

Transcript of interview conducted 8th September 2017

Interviewees: ROSALIND LEE (RL)
Interviewer: CLAIRE COOKE (CC)
Bridgwater , England

Transcription: CLAIRE COOKE

[0:00:00] CC: We are here just outside of Bridgwater on Friday the 8th of September my name is Claire Cooke and I am the Heritage Lead for Kingston RPM. I am conducting a series of interviews or oral testimonies as part of Kingston RPM which is researching the music history of Kingston through 1950s through to the late 1970s and today it's my pleasure to be interviewing someone who worked at the HQ of Decca Records. If you'd like to introduce yourself?

RS: Yes I'm Rosalind Lee. I was Rosalind Leach back in those days and I joined Decca in 1976 back then you could pick up a job anywhere and I wasn't very happy where I was so I went to an agency and one of the jobs they had was working at Decca Records and that of course to me seemed ideal because I loved music and I thought: 'Wow' so I went for the interview did very well and was offered the job. So I started as an assistant to the classical promotion manager and later when somebody left I became promoted to the assistant classical promotion manager.

CC: And what time? What time was this?

RS: I joined in 76 and I was promoted roughly about a year later 77 and that was really the the last great years of Decca Records when we when we got taken over later in 1980 everything changed and I think to be fair everything was changing anyway in the music business so....

CC: In what kind of way was it changing?

RS: We had ... when we got taken over we got taken over by a company called Polygram they were a Dutch company they had Philips and they were looking to get more ... I don't quite know what they were looking for but I think it's what we would call these days assets stripping. They would buy a company and they would really take what they want and just get rid of the rest. I don't think it was a term we back then but that's really what it was all about and they sent over a bunch of accountants who had no idea about music, no idea of the rich catalogue we had .The Decca catalogue and this is ... it was a book that was about three inches thick that was everything classical, middle-of-the-road and pop - not that there was a lot of pop - but our main catalogue - the great catalogue really was the classical music itself; the middle-of-the-road was also very use you had programmes like your 100 best tunes and we used to produce with Alan Keith, records of the favorites, what Classic FM would now have their top 100 we did that back then. In theory, the pop music side were supposed to subsidize the classical side but unfortunately with Decca it didn't work that way but our classical side was making money - not huge profits - you could make money with single recitals so the cheapest thing to do as a piano recital or a song recital... symphonies make money but the thing that we really specialized in was the opera recordings and opera recordings took years to pay for themselves because we'd go over to Vienna, we'd record there the forces you'd have them whole of the Vienna Phil you'd have umpteen engineers going over there you had to have all the singers ... and quite often you would be backwards and forwards because you could get maybe two singers to do one bit but you couldn't get the other two so you really had to jiggle it about ... and just try and get things so that's why they probably cost more money because you didn't get everybody together and say: 'Okay we are now going to do this from start to finish' You did it piecemeal but we had wonderful engineers and they could do great things so you know it was ... but they were great days.

[0:04:30] CC: Who was some of the artists or the recordings that you did in the opera?

RS: Well with Decca we had what I think it was a first we had what we called exclusive artists we had people like Vladimir Ashkenazy who was really the best pianist we had and the best pianist anyway in my own opinion. We have people like Georg Solti who who conducted most of the Wagner operas we had people like Joan Sutherland, Pavarotti quite a lot of the big names so we and we had we that was just sort of on the opera side. We had a department that specialized in early music so you had people like Chris Hogwood who was a real pioneer in the early music along with people like ... oh I've forgotten his name now the poor boy that killed himself David never-mind it will come back but he was ...he was a real pioneer and I mean Mozart wrote about 40 old symphonies and there was an American academic called **Niels Aslaw** by the time he'd finished he majored 120 because the symphony would change depending where Mozart went if the forces were a bit weak in one area he'd rewrite it so they produced an entire set Mozart symphonies but with about six variations practically for every symphony depending on the forces available at wherever it was being performed. We did an awful lot of complete works **Der-Rati** did all the Heiden works and although at the time it was perhaps not commercially a good idea we didn't really think commercially, we thought long-term and that I think was the difference between Decca and the other companies we had this huge overview of having this wonderful catalogue of as much music as possible and we had experts to do it and whereas other people would perhaps more wisely with hindsight go for perhaps the more commercially successful things I mean later on with Pavarotti all sorts of LPS were issued which were often just an amalgamation of old arias from recordings but back then we just had this great idea to have this wonderful catalogue so that it was there to provide a resource of and an education for generations to come.

CC: And who were your... you just mentioned a couple another label there when you're talking but who were your kind of competitors at the time?

RS: Well **Ros o Lea** was part of Decca we had a lot of different departments, we had our main Decca labels but we also had different departments. Argo was well known for the recorded speech and they used to also do a lot of train records, **Rosolea** was only at all the early music but a lot of the main music was on the main labels and then within that you also had a whole series of different labels because a recording would come out on the main Decca label say with the prefix of SXL then it would get re - issued later in one of our cheaper labels - nothing wrong with the recording it was just that you could re- issue it more cheaply and get to a wider audience so we had quite a lot of different things. The other companies did the same EMI certainly did, Deutsche Grammophon didn't as far as I known and Philips didn't but we were the two British companies and so we tended to do that. Maybe the Germans and the Dutch had more money.

