

PROCESS OF RESEARCHING BEATRICE HARRISON AND HER NIGHTENGALE DUET

By Serena Tideman

I have been in love with Elgar's Cello Concerto since I was a teen, but I did not know of the cellist who inspired Edward Elgar until this year. I was only familiar with Jacqueline DuPre, who is a hero of mine, and recorded a great rendition of the Elgar Cello Concerto. This year I happened to read about Beatrice Harrison, Elgar's favorite cellist, on the "Marginalian" blog. It was fascinating that she had been a star of 100 years ago, and had a very famous recording of herself playing with a nightengale in her garden. In recent times, there was a controversy about whether or not the recording was indeed recorded live, or if it was made by a human bird impressionist. It was even accused of being "fake news" instead of being treated as a beautiful musical work, regardless of whether it was created with a living nightengale or not. I decided it was worth learning more about Beatrice Harrison and about bird song in general.

I learned that Beatrice Harrison was the muse not only for Elgar but also for other famous composers of her time, such as Delius, who wrote several pieces for her. I researched about how recording techniques can alter the way sound is perceived by the listener. I had to rethink my strategy when the majority of contemporary articles about her were accusing her of being a fraud. It turns out that possibly the BBC broadcast used a recording she made of cello with nightengale, instead of a live broadcast as they claimed. But the birdsong itself was recorded live with the cello in her garden, multi-tracking was not even invented yet! It was obvious to me; I knew she was a great cellist and a muse of great composers in her time. I decided to make an artistic defense of her. In the tradition of "musique concrete", which is a 20th century technique of utilizing live sound recordings layered with music, I decided to make a "Beatrice and Nightengale" inspired musical composition of my own.

The majority of sources about Beatrice Harrison are recent news articles about the "fake news" controversy regarding her popular BBC broadcast of 1924, and recordings from the 20s she made with Edward Elgar himself. She also wrote an autobiography, which I ordered using Interlibrary Loan. I found the blog of a scholar who traveled to England under an Edison fellowship and was given access to archives about her, but I found his blog very short considering the vast amount of photographs and personal information he was given access to.

I was pretty thorough in looking for sources, including ordering a dissertation from Texas.

While researching, I felt very protective of my subject. I realized that it had become trendy to disparage her, even though she was a bonafide great cellist and the opposite of a fraud. It also became apparent that sources about her were rare and precious. I tried to zero in on dissertations since so few books have been published about her, and there have been many disappointing articles recently. (Though "Strad" magazine offered a great defense.)

What library resources or services did you utilize for this research project? Since there are so few books about her, I focused on UW Libraries searches for articles, dissertations, and music library scores of works she inspired. I also utilized Interlibrary loan to get access to dissertations. I used Worldcat to find a rare LP of her original cello and birdsong recording. (It is found only in two libraries worldwide!) I also used the computers in Suzzallo and the Music Library for reviewing blogs and scores, and to learn more about the small town in England where she lived most of her life. I tried to find scores related to her in Special Collections, and did not find any, but I did find another rare cello score which I consider to be treasure! (It is from a cellist who was a student of Pablo Casals, and both he and Casals have written compositions where cello imitates birdsong!)

During my process of researching about Beatrice Harrison, I learned that there were many articles, especially in the past few years, that had not done proper research themselves, and were misunderstanding the subject they were writing about, and misrepresenting her. I decided that the most appropriate sources would be as close to 1st person as possible, I asked myself, "Was the source aware of her presence in real life, or simply regurgitating a trendy trope regarding the "fake news" of her popular birdsong broadcast?" I knew her to be a bonafide artist and I believed her broadcast was a real recording of her playing cello with a nightengale in her garden. I thought it would be nice to make an artistic defense of her 100 years in the future. It also seemed appropriate to me to bring in concepts from early 20th century composition such as "Musique Concrete", and to play with the idea of impressionism, live real world recorded bird sounds, and the songs of local birds near my home.

I am also going to keep going with this research project and hope to compose more music on this theme. Maybe I will even travel to her town south of London and play a concert in her honor! Later in May, I am presenting research at the Undergraduate Research symposium related to a new sound I discovered on cello, and in June I will present a musical composition for the Undergraduate Composers Concert elaborating on these themes, as well as playing at least one other piece inspired to include my cello by a fellow student composer, and I will also perform a live cello duet with birdsong for my Honors Interdisciplinary Birdwatching class.

