

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: THE B.B.C. RADIO 4 SERIAL

by

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The B.B.C. serial was first broadcast in the Spring of 1981, to a spate of patronising reactions in the media and in Tolkien fan circles. As the serial progressed, its true scale and achievement was more widely appreciated. This sequence of reactions resembled those originally given the book -- the whimsy of the first few chapters repelling readers then unlikely to sample the more mature imagination of the later parts. Only with a full study of the saga was its worth better understood. Nonetheless, both novel and serial have produced the most polarised reactions concerning technique and content. With its fourth broadcast in the Spring of 1987, this radio dramatisation is now regarded as one of the finest of the decade, surpassing past productions in scope and ambition. The strongest tribute from within the BBC is the serial's present release on audio cassette.

The first broadcast had a profound effect on the Tolkien Society. Radio Times published a colour feature on the serial, discussing the book and the Society. A Tolkien Society address was printed, prompting a flood of enquiries and new members, until the total membership reached an unprecedented high of around 1000, a number which has since declined. A number of subjective criticisms were printed in Amon Hen, but nothing resembling any kind of appraisal of the full serial. A one-off magazine was published, Microphones in Middle-earth, with some perceptive analyses and comments from actors and production staff, as well as some blindingly prejudiced remarks from casual listeners. Copies are now rare and highly prized.

The Administration.

Lengthy negotiations for the radio rights of The Lord of the Rings began in late 1979. This took 18 months, a longer process than usual because the rights were wrongly assumed to be owned by Saul Zaentz, the LotR Film producer's company -- instead they had rested with the publishers George Allen & Unwin all that time. According to a report in The Guardian, a budget of £50,000 (1980 prices) was set, an extremely generous figure in radio terms. Within this constraint a thirteen-hour, 26-episode serial was to be produced -- apparently half-hour episodes were easier to sell abroad. Since this was one of the longest radio serials ever to be made, the BBC took the unusual step of creating a team of two directors and two adaptors: Jane Morgan and Penny Leicester directing, Brian Sibley and Michael Bakewell dramatising. Bakewell was chosen for his past experience of saga adaptation, Sibley for his Tolkien knowledge. Between them,

they discussed how best to compress the novel into thirteen hours, fundamentally motivated by fidelity to the text and by what would be most dramatically effective on radio.

Sibley analysed the book, and produced a rough framework in the shape of a 26-page synopsis, subject to alteration. The two men then adapted thirteen episodes each, working within the guidelines specified by the synopsis. Bakewell was trusted with the complex battle scenes, and he generously made Sibley choose the episodes the latter particularly wished to tackle -- which included those episodes importantly featuring the Ents.

The Adaptation.

The adaptation is a remarkable achievement. Nearly every scene has some basis in the novel's words or spirit, a quality which relatively few book dramatisations share. Events not directly related in the novel were either taken from Unfinished Tales as in the case of the horse-borne Nazgûl galloping through Rohan, or dialogue was carefully invented from Tolkien's narrative, as with Bilbo and Frodo's early discussion of the party guests. One of the more striking additions was "Bilbo's Last Song", Tolkien's verses and Oliver's music giving greater poignancy to the parting of Frodo and Sam. The Tolkien Fundamentalists have understandably disliked such changes to the pure text, wondering why fiction outside of the book was included when so much of the original was cut. Such compromises are essential in book dramatisation, making a novel less incongruous in an acted form. The Unfinished Tales inserts added greater drama to Gandalf's plight, while the reshaping of dialogue and the use of new verse in the episode of "The Grey Havens" prevented the final parting being reduced to minutes of mere narration.

The original scripts are not identical to what you have heard in the serial, the broadcast scripts. The originals held sumptuous descriptions of lore and landscape which had to be axed to accommodate the main plot if the full script could not be contained in one 28-minute episode. Hence the neglected events, the sparse history and the poor landscaping. Sibley was content with his original results, and it was painful to see so much go by the wayside, an emotion common to all dramatists whose words are molested.

More controversial was the omission of Tom Bombadil and Gildor's meeting with the hobbits in the Shire. In fact the original synopsis left out Farmer Maggot and included Gildor, and Sibley considered Sam's meeting with Elvenkind in the novel a more satisfying event than the awkward compromise with Glorfindel's appearance. Why this change of priorities, I don't know. Bombadil was reluctantly removed, but it was considered dramatically incongruous to distract attention from the main threat of the Black Riders by using this isolated episode with the Old Forest, despite its charm. Stephen Oliver at least was grateful that he need not set Tom's verse to music after all...