CC: And so you were based in their main offices...?

RL: That's right 9 Albert Embankment. I Googled it the other day just to see what if it was still there because so much is gone and sadly it's now become a an apartment of luxury flats that you can see the outline of the building because that was a purpose-built headquarters and I'm not sure of the exact date but it was in the 1960s and it had under floor heating which was really quite something in those days and it was lovely and warm but wasn't ideal for records and of course an our department we had a lot of records which we would send out for various reason promotional reasons and you really don't want an awful lot of heat coming straight into your LPs so we had these massive cupboards in the offices but we never put anything on the bottom shelf simply because they would get warped but I can go into a bit more detail about all that .

CC: So you were based at the Albert Embankment but there were lots of different offices that Decca had?

RL: Yes

CC: Obviously we're focusing quite a bit on what happened in New Malden but there was lots of

communication...?

RL: Well there were three main bases; you had had the office at 9 Albert embankment you had the recording studios in Broadhurst Gardens which was West Hampstead and then you had the record factory where all the pressings were done and where all the records were stored and that was Burlington Road in New Malden and opposite nearly opposite that was Decca Navigator so [0:10:00]

we were spread all over the place really and we used to have a daily shuttle which was back then a transit van so if I needed any records for promotional purposes or for an artist or whatever you could just pick up the phone and speak - we had we had in a strange version of internal phones even though it was down at New Malden quite how that worked I don't know that there was obviously something with British Telecom and we had the same thing for the studios and you would just pick up the phone and you can say: 'Oh can you put so-and-so and so-and-so on the van' and it would come up and you'd have it by lunchtime so somebody obviously had the job of just driving up and down between New Malden, the Albert embankment and West Hampstead and again if the studios needed to send us anything or we wanted anything from the studios, it would all come back so the van would come up from New Malden stop with us drop things off we put things on for wherever then it would gone to the studios then back again if the studios had anything for us and then back to New Malden ... and as I lived in Merton Park - which was just down the road - if we needed anything really desperately urgently I could pop along and pick it up first thing in the morning.

CC: OK, what was your impression of...so you went to the factory?

RL: Yes

CC: What was your impression of it? What do you remember of it?

RL: Well I only really got to reception I didn't get all the way round and I would have loved to it because I'd have liked of seeing the pressing machines. I've seen them on videos I think the Duke of Edinburgh went there to visit the Navigator and they and the record company but I would just pop down and pick up what was ever in reception which was a shame because I would have liked him had a look round but it it was a huge building and when you think what was going on there when EMI had its pressing plant out in Middlesex we had ours in New Malden and but it Edward Lewis who was the founder reminded me in some ways of William Morris now when I say William Morris I mean Lord Nuffield as opposed to the other William Morris. He was quite an entrepreneur because he bought the Decca gramophone company as it was then they used to provide the dulcet machines and the **dulcephone** and he thought : 'This bit stupid you've got a gramophone company making gramophones why don't you do records/' So back in '29 he bought the company and then decided well we'll make records as well so he did that so he had quite a ... that same sort of entrepreneurial idea and he'd made all his money as a stockbroker in London so ... I mean other things that reminded me of Morris ... William Morris had it was quite a nice house but it wasn't very opulent he lived a fairly simple life he drove a little Worsley rather similar to the one that you'd see in Foyle's War and Edward Lewis was rather similar he did have a rather revolting Brown Bentley ... it was a horrible colour I kept thinking why Brown it really is a terrible colour but that was really his only concession I think to luxury. He led him perfectly ordinary life it wasn't a really showy life but...

[0:13:22] CC: Was he present? Often around at the Albert embankment?

RL: Oh he was there every day he came in every day because he was ... towards the end of it ... I mean cause I was in my twenties and he seemed quite elderly but I think he was holding in his seventies and as I lurch towards that decade myself it's not very old really is it? He seemed ... he was ill I mean at the time we didn't know how well he was he had cancer and there wasn't the treatment available then so but you'd see him I mean he was there every day and he had his offices on the seventh floor and you know he was there he certainly didn't miss a day of work.

CC: Was it ..? What was it like to work there at the Albert embankment?

RS: I loved it. It was really nice there was a nice atmosphere, the department I was in the classical promotion departments we all had a grand passion for music that was the thing we really loved classical music so in a way although we had very long hours because we'd start at 9 o'clock but if you had a concert or something to go to which was considered work you've got free tickets but didn't get paid overtime but we didn't really mind because we really just loved what we were doing and we would have a laugh. I mean there were serious bits, of course, but there was a very nice relaxed atmosphere and - sorry you'll have to edit that bit out - but it was it was very nice I don't think you'd get an atmosphere like that these days because everything has changed so but I was there really at the tail end of how things were because once of course Margaret Thatcher got in in '79 everything changed for everybody a very different style of doing things. I don't want to be political here but it did ... you know I mean she did a lot of damage to British industry and as a result everything suffered whatever particular branch you were in and people were being taken over by as I say accountants pure and simple ... and the whole ethos of our rather nice old-fashioned comfy promotional work was changed. I mean we were we were quite revolutionary in what we did we did we dealt with them radio stations because they were just starting in the mid seventies - the BBC ones and also the independent local radio stations - so part of my job was to send them recordings from each month's releases send out things ... if there was an opera as I was the opera expert I would often do a tape. I would go.... What they would do is they would send me down the score and I'd take the recording home and I'd sit I'd spend the whole day so that I wouldn't be disturbed going through it picking out the bits I'd wanted and I'd have to mark everything up for the engineers and I'd say write fade in so many seconds bar whatever and give them as much information as possible so they could be absolutely exact and I would do a highlights record if you like which was then usually turned into the highlights record which we would release separately and also do a scenario and a bit of information so it was an educational thing really because the radio stations a lot of the local radio stations they had lots of very enthusiastic people but when it came to certain areas particularly classical music enthusiastic but not terribly knowledgeable so we our job was to advise people and they would take our scripts that I would write and they would really just use them and if you ever listened to one of their broadcasts it would really be word-for-word what I'd written so I daresay they probably thought that was a bit of a godsend because they could do an entire program and just read it and say you know now this story is set in and the following happens and they haven't got to do anything play .

