15 David Fanshawe

In: So much music that I have recorded...

Out: "...with their voices.

Dur: 14"

FX 17.30 Chorus of Frogs

(Start under above as before but at this point we need to establish the frogs 2 or 3 creaks
before dipping down.)

DF2b(ii) 17.34 David Fanshawe

In: I recorded frogs...

Out: ...in central Africa.

Dur: 4"

Once the script is prepared, all the inserts edited and put into order, music, sounds etc selected and timed it is time to go into the studio to mix the programme. Because this is going to be recorded any mistakes can be retaken and it can be edited or tidied up later. If a programme is to be mixed, all the sounds layered rather than simply being attached to each other, each sound needs to be available separately. In order to save time and demands on the presenter some segments that may be complex or are montaged together – that is to say mixed without a contribution from a presenter – can be mixed earlier and played into the final mix.

With the presenter in the studio at their microphone and the rest of the team in the control room they can begin recording and mixing the programme as outlined in the script.

Depending on the content and complexity of the mix you can simply start at the beginning and rehearse a short segment then do it for real and record it. You carry on through the programme until the end.

The wording of the written trail submitted for use by the Network summarises in a simple and concise way what is a complex programme and at the same time entices the potential listener.

Trail:

‘Tomorrow / This morning the singer Catherine Bott embarks on a remarkable journey in an attempt to discover who, or what, sang “The First Song”.

She travels back through time to the origins of music itself and into darkest pre-history. It's a journey that explores the significance of song, from medieval cathedrals to stone age monuments, and examines why the desire to sing is so fundamental to thousands of species – from the nightingale to the humpback whale.

So join Catherine Bott tomorrow / this morning at half past eleven as she talks to composers, biologists and archaeologists and tries to find out who sang – “The First Song”.’

You will notice that the trail can be used the day before the programme is transmitted and earlier in the day of actual transmission.

The written Presentation Details or cue sheet submitted with the completed programme borrows on the wording and language used in the trail. This is the suggested opening announcement that would be read by the continuity announcer to introduce the programme:

Opening Announcement / Cue:

‘Even though we might not admit it – we all sing – even if it's only in the bath, or to ourselves in our heads. Singing is one of the most natural activities known to us humans.

But when did we start to sing and who, or what, discovered how we could do it?

In this morning's feature the celebrated singer Catherine Bott takes a journey back in time to try and find out who sang – “The First Song”.

The cue sheet then contains the details of the opening and closing words, music or sounds and the total duration of the recorded programme. This helps to inform the studio manager who is responsible for playing out the programme to check and confirm that they have the correct recording.

Here we can see that the programme starts with 19 seconds of music before Catherine introduces herself. At the end of the programme her closing words are ‘...still singing it.’ over music that ends rather than fades.

In: (Music 19”) Hello, I’m Catherine Bott.....

Out:still singing it (music – ends)

Duration: 27’.41”

There then follows on the cue sheet a suggested back announcement that the continuity announcer can read after the programme has finished.

Back Announcement / Out Cue:

‘The First Song was presented by Catherine Bott and produced by Andy Cartwright as a Soundscape Productions for BBC Radio 4’.

In other words by using these announcements we are telling the listener what they are about to hear, then we let them hear it and then tell them what they have just been listening to.

Producer Andy Cartwright says that the secret of a good radio programme is the story and the storytelling. A listener may not have any interest in a particular topic or subject but if the story is told well they will become fascinated and involved. There are lots of different ways of telling a story on radio, a wide range of production methods, the producer is there to help the person telling the story to do it in the best way they can.

‘I knew I wanted a singer to tell the story. I think Catherine was a good choice, but I knew she would do a good job because she had experience of working in radio so she was able to contribute to the script, as a singer she had a personal interest in the subject and most importantly she was excited by the idea and content of the programme.’

Andy’s method of working with a presenter varies from programme to programme but generally he will discuss the script with them on a regular basis as it develops and will often let them hear the programme inserts in advance and try to make revisions well before the recording in the studio begins to save valuable studio time. On the day of recording he will usually avoid simply recording the presenter’s links for cutting into the piece later preferring to play in the inserts at the appropriate place during the recording. This method, similar to those used in a live programme, helps the presenter use their

voice to give the script the correct tone and pace and conviction, enhancing the performance by giving it 'an air of discovery and freshness'.

Andy believes that a presenter is a presenter because they can present; they have a voice and personality for radio and it takes a certain type of ego to sit in front of a microphone and the producer needs to manage and massage that ego. The professional presenter should just be able to get on and do their job once the links have been rehearsed to everyone's satisfaction and guidance notes added to the script. They will know if they have stumbled, mispronounced or fluffed. Sometimes it is necessary for the producer to ask for retakes as they may not be aware of page turning noises, squeaking chair, tummy rumbling or extraneous noises being picked up by the microphone.