Tolkien's ingenious dedication of the later books to one group of characters would never have worked on radio, so the chronological description of the plot was inevitable if those unfamiliar with Tolkien were to follow anything. The same applied to reported events, such as Gandalf's description of his imprisonment at Isengard to the Council. Despite the achievement of this written adaptation, both Sibley and Bakewell felt the need for a still longer serial, to impress the more strongly the enormous journey of the Quest and cover those events merely sketched within those 13 hours.

The production.

The directors cast all the parts, subject to the actors' availability, auditioned tapes of various composers' work before settling on Stephen Oliver and commissioned special electronic sound effects from Elizabeth Parker of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop. Within the budget limits, a remarkably starry cast was assembled from Britain's finer character actors. The smaller parts were largely allocated to Jane Morgan's "family" of actor friends, many of whom feature regularly in her other productions -- Michael Graham Cox (Boromir) and Jack May (Théoden) are two such siblings. Because the serial would be dominated by the

male voice, care was taken to ensure a wide variety of tone, to differentiate character and race more effectively and offset any monotony. Some of the parts were played rather physically, for all that -- all the hobbits except Samwise were played by small men. On the one hand actors with distinctive voice colour were cast, prime examples being Michael Hordern (Gandalf) and Robert Stephens (Aragorn); on the other, players renowned for their vocal virtuosity, like Peter Woodthorpe (Gollum). Strangely enough, the predominant accent was standard BBC -- no real variety of diction characterised the main roles in a land stretching over a continent's span.

The music budget accommodated the composition, three male singers, a male choir, a small string orchestra supplemented by harp and French horn, and a group comprising piano and pitched percussion. Most of the soundtrack was played by the orchestra. It was a deliberate directorial decision to avoid the customary brazen sounds of cinema epics, which would have sounded pretentious on the tranny; Oliver's reading of the text suggested a sober mood overall, a decision prompted by his first sight of "We hear of the Horns...", and his setting of it pleased him most of all the soundtrack. This unexpected view of the work is one of a number of ideas which has made this serial avoid the crass archetypes of saga dramatisation, and provided listeners with a new vision of the work.

The serial was rehearsed and recorded in Studio 6A in Broadcasting House, London, over Christmas 1980 and the New Year of 1981. 6A is one of the larger studios in the House, appropriate for the wide open spaces in LoTR, whether a massive hall in Moria or the grasslands of Rohan. Smaller acoustics were created by placing screens round the actors and modifying the microphone reverberation. The actors seldom carried out effects on the studio floor, preoccupied with reading from the script -- instead, the Spot Effects Staff splashed, jumped and hammered 'live' with the acting, a more painstaking job than might supposed. Each half-hour episode took two days to make, the first day, 10.00am - 6.00pm, to rehearse the main characters and synchronise the effects. Lesser parts were not dealt with. On the second day the episode was recorded with all parts played from 10.00am to 7.00pm, and the editing carried out in the evening.

This is an incredibly tight schedule in which to produce a finished drama, a world away from the frittering and extravagance of any film production. For this reason, pre-production discussions were all the more important, to plan to the finest detail how much time a scene could be spared, flexibly allowing for any inspired spontaneous suggestions from production staff and actors. It is also for this reason that some of the more spectacular set-pieces were not always ideally polished -- the short battle between the Fellowship and the Wargs on the way to Moria took an extravagant three hours to record in the studio, and it still sounded rough to some listeners' ears. That such radio drama maintains its high standards within such strict schedules is a tribute to the professionalism of the makers.

The Performances

The standard of acting was high within the serial, the weak performances confined to bit players uncomfortable with their strange roles. The directors emphasised that the characters be played for their 'humanity', for the lack of a better term -- "No funny voices!" they said. I appreciate that decision, a fundamental one which breathed emotion and vulnerability into characters sketched as archetypes by an author more intent on linguistic and historical flair. It has been a controversial decision, with violent reactions -- critical from one side who would have preferred the bland heroic archetypes of past saga dramas, and with qualified praise on the other, applauding the endeavours of those actors intelligent enough to exploit the mature characterisation Tolkien did to some degree provide, though you have to dig quite hard to find it.

In Ian Holm's voice, I heard Frodo the cheery hobbit suffer and mature under a heavy burden. That was as much as Tolkien had provided for him, but the character was developed still further -- in small ways, when the voice cracked and weakened after the

climbing of the stairs to Cirith Ungol, the ferocious selfish passion when Frodo snatched the Ring from Sam in prison, and the irritable outbursts on the first stage of their Mordor trek. Holm remarked afterwards that he had never received so much public acclaim for a single performance since his early days at Stratford.