[0:21:32] CC: Something I was involved with - there was a Time Out article and I pretty much wrote that article. Changed the name at the top but it promoted us, it got a lot of people coming to see it and if you've got the knowledge its helpful to use isn't it?

RL: Well yes I mean I was happy to do it because as far as I it was almost a sort of evangelical thing if you like we were converting people and we felt as strongly about our music as if it were a religion or anything else you wanted to convert people to ...

CC: So if in particular that music that really makes you passionate about it?

RL: Oh I always loved music right from a very early age. When I grew up I had mum and dad and my granny lived with us... now on mum's side we were all Welsh on my dad's side Scottish and granny had played the piano and she played the organ in chapel. She herself was Church of Wales but when she got married her husband was Chapel so he went to Chapel and because she played the organ she play and when they came to England because you had to come to England to get a job, she we had a piano and she would play for me and we'd part of my growing up was me singing along with granny and she taught me to read music and tell me off if I didn't follow the notes exactly and if I cut things short she go: 'No you've got to hold that.' so I always loved music. I think one of my earliest memories was listening to the wireless as it was back then and hearing Paul Robeson sing Old Man River and I heard this beautiful deep voice and I thought: 'Wow that's wonderful!' and I just really love ... I don't know why I just particularly loved classical music and my great conversion to Wagner ... I got thrown out of a lesson for arguing at school and we I went down to the music room and I just descended down to the music room and I heard this wonderful music coming forth and I thought: 'Wow!' It was a real Damascene moment - luckily I didn't have to fall off a horse - and I sat there and I listened to this and at the end of it I rushed

into the music room without thinking and I said to the teacher - who was a lovely lady - I said: 'That was wonderful what was it?' She said: 'That was overture to Wagner's Flying Dutchmen.' I said: 'Oh Wagner, opera, don't like opera.' you know typical child: 'Don't like this' Never tried it but know I didn't like it and that was it from then on I hooked ... so she gave me various titles I went off to the library and of course I found part of the Ring Cycle and Verdi's Otello and I just went home and I sat in my bedroom with my little gramophone record player and I just sat there and that was it I thought this was the most wonderful thing there was no libretto for the Otello but I knew the Shakespeare but I just thought the music was wonderful and then after tea I sat down for the entire evening went through Valkira and there was a libretti but of course I didn't really know any German but I just thought - followed as best as I could ... by the time I got to the end of it that was it I was hooked and I was about 12 at the time and so I just loved music and I think having a job where it was my job to promote the artists to promote the music and to try and give others a sense of the enjoyment I had it was perfect and I was very lucky because people have jobs but how many people can honestly say in life that they had a job that they loved doing? Not that many. I mean even if you're a nurse as we were discussing earlier you love your job but my goodness the pressures that you're under in the hours that you're working I mean we were under certain pressures but nothing like nurses and and we did work long hours because if we went to a concert or something it was considered part of our work but we you know we didn't really feel it was work it was just so enjoyable so I was very lucky.

[0:24:32] CC So to bring it back to you your actual time at Decca, could you describe what a typical day was like, working there?

RL: Oh I don't really think there was anything that you could call a typical day the only thing that was typical was we would all the start with the same routine we'd come in we'd hang out we'd make tea that was the most important thing to make tea first can't possibly start without tea that's when I was converted to Earl Grey tea ... we would read the papers now that sounds very very nice and comfy but in fact we were reading the papers to check on the reviews any are any of our artists who were performing and back then you had The Guardian The Telegraph The Times and The Financial Times so **[[24.02 minutes]]** we'd probably take a paper each and then we would just go through we'd take out the bits that we needed for our artists we've also been reading about other artists as well it was mostly the arts pages we were looking into and then you record reviews that might appear as well but these were all things that were part of our jobs and we needed to make sure that our artists were getting good coverage and we also needed to take any decent quotes because then we could put that in a publicity handout and sometimes we'd be rather naughty we'd take a quote leave out some of the negative bits ... so somebody might say something like: '...well I've never heard anything like it before in my life so-and-so was dreadful...' we'd leave out the so-and-so was dreadful we're just careful editing but some so and then we had various things that we did need to do we would send out promotional copies of all the records to the main newspapers we'd say oh there was The Evening Standard as well yes I'd forgotten how could I forget The Evening Standard and the Sunday ones but we had those on the Monday so Monday was really heavy duty because you had the whole weekends papers ... so we would have test pressings come in. Test pressings were the first pressings and they didn't have the finished label they'd have a little pink label or a white label and it would just be handwritten the number and what it was and those would be sent out to the reviewers so that by the time the record was released that would then be that would have been heard and the review could come out to coincide with the release and they again they all came from the New Malden Factory Burlington Road.... and then it would be a case of whatever needed doing ... now sometimes it was setting up interviews for artists who happen to be in town, might have to go to a recording session to speak to them about something ... we did so many different things ... we did a lot of which was quite new back then we do a lot of promotional signings and things so if somebody had a record coming out we would go along support them there'd be records on sale, pictures and various things so that the media coverage the lot so we really promoted our artists to the best of our ability and we would ...so you could just disappear out of the office say at lunchtime because a lot of these things tended to happen around lunchtime because that was when people who were working particularly in London could go to these things. I remember being sent off to Harrods because **Tito Goby** was there... now he wasn't strictly he'd made recordings for Decca but he wasn't one of our exclusive artists but they