It can take a little while to relax, get used to the microphone and get into the flow of the script so it can be a good idea to go back and record the opening links again at the end of the recording. Producers often record two versions of most links to give themselves a choice and some like to record the rehearsal too again to offer more alternatives. Should you tell the presenter that you intend to record the rehearsal? It's up to you.

Unlike everyone else in the production team, who will generally stay focussed on their particular contribution to the proceedings, the producer knows how the complete and completed programme should sound and needs to keep it in their mind the whole time. A producer never expects to be a hundred per cent happy with the finished product.

Availability of time, money, resources both human and technical will all conspire to thwart your efforts to achieve the effect you can hear in your head. There will be compromises. Some ideas will be dismissed for pragmatic reasons. You will be asking

yourself how can I illustrate this point in a different way to save some money or time or who can I use to read this if so-and-so is not available?

All producers will in hindsight know how they would have done things differently. Andy, for example, would like to do a revised version of the opening of '*The First Song*'. At the time of the production he had in mind a particular effect but was unsure how to achieve it. Now, without the pressure of a deadline and production schedule he has finally worked out how it could be done. 'However, not much changed between the original idea and the finished product. In essence the concept stayed the same it was the journey that was not expected. If you can summarise the programme in one sentence at the start of the production process then it should still be applicable at the end because that is the essence of the programme'

Andy also believes that producers can get too close to their programmes. 'Programmes become your babies; you really don't want to hand them over to someone else to produce when you have come up with an idea and are committed to it. But you should not be possessive or precious. Play the programme to someone whose judgement you trust and be prepared if you agree with their suggestions to change things. I did this with '*The First Song*' and ended up changing the mix to include more music and I think it is a better programme because of those changes.

'*The First Song*' was produced by an independent production company and this puts extra demands on the small team. Although they provide some help and support you

don't have the whole of the BBC behind you helping out with contracts and copyright issues or access to their research base.

This means things take longer and you need to factor this into your production schedule. Remember you are also likely to be working on a number of different projects at different stages of production or preparation at the same time.

If he is working on two programmes at the same time Andy tries not to allow the production timetables overlap too closely, but during the production of *'The First Song'* a previous programme commission that had been delayed by a year in its production schedule because of the effects of the foot and mouth crisis in the Lake District was due to be broadcast a week earlier.

This time-shift meant that Andy had to oversee the mixing of both programmes during the same period. Time is finite and that puts production teams under pressure, but of course professionals make sure they meet their agreed deadlines and that the listener is oblivious to the problems encountered in the programmes production.

You will see on the script extract reproduced above some comments in brackets. These are Andy Cartwright's instructions to the editors Clipstore Ltd. in Leeds who were responsible for editing and mixing the final programme. Warwick Pilmer insists that *'The First Song'* was a fairly straightforward edit job:

'Materials were supplied on DAT, CD and minidisk to be edited on SADiE classic (a mixing and editing software package). The programme is a fairly simple one; most of it contains a single recorded voice with a stereo wild track underneath which leads into music, actuality or another voice.

The actuality is a mixture of real recordings, for example Dave Fanshaw had provided the sounds he recorded in Africa, and other sequences we created. After all there are no recordings of Stone Age man or of the big bang. We tried to make these sound as authentic as possible using a large selection of sound effects libraries. We had to make sure that the birdsong in the background was of a bird native to where that particular section of the programme is based. The big bang is a recording of a nuclear explosion. We also had to confirm a statement by a contributor that a whale song sounds like bird song when speeded up before we could use the interview.

Generally we mixed two to five audio tracks at once – a mixture of mono and stereo.

I did a preliminary edit to get the materials off the DATs, CD's and MD's into SADiE and sequence them and de-um the speech parts (remove any unwanted umms and errs) which took about six hours.

The whole editing and mixing process took thirty hours: however there are actually two versions (the original edit and the radio edit). This was because the producer decided to change the opening and closing sequences so that he could include more of the musical pieces.'

The last word on *'The First Song'* goes to presenter Catherine Bott. 'I was pretty experienced at being a guest on a number of radio programmes on Radio 3 and Radio 4, but inexperienced when it came to presenting one, so I was flattered to be asked to do it. Andy sent me a copy of the script and I was allowed to make changes and customise it so that it "sounded like me talking". Script reading is different and difficult but now that I have learnt how to do it I am completely addicted and now want to try everything. What I hadn't realised was what it would lead to. Another producer heard the programme and

thought I had a good turn of phrase and I was offered a short term presentation contract with Radio 3. I found that I learn something from everything I have done since and in turn everything I have done leads to being offered something else to do. I now feel confident that if *'The First Song'* was offered to me now I would enjoy being more involved in contributing to the writing of the script at an earlier stage. It was a real pleasure to work on the programme.'

This excerpt is taken from Programme Making for Radio by Jim Beaman (Routledge, 2006).