William Nighy gave a Samwise initially subordinate to his Mister Frodo, and whose courage and support grew in the Quest, and the patronising Master-Servant relationship gradually dissolved into a friendship of two equals. Many of the dialogues between the two hobbits are the serial's finer moments, full of that intimacy in which radio drama can excel.

Robert Stephens provided a very human Aragorn, weary with long waiting and travel, his latent qualities as King overcoming his mistakes as leader of the Fellowship from Moria, and strongly evident in his amazing delivery of Tolkien's words at the Paths of the Dead. An understated interpretation which had provoked adulation and abuse, but it is characterised by an intelligence absent from, for example, Jack May's loud and braying Théoden.



Michael Hordern's Gandalf was thoroughly professional, an ideal example of a very compassionate, sometimes weary wizard with which you can't really complain. But still there are qualities to Gandalf which Hordern didn't try to find -- I am startled by how vicious Gandalf can be sometimes, frightening Frodo in his Rivendell sick-bed with unsuitably pessimistic forecasts, and passively goading Denethor to his suicide to smooth the path of the true King to the throne.

Peter Woodthorpe's Gollum is a vocal tour-de-force, and he has phrased many lines unforgettably. His microphone technique was brilliant and experienced; actors of the visual arts tend to "stand and deliver" for radio, but Woodthorpe pranced about the studio stage, and occasionally spoke right into the mike to produce an unbelievably menacing resonance.

Right through this production, great skill on the part of actors and directors has created frequent magic from Tolkien's dialogue, unhelpfully set as massive blocks of print. No reader, I guess, has ever brought the characters so fully to mind as effectively as these speakers.

The Music.

The music was melodious and businesslike. The writing for string textures was essentially unadventurous, but the string playing of the New Chamber Soloists was very descriptive -- string timbre could be altered to resemble the distant bray of horns at the Black Gate of Mordor, the galloping of Shadowfax, the ringing trumpets on the Field of Cormallen, and suggest the slow tread of the Ents. But considering the many British composers who wrote their most intense sounds for string orchestra (notably Benjamin Britten, Michael Tippett and Ralph Vaughan-Williams), I regret that Oliver's concentration on lightened sobriety prevented a daring exploitation of string texture. However the music for the Elves and the singing Eagle was startling and refreshing -- ingenious instrumentation and flavour, if not to all tastes. Oliver's vocal settings have been greatly praised, especially The Fall of Gil-Galad, and what is most impressive is the variety of mood that characterises each song. More dramatically effective than the setting of Tolkien's prose to music in the battle of the Pelennor Fields was the wordless male chorus roaring away in the battle of Helm's Deep, greater tension and drama from a throbbing string beat beneath.

The fault is not with the music, but its recording. Recording music is an art in itself, and BBC sound engineers prefer to balance the sound distantly and 'realistically', while some modern record companies prefer to record orchestral forces very close, so that they almost seem to be playing a few feet away. Oliver's re-scoring and augmentation of his music for LP release was ruined by insensitive engineering, which reduced the sound to an indistinct mush, and insulted still further by the sub-standard pressing quality of PRT Records. For the serial the sound was of better quality, but the music still sounded quiet and distant, especially when backing the spoken word. Dramatic effects can result from different sound balances, and I thought the effect of Oliver's more evocative writing was diminished because it was broadcast so quietly.

The other baffling quality was the placing of music in the serial. It was nearly always played as filler, separating passages of the spoken word. This effectively draws our attention solely to the music, so we can appreciate its quality. However Oliver wrote and scored many small passages which were only included in the serial. There are several moments in the book of excellent grandeur, and these pass by in the serial as a solitary voice in a studio: the first unsheathing of the Sword That Was Broken, the forging of Andúril, Galadriel's dramatic rejection of the Ring, and others. No passage of music already recorded was repeated during these events to heighten their impact. Did such repetition of music have a price that could not be afforded? And in those cases with background music, such as Théoden's energetic Call to Arms in front of Meduseld, the very forward voice and the distant music do not have the intended exalting effect.

The Sound Effects.