said or well go along make sure some of our records are there, check everything is okay so I went along and to my horror there were no signs indicating where he was about to be and when I arrived in the music department he was promoting his book at the time there was nothing there ... the poor man was sitting there with about two or three Harrods people floating around and of course when I appeared I was seized with great joy and delight ... now I'd also taken along some records to be signed but I introduced myself and I said: 'Look what's happening? Where is everybody?' And he said: 'I've been sitting here you are the only person this has come.' So I said: 'Well when I get back I'm going to ring my opposite number at EMI because this is really wrong.' I think the fault was really Harrods and back then they didn't do that sort of thing everything was very low-key it was long before the days of **Al Fariad** it was when Harrods was a well a very upmarket emporium and they do really go with this publicity and well-known personalities so wasn't their thing but I mean lovely man and and he was really I think had they had anybody else who was a bit more tempestuous he'd have probably just got up and walked out so when I got back I said: 'You are not going to believe..' so I rang EMI spoke to my opposite number and there 'Oh no!' and a few other words which we won't include but I'm sure you can imagine.

[0:29:02] CC: Well, just as a quick aside. Selfridges now has a music space in its basement.

RL : Oh does it?

CC: It's only temporary it's only pop up I'm actually going to something there at the end of this month, September, but yeah it's been having gigs there. Yeah just for the last like 3 months but it is, it's gonna close. It's just a pop up thing.

RL: Well that's it that's a good thing I would have thought that would have been a good thing to have. You see I remember Harrods when they had a really good music department in your had what people will won't know about these days I suppose when you used to go to a record shop you would have listening booths and you would Harrods was very nice you had these little rooms that you would go into and you would ask them to put on a particular record you would sit there I mean nothing uncomfy proper comfy chairs and you could listen and all that of course was long gone but when you went to buy a record way back it was a real you know you could listen to it I mean the same would apply for whatever you wanted to listen to whether it was pop music, classical and it was a very very different world.

CC: It's interesting, it sounds like an extra service you may listen to the record before you purchase it.

RL: Well I wanted to buy a copy of Verdi's Otello and my godmother had given me some money and I thought the best place to go was Harrods and this was quite an adventure going up on the bus and by myselfand I went there a lovely chap there and I said: 'I wanted a copy of Verdi's Otello,' and there were quite a few on offer and of course I thought I wanted stereo because stereo was the thing I must mention that when I get back to Decca properly and he played me the various recordings and I thought: 'I don't like this, I don't like this ' I mean a child you know very very picky and he said: 'Well, of course, in my opinion.' he said, 'the best recording is still in mono.' And it was the **Serafim recording** with John Vickers and **Tito Gobby** but it was in mono, well when I heard that I thought: 'Wow.' you know . To me the finest Otello was John Vickers because it was not a typical Verdi lyric tenor part you needed that heroic quality and no lingo was better than **Tito Gobby** so I came away with this prized recording. I had to get another one from an opposite number and RCA cos it got worn out with being played. I've still got it but I have a duplicate copy and I suppose I ought to get in on CD as well

[0:31:52] CC: [inaudible]

RL: Yes oh I haven't got into that no... as you can see I still have reel-to-reel cassettes. LPs for me - as you can see - never went out of favour and I do have CDs but by the time I I'm quite sure there'll be something new now I haven't got around to downloading things because I like to hear my music properly as I consider it because that was one of the things you learned at Decca; most domestic equipment

doesn't do justice to the real sound of the recording - the LP so and there is a Japanese chap who has brought out this wonderful machine I think it's something like oh it was rather expensive it was \$15,000 so it's probably about £10,000 I don't know how manyI can't work this out in English anyway but it was expensive but it was it it was rather like a giant CD player in that a drawer came out you put your LP on to it and then it went back in and it didn't matter if there was a scratch or it was warped two lasers then focused on the groove and went right in and you could get excellent recording sound. I mean I've got a **ragar deck** but I think if ever I had more money than sense maybe when I've moved it would be lovely thing to have because it means some of the older and slightly damaged LPs you could play again I mean most of mine touchwood my treasure and look after but accidents happen so that's my record collection in the corner there...

CC: Wow

RL As you can see

CC: I should just say that we're just pointing to a very substantial record collection over over on the right hand side of the room. How many records have you got in there?

