III

MUSIC FOR TV AND RADIO

From the moment he embarked on his career as a composer after settling in London, Carl Davis has shown himself to be fluent in many different genres. Some of the most enticing opportunities for a versatile young composer willing to work to a brief lay in the fields of television and radio. By 1960 three-quarters of British households owned a television set, and the medium was growing ever more insatiable for content, even though at that point there were only two channels – BBC and ITV. BBC2 arrived in 1964, and by the end of the decade all three channels were broadcasting in colour.

Early works for television

Davis's first television commission was for ABC's Armchair Theatre in 1961, the same year as his revue *Diversions*, written in collaboration with his American friend and colleague Steven Vinaver, reached the Edinburgh Festival. 'Armchair Theatre was leading the way with new writers,' says Davis, 'and its Canadian producer Sydney Newman commissioned a musical that Steven and I wrote called *His Polyvinyl Girl*. It starred John Fortune (later a mainstay of theatrical and media satire), and Nyree Dawn Porter (an up-and-coming young actress who later made her name in the hugely successful BBC adaptation of *The Forsyte Saga*). It was completely mad, no one had any experience of this. The production techniques were still quite primitive, and editing

tape spoilt it for re-use, so we did it quasi-live. Charles Mackerras conducted it!'

There were no further television commissions for a while, but after *Diversions* (renamed *Twists*) transferred to the Arts Theatre in March 1962, Davis was taken on as a client by Peggy Ramsay. 'Peggy had a contact at the BBC's arts and cultural radio network, the Third Programme, who was interested in commissioning me to compose the music for some radio drama. My first real patron there was the Dutch director H. B. Fortuin, who was producing drama in English – he was very clever, very intelligent, very ambitious. He instantly taught me how to organise the music for a radio play, and in 1963 I wrote the music for a radio drama called *The Flip Side*. It was a satire on a late-night American DJ show, and I had to do very short bits of pop songs, bits of commercials. It was quite complex, and I managed to involve the jazz singer Annie Ross. She performed all the songs brilliantly. It did well, and the programme won an Italia Prize. H. B. Fortuin had me do many more projects, including Brecht's *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich*, and then other directors started to take me up, including John Tydeman, with whom I did an *Edward II*, and later an *Antony and Cleopatra*. I was in business.'

Davis says that looking at the nuts and bolts of how radio drama is put together is very instructive. 'I had very good experiences. Then there began to be a cross-over into TV, and after BBC2 opened in 1964 one of the actor-producers, Cedric Messina, gave me my first televised play, a trilogy by Ken Taylor called *The Seekers*. It was directed by a Canadian, Alvin Rakoff, who many years later commissioned my score for Channel 4's adaptation of Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time*.' The following year, Sydney Newman, who by then had moved to the BBC as Head of Drama, commissioned Davis to compose a television opera, for which Peggy Ramsay suggested he should team up with the Polish writer Leo Lehman. *The Arrangement,* produced by Cedric Messina, was broadcast on BBC2 on 30 May 1965, and was praised by the critic Alan Blyth in *Opera* magazine. Lehman

and Davis went on to do a second television opera, which has, however, remained unperformed.

The success of *Diversions* encouraged Davis and Vinaver to ride the new boom in satire. They had arrived in the UK at precisely the right time. The first wave of British satire, a genre largely created by a group of clever Oxbridge graduates, is generally agreed to date from August 1960, three months after Davis's arrival, with the opening night of *Beyond the Fringe,* the legendary comedy revue written and performed by Peter Cook, Dudley Moore, Jonathan Miller and Alan Bennett. Its success spawned the satirical TV programme *That Was The Week That Was* (known as *TW3*), devised by Ned Sherrin and presented by David Frost. A bevy of writers worked on *TW3*: some, such as Richard Ingrams, Bernard Levin and Peter Cook, were involved in the creation of the magazine *Private Eye*; others, such as Graham Chapman and John Cleese, went on to create *Monty Python's Flying Circus* for BBC TV. There were plenty of targets for their biting lampoons, ranging from politicians to the monarchy, sexual and social hypocrisy, the class system, and even the BBC itself.

The breakdown and reshuffle of established social hierarchies, customs and morals offered easy pickings at that time. Princess Margaret, the Queen's sister, had finally bowed to Establishment pressure to call off her intended marriage to Peter Townsend, the divorced man she loved, and in 1960 she married Anthony Armstrong-Jones, one of a new breed of society photographers working principally in fashion, design and theatre. Such an alliance would have been looked upon with great disfavour in Court circles a decade or so earlier, but within a few years the Royal Family was unable to avert a marital scandal when the Earl of Harewood, cousin to the Queen, divorced his wife and mother of his three children in order to marry his mistress, by whom he had already had another child. Meanwhile a naked romp in the swimming pool of a Buckinghamshire mansion involving John Profumo, the Secretary of State for War, and Christine Keeler, a nineteen-year-old would-be model whose concurrent lovers might