The serial's sound effects were strongly criticised from the start, and deservedly. Simple effects noted in the script (Théoden's "stick clattering down steps") were unperformed and some important atmospherics were neglected, such as the wind in the trees in Caras Galadon. Some of the faults can be put down to the lack of rehearsal and recording time noted above. A better representation of the arrival of the Rohirrim to Pelennor would have been possible if there had been time to create a tape of distant blaring horns. There was not, and the scene flopped, all the more disappointing because the rest of the battle was spectacularly handled. The fact that certain sounds started and stopped suddenly (the Wargs' howling, the movement of horses) seems to be a radio convention and a curious one -- justified to keep the radio sound uncluttered. Atmospheric effects there were, but they were very distant and quiet. Any film soundtrack recorded on location reveals an interesting balance between voice and background, and possibly more realistic, except that our ears filter out unnecessary sounds. Nothing resembling this was approached in the serial -- it seemed to be a quality of Jane Morgan's productions to emphasise the clarity of the voice

above all. Speakers in the serial are usually in the near or middle distance, and atmospheric effects are suppressed. This clarity of the voice was a quality I greatly appreciated in 1981, new to radio drama, but with greater experience since then I have heard the most ingenious and realistic technical presentation, and feel its relative lack in this production. Nonetheless, when things came together, some events are superb -- the trip through Moria, and the hobbits' sight of Galadriel's mirror, where acoustics and background are ingeniously manipulated; the voice of Saruman 'floating' towards the listener, and all the piled-up catastrophes at the Ring's destruction.

I have heard a justification for this forward balance. Statistically, most people listen to radio drama on cheap hissing trannies, so clarity of voice is all-important -- at least in the early 80's, for the national standard of radio reception has possibly increased in the following years. Production staff could not simply increase the volume of sound effects to compensate for the more forward balance of the voices, for the listeners to VHF stereo would be overcome by crude exaggerated noises. Hence the compromise of near voice and distant effect in some producers' work. This is a very regressive technique. No TV drama designer camera organises shots and group postures hoping it won't be too confused on a 14-inch black-and-white screen. Perhaps the overall quality of the serial would have been improved still further without these restraints hindering technical flair.

The Repeats.

The Executive decision to slice the book into half-hour wedges was a mistake, for not only was the plot changed into something like a Flash-Gordon cliff-hanger job, many of the foreign stations who bought it spliced the episodes together into hour-long ones anyway. With this in mind, the third broadcast modified the serial from 26 to 13 episodes, newly edited so there was less intercutting between travelling groups of characters. This action made more minutes available, so some out-takes were replaced, and Gerard Murphy recorded more descriptive and linking narrative in a noticeably slower and deeper voice. The replaced out-takes were usually trifling but colourful decorations to the main thrust of the plot - Treebeard's adding of Hobbits to his long list and elegant qualifications in the dialogue between Gandalf the White and Saruman. More significantly, some scenes essential to the plot were still absent from the serial, though not from the original scripts. The unknowing listener never heard any conclusion to the Battle at the Black Gate, with its climactic arrival of Eagles -- and most outrageous of all, the hobbit species was never at any point in the serial physically described!

This is the version that has been released on thirteen cassettes, on good quality chromium dioxide tape, at a reasonable price of around £32.00 by mail order. However, there are moments of distortion, and the high frequencies have been emphasised at the expense of the lower, so that the years' passing will not swiftly dull the sound. The set is nicely packaged, but with minimal documentation -- just a card with a map, cast-list and Tolkien biography. There was a series of exquisite drawings by Eric Fraser which accompanied the serial titles in Radio Times in 1981. They have not been reprinted for this release -- a great waste of resources. Incidentally, the cassette for Episode 8 is now titled The Voice of Sauron!*

The broadcast serial's revelatory achievement was to find greater depth in Tolkien's main characters, revealing more interesting personalities to