RL: Well I gave up when I got to a thousand counting, I think there's probably about [**34.03 minutes**] 1,500

CC: Wow

RL: Give or take. I haven't got the time to sit down and count but you see what we would do is we would liaise with our opposite number so when our list came out we'd say you'd ring up some EMI at Deutsche Gramophon, RCA whatever and you say: 'Oh anything you fancy on our list ? Oh I'll have this, I'll have that. Anything you fancy? Oh sorry'. So we would have, they would send us their records we would send them ours and I suppose technically it was sort of theft but it was considered one of the perks because we were not that well paid but because we loved the job and we got all these I mean we could always have records and I mean a record didn't cost a lot to produce it, about ten shillings so you know we that was really one of our perks. I suppose it's like in a chocolate factory or biscuit factory you can eat as much as you like because after you've eaten so much you're gonna be sick it doesn't quite work that with way with records. One of the people I work with he had an extension built especially for the record collection and I can understand that

[0:35:19] CC: When I worked at the British Film Institute, I worked in the DVD department and similar situation whereby we would get - and I've got nothing near a thousand - but I do have the most random DVDs ... I did watch them because I had to for work and I don't dislike them especially but that I've still got like volumes one to six of British Transport Films

RL: Oh well that's interesting.

CC: You know this one that we

RL: I would be fascinated

CC: Well maybe I'll post them to you. I've still got to keep them because I got them from work as a freebie but I've never really watched them.... but there's one by – I'm going to forget his surname but its George something and he did more poetic versions so his is very nice and I gave it to a colleague, well a contact at the London Transport Museum [inaudible], but if you are interested in then I will happily give me your new address in Wales and I will post them to you.

RL: Well my grand passion in life, well one of my grand passions is steam trains but transport is fascinating anyway and I love old I love old cars and buses and coaches. It's very interesting and when

you see the pictures I've got a few train DVDs and things but when you see also the cars in the station and what was going on again it's a glimpse of how things were. I think that's probably why I like things like Foyle's War and anything set in the, in the past because of the you know the Poirot, the Miss Marple it's the cars and I sadly to say I have sat there and watched a film or something and seeing somebody get on the southern engine and think well you're not going to get to the Lake District in that and the carriages are wrong they're post-war marked ones!

[0:38:00] CC We have to be a little bit careful, because I know we both like early cinema, and if we're not careful this conversation will start going completely [inaudible] so can I, if I bring it back to Decca, can I just ask if there was any particular day that stood out or incidents when you were there that really rises to the surface from the time you were there?

RL: Well, there were some, there were some funny things that happen. I remember one day with this wonderful underfloor heating one of our singers Norman Bailey was coming in to do an interview because a lot of the time people would want to do interviews and it was difficult to build a book a studio so they would often come in use a room at Decca because it was such a big building we had spare rooms and he came in and there was torrential rain outside absolutely pouring down and probably like the poor Americans are coming across now and he had a hat and he had a coat and they were absolutely sodden and he came in - and I knew Norman anyway - he came in and I made him tea, absolutely sopping wet so I says: 'Well give me your coat and the hat I'll see if I can dry them out.' And I put the hat on the floor, he said: 'What do you doing?' I said: 'It's under floor heating.' so I did that and I spread the the coat as well the damp bit on the floor sort of careful people didn't walk on it and by the time he done the interview they were actually dry and the hat, he said, 'Oh it's all nice, it's all warm!' [inaudible] It was as if you'd put it in a microwave these days and I do remember there was a chap called **Walter Vellnar** now he used to be leader of the Vienna Philharmonic and **Will Bosscovski** before him and often the leader of the Vienna Phil became a conductor and he just started to become a conductor and he'd come over to England from Vienna and he'd come in to do some interviews and various things and he'd forgotten to put his watch backwards oh backwards, yes I think it would be, yes so he arrived an hour early. Now he came in and it was lunchtime and we weren't expecting it really so there I was sitting in the office with my tea and my sandwiches my feet on the desk and my nose in a railway magazine and I heard this knock and I just said: 'Come in.' thinking it was, you know, a colleague from down the corridor and in he came and I thought: 'Oh Good Grief!' you know, so feet off the table and he came in introduced himself I said: 'Oh **Herr Vellnar**, I'm very sorry didn't realise you were coming, weren't expecting you 'til two o'clock.' And he said: 'But it is two o'clock.' And I said, 'No, it's one o'clock.' And then he realised he did ... so I said: 'But please, come in sit down I can make you tea we also have coffee....?' And he noticed I was reading the railway model I daresay or a railway magazine, he said: 'Oh you are interested in railways?' So I said, 'Yes.' 'I too am interested!' So we had we sat down over tea and coffee and we had a delightful chat passed the entire time talking trains. He told me all about his layout in Vienna and so what could have been quite difficult so when people started arriving there we were nattering away about trains so I mean it could have been quite awkward. I mean he was very nice and I have to say most of our big artists were lovely people, there were one or two who were what can best be described as 'pains in the arse' - all now dead and I think it's I could tell some ... no I won't say anything because they're dead and they're gone and you know they'd you just don't know why people are like they are but most of them were really truly delightful and very nice to work with not at all difficult but you always had one or two. It's like anything whatever, you know, wherever you're working whatever it is is always going to be one or two that you really think: 'Oh my God, it sounds so and so ..' but, you know, but for the most part they were really delightful.

[0:42:03] CC: I think really established people tend to be ok because they're less insecure maybe because they know that they're good at their craft and have a kind of recognition?

RL: Yes they ought to be but we had one or two big names that were difficult but but, as I say, for the most part they were really delightful and would really be helpful and do whatever they could to help you along. There was no sort of big ego or anything I mean Joan Sutherland was a sheer delight, she was just

a nice down-to-earth Aussie girl with this remarkable voice that was quite unusual - nobody else have got anything quite like it and I would ring up usually to speak to her secretary who'd actually worked at Decca and I rang one day hoping to speak to Tessa and she answered instead and I said, 'Oh you know I'm sorry I was trying to get hold of' 'Oh no,' she said, 'What can I do to help?' So nice and she's like: 'I think she keeps it here...' and she went and read things out but you know as you say I think that most of the really big people were really nice I mean like you find that in the acting world the real big people **[42.05 mins]** people like John Gielgud Ralph Richardson, they were an absolute delight and really nice.

CC: And you worked with them?

RL: Not worked no I just sort of vaguely knew them. I used to go to the theatre a lot and they were they were charming Ralph Richardson was lovely because he... I'm ... he came out when I parked my motorbike by the National Theatre and he came up and said: 'That's a very big bike for a little girl.' And I said, 'Sir Ralph it is not a very big bike here to some mere 250 CCS unlike your own BMW...' And we only had the most delightful conversation and he took me over to where Nicky Henson's Beemer was parked and he said: 'You have a look at the fairing...' And he's yeah the most terrific accent and we were chatting away about bikes and somebody came out the stage was: 'Sir Ralph, Sir Ralph! We've been worried....!' 'I have been talking to my friend about motorbikes.' And I said: 'I supposed to be coming to the performance, you see.' 'I shalln't start until you're in.' But I mean people like that John Gielgud was delightful as well I mean the big people really are usually very nice and , you know, we had a really nice bunch of artists and they were always easy to work with and they would help with publicity wherever they could so we were very lucky in that respect.

[0:43:34] CC: So when we talked on the phone before, we did talk a little bit about the wider reputation of Decca internationally , and the impact it had as a label so do you want to talk a bit about that? Alright as a company as well?

RL: Well I mean now the thing about Decca was it it did so many - it was the first in so many different fields ... now I've got it written down because I shall forget cos my poor little brain isn't what it was but I'm just trying to just trying to see where we are with the yes I mean there was the huge catalogue of music of course which was unique to us but we had ... I think it was the technical innovations that probably put Decca away ahead When Edward Lewis started in '29, we were way behind EMI - or as it was then HMV and Columbia - we we were just a very small company just starting and we were really pioneers. They were the first British company to actually manufacture LPs everybody done 78s and from 1946 to '52 they made the change from 78s to LPs. They invented a thing called FFRR which was full frequency range recording and they were the first to try stereophonic recordings as early as May '54 and later on, of course, when stereo was standard FFRR became FFSS and that was full frequency stereophonic sound. The FFRR interestingly was developed by one of the engineers Arthur Haddy and it was an offshoot of Decca's World War 2 pioneering work of a high fidelity hydrophone cable of detecting individual Germans subs. This was the Decca navigator thing, they had radio beacons so a ship the British ship could see exactly where it was by getting these beacons but they could also tell where other German ships were and because the Germans didn't know about it unlike radar they couldn't block it so it was really vital and I gather it was in use in navigational circles up until the 1990s when GPS replaced everything but a lot of the stuff, you know, would be would be as a result of the work that Decca did during the war and I mean the navigator I gather the building got knocked down when they widened the road - I think the A3 access or something - but they did a lot of pioneering work there and we I'm just trying to see what else I'd yeah ... I mean we have the stereo, of course, we also had back in 1958 the young man called Jon Culshaw who joined the company decided it would be a wonderful thing to record Wagner's complete Ring Cycle. Now if you're not familiar with Wagner's Ring Cycle, for a start there's an introduction in three parts so in theory four operas. The first opera goes onto a mere three LPs like any other opera then you get to Valkyrie and Siegfried which take up five LPs and **Gerter Demara** which takes up six and this is double-sided so this was no minor undertaking. And back then people would buy records but everybody said: 'Well nobody's gonna buy an entire Ring Cycle!' But they said: 'No go ahead see what happens' That was the sort of faith Edward Lewis had in his staff and Jon Culshaw was a