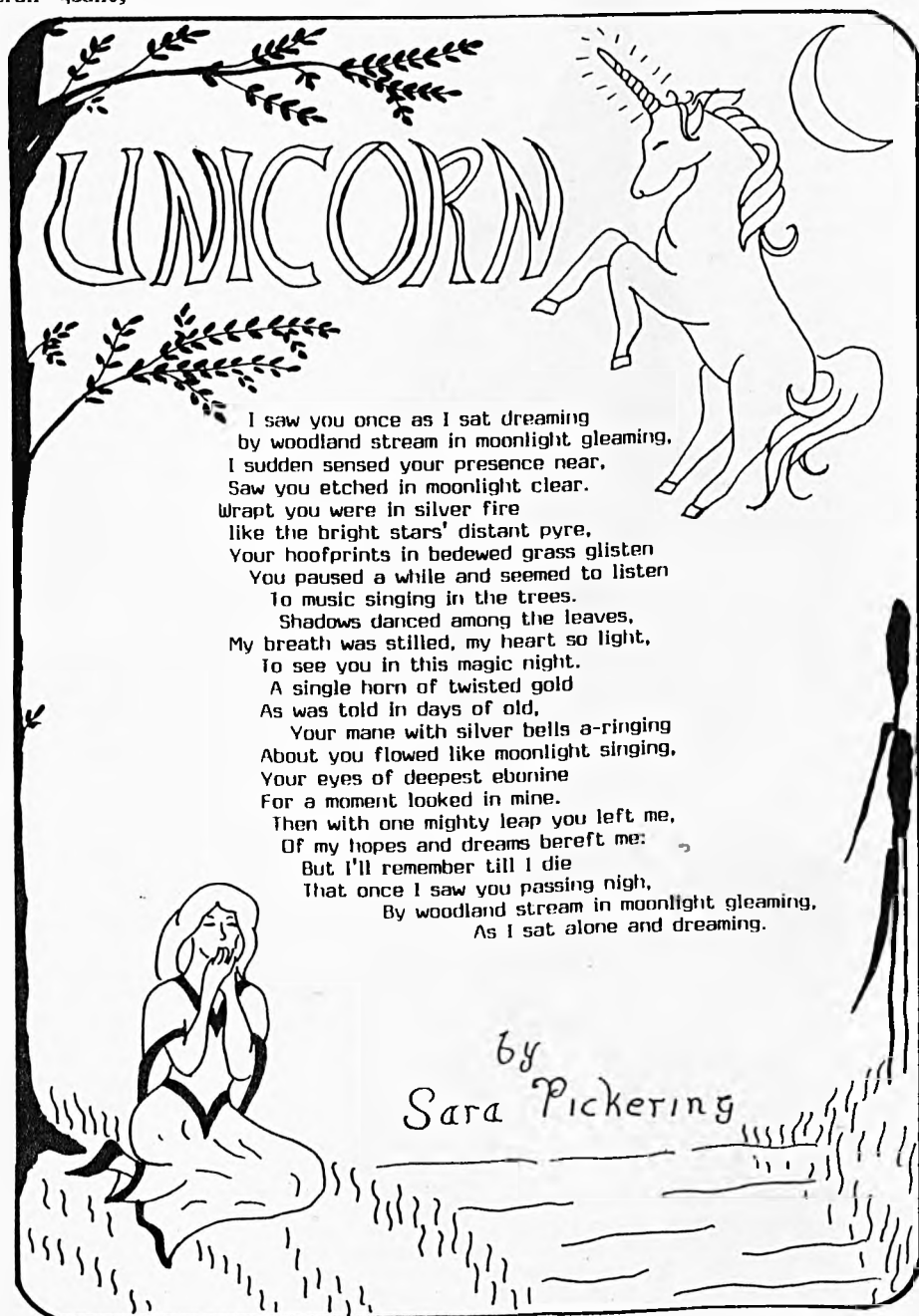
listeners initially more impressed by the novel's epic qualities than anything else. This revelation had a cost. There are events and settings in the book which have a massive grandeur that is incredibly exciting. The serial's relatively unmelodramatic approach severely diminished the impact of those moments. Listeners felt the trials and the joys of the characters, but not so much of the awesome historical perspective in which these characters were placed. The intimacy of the book was revealed, but not the grandeur. Perhaps non-visual radio makes these qualities mutually exclusive?

Sources

- a) Broadcast scripts of The Lord of the Rings.
- b) Microphones in Middle-earth, edited by Ian D. Smith. Hampshire: June 1982.
- c) Mallorn 17, "The Choices of Master Sibley", by Brian Sibley
- d) Synopsis for The Lord of the Rings, by Brian Sibley: 1980.
- e) Conversations with and letters from members of the cast and production staff.
- f) The New Tolkien Newsletter, Vol.II, N°1: "Microphones in Middle-earth", by Ian D. Smith: September 1982.

*:Editor's Footnote

I have recently been informed that the mistake had been corrected and that the original title The Voice of Saruman is now reinstated.



I saw you once as I sat dreaming
by woodland stream in moonlight gleaming,
I sudden sensed your presence near,
Saw you etched in moonlight clear.
Wrapt you were in silver fire
like the bright stars' distant pyre,
Your hoofprints in bedewed grass glisten
You paused a while and seemed to listen
To music singing in the trees.
Shadows danced among the leaves,
My breath was stilled, my heart so light,
To see you in this magic night.
A single horn of twisted gold
As was told in days of old,
Your mane with silver bells a-ringing
About you flowed like moonlight singing,
Your eyes of deepest ebony
For a moment looked in mine.
Then with one mighty leap you left me,
Of my hopes and dreams bereft me:
But I'll remember till I die
That once I saw you passing nigh,
By woodland stream in moonlight gleaming,
As I sat alone and dreaming.

by
Sara Pickering