delightful man and I had was lucky enough to speak to him and know him very briefly in the 70s – he was at the BBC then I think - and he pioneered the whole revolutionised the whole opera recording... because at one time when you made an opera recording you'd have the conductor you'd have the orchestra in front of the conductor and then up on a sort of raised platform you would have the singers and then behind the singers you'd have the chorus and the microphones would be all over the place - they'd be hanging from the ceiling, they'd be over the orchestra, over this the singers would have individual mics, the chorus would be generally miked from above and it was quite ... but everybody stood exactly where they were supposed to stand ... Now John Culshaw said no this is an opera, things are happening.... so he would have people walk about and there's a wonderful film which shows part of the the making of the ring and a young **Christopher Rabin** who I knew quite well at Decca - as when he was a general assistant then - actually going and moving singers from point A to point B so that once you'd sung at one microphone he'd go over and you'd see him gesturing and he'd get them over to the third microphone or whatever so when you listen to that Solti Ring Cycle - especially on today's modern equipment - you can hear people walking about and it is just like listening to a performance. If you listen to a relay say from Covent Garden or **Bayreuth** or wherever you've got that sound but without any strange thumps and bumps and it is really still a landmark in recording history [49.47] and then of course we were the first company to develop digital recordings and I think that was 1977-78 the first LP we produced that was digitally recorded rather than on an analogue machine was the New Year's Day Concert from Vienna and that - really - I think that was then led to the development of CDs because once you've got digital recording which is so much easier to deal with than the old-fashioned analogue ... I mean the tapes that they had at the recording studio you'd have reel-to-reel obviously but on the back of the tapes it would be black and you would mark that up rather like a blackboard so you could mark up where you wanted to cut and join to something else or there was a problem with a particular tape you could then splice two together splice a bit in whatever so... I mean there was a famous story about a **Pearl Fishers** duet that was recorded because the old one with **Robert Maryland** , **Yuserf DeBerling** ... you can't better it ...but anyway Decca decided to and unfortunately neither of the singers were quite able to achieve the top notes that they were supposed to achieve but they did achieve them thanks to the recording engineers who did a little tweaking here and a little tweaking there but, you know , I mean and they also did other things they invent ... you know having got the gramophone... they've invented a particular tone arm that was far more sensitive than anything else.... they even invented cleaning things for discs - little brushes - because before, nobody bothered to clean their records but now they did all that so they were really - I think - pioneers and what we take for granted now it was all started by Decca in the same way that if you go to the theatre or the opera particularly the house lights go down... now, before Wagner the house lights stayed up but Wagner who had gas at **Bayreuth** he insisted that the lights came up for the performance but the auditorium was in darkness and that had never happened before so you know now if you were told you the lights were going to stay up in the auditorium you would go: 'Don't be silly!' And he of course introduced the sitting there quietly and behaving yourself almost like a religious experience.

[0:52:33] CC: I went to a talk on that once, at the TATE about Wagner's concepts of darkness. I can't remember much only now but it was about his proposals for theatre and how it should be completely in the dark so I yeah I recognise that. I've got another two questions I want to ask, and of course, if there is anything else you want to say at the end, please, please do. So the first one is a bit back to you being based over there at the Albert embankment so we've touched on this a little bit but how did you feel when the company was sold and the label had to close?

RL: Well the label still continued but it was I think it was very sad for me and it was I think it was a great sadness certainly things needed to be changed and needed to be done. It was always said there were three types of management; there was a triangular management which was practiced at Deutsche Grammophon - somebody at the top and then it will petered out towards the bottom , EMI had circular management wherever the boss was in the middle and everything radiated out equally and Decca was supposed to have mushroom management where we're all in the dark and I'm afraid it was rather like that

CC: Yeah but there was good communication across the three sites?

RL: Oh yes I mean we'd we'd all liaised with each other, you know, you pick up the phone you talk to the studio or the record we call the record factory but I think the trouble was Sir Edward by that time was getting ... well he was probably for far more ill than we actually realised because I do remember he's signed on the Friday ... he signed over Decca and over the weekend he died so when we came back in Monday he'd died and nobody was really surprised because it was his great pride and joy. He built it up from nothing and sadly he'd had two sons but the one who probably would have been the one to inherit he drowned when he was at school saving another boy from ... I think we'd fallen into a river and he went in to help him and sadly drowned ... and the other son had absolutely no interest whatsoever so there was nobody to hand the company on to and I think had it been handed on as a family concern they would have needed to certainly be changes but I think it would have continued as as it pretty much as it was as a company but, as I said , it was bought by accountants from Polygram and they were really only interested in asset stripping and bit by bit they would come over they would speak to us they'd learn what they could and once they've got what they needed they'd fire people bit by bit so it was not a nice time because every time you got called in to speak to one of these people you've never really knew whether you were going to come out with the job or not ... rather similar to the stories Shostakovich tells about being someone to see Stalin in the middle of the night and ... wasn't quite as bad but you just didn't know what was going to happen and they were really just getting all the information out of us in a rather underhand manner and then you'd be made redundant as they called it and they closed down the building and moved off somewhere else. It was it was very sad a lot of people lost their jobs and it was a bad time because in the '70s you could find jobs anywhere but once things had changed and there was a change of government ... the '80s became very very difficult jobs were no longer there to be had ...and I admit there was certainly a lot of over employment but at least people were working and paying taxes and I think it's better to have more people working than less because we now see the problems today... you tried to run a department that formerly say had 10 people and they try and run it with two and it you just don't get the service and if somebody is ill or on holiday you've lost 50 percent of your staff.

[0:57:15] CC: I meant to say the label closed it's factory [inaudible] cos it still operates as label today.

RL: Yes it's still I think it's Universal or something else it now. I said, so many owners I think Sony had a hand in it and I think they bought it from Polygram and now is it Universal Music or something... it's it's been passed from pillar to post and of course the each time it gets passed I dare say it loses a bit more. Now, of course, a lot of people I worked with I was younger I was only in my early twenties and what are we talking 40 years ago and a lot of them who were then in their 40s - if they're still alive they'd be in their 80s and sadly a lot of them died of AIDS because obviously in the music industry we had a lot of gay men - and very talented they were - but you know nobody knew about the dreadful business of AIDS then and people sleep around because you could without any knowledge so many of them sadly died very young or too young

CC: It's interesting because what you're saying resonates very strongly with other interviews that we've got about the people who were working in the factory and in 1980 that closed and so all of that livelihood, that employment was just gone and it did make it very difficult especially one of the interviewees we have - I believe her husband was a press man and so to become redundant and you're like - at that time - in your late fifties I mean your employment prospects...

RL: Well who's gonna want to take you on ? And also if you if you've got a specialized job like that it's very difficult to find a similar job because the only other people doing that work would be EMI and they'd have all their own people and also if you were in New Malden they were in Middlesex so you were hardly wanting to go all that way over the river. I mean it must have been devastating from the local area because the record factory closing and all those people being made redundant ...The Navigator closing later on, because at one time , I mean Decca was one of the major employers and a lot of people work locally and liked working locally because they didn't want to commute up to London { 59.55 } it must have been ... I mean it must have dealt the area a huge blow

CC: Yeah, especially as ... another interview who talks about how easy it was ... again echoes your sentence and it's saying that it was easy to get work at the time that he started working there I didn't ...I don't know what he said about when he finished or left but he said it was very easy just to walk into another job in any kind of factory around that general area at the time

RL: Yes I mean I was not happy where I was working and so I just went to an agency in the lunchtime and I said: 'I'm not happy where I am what have you got ?' And then they came up with the Decca job and I went off for an interview and because I'd got holiday and things, the man I worked for for who was - well he was busy carrying on with somebody and he thought I'd told his wife and I hadn't told his wife because although I didn't approve of what he was doing it wasn't my place and I didn't want to stir up trouble - so he went off on holiday by the time you came back I was able to greet him with the news that I was leaving at the end of the week so I thought I had a little bit of revenge butyou could you could literally if you didn't like what you were doing you could just up and go into any other job you were given you know also those sorts of opportunities. Agencies then had more jobs than people, now I understand it's more people than jobs...

CC: Or zero hour contracts...

RL: Oh I think that's an obscene because how earth can you cope if you don't know how much you're gonna learn in a week. I mean even if you're badly paid you know you're going to get X pounds at the end of the week or if you're working on a basic salary for so many hours and then plus overtime you know that whatever happens you are going to be getting X plus something but to zero hours it's just a way of saying well we don't want you this week but we might have a couple of hours for you next week or we might want you all next week for forty and that's I think that's so wrong but we didn't have all that sort of thing we had job ... I mean that was back then you still had job security because when I was at school – and I left in oh goodness `when did I leave? Well let me see I left grammar school at 18 so that would have been ' 69 -'70 yes then onto university but you know when you went for a job a big company you'd be there for life that was the whole ethos we grew up with so if you went into banking or record company or or any sort of company retail outlet you could expect to start with them and finish with them now nothing of the sort ... even teaching because I retrained them to teach and no longer did you have you know you had quarterly contracts so you were only employed for a term how can you do you know you can't make plans because you've got to do lesson plans you've got to make long-term and I think it's dreadful but we didn't have any of that thing you see if things were far more secure then and although I know change must happen and we certainly could have had a lot of change in Decca , you know, the way it was done was was not very nice that's that the sad thing so...

[1:03:43] CC: So my final question, and as I say we can add some bits on at the end, was looking back what impact do you think working for Decca had on your life?

RL: Ah yes, well as I said earlier the best job I ever had. It was fun, it was hard work but I loved every single moment and I made friends that I still have all those that are still alive, some of the artists I knew I'm still in touch with ... you know it was a lovely time and I suppose they the one thing is my enormous record collection which when I started there I think I had a couple of **palace set cubes** that used to get from habitats and that was wonderful but then I found I needed an awful lot more and now I'm delighted to say Ikea are producing these wonderful things which are ... I went ... when they first came out I went to Ikea and I had a cardboard cutout of an LP sleeve which I inserted in I thought: 'Oh yes they fit!' and I think they must I don't think it's specifically for records but they obviously realised that that size was going to be very good for all sorts of things whether it was ornaments or whatever.

CC: We had an exhibition as part of this project. It was called To Make A Record – and as part of the feedback bit you could write on the record what you thought about the exhibition and we did indeed get the carriers from Ikea so I think it was designed with that in mind.

RL: Yes well they are brilliant and in fact when I move I'm probably going to have to get another one because where I'm moving I've got underfloor heating....

CC: Oh no it's going to...

RL I know! It's gone full circle! But what I will do is I will not put anything in the bottom row and I'll just have them on the top, you know, the the next one up and underneath I can put all the oversized books and the scores and things but I mean I can look back and I can remember some lovely people and some lovely times and it was interesting ... I mean one of the things which you may want to put somewhere else ... we used to do all this promotional work including going to music clubs and playing our recordings there and the equipment we had was wonderful because other companies would give you stuff so that when you went out you were promoting theirs we had this beautiful **BNO Deck** which had a fixed arm which was incredible. We had a quad dumping amplifier in an ordinary dump amp, we had tanoy speakers which were practically as big as me and I should add I'm five foot nothing and they were literally nearly, they were certainly even wider than I am now! But they were huge great things and I would turn up at , you know, whatever music club it was and a van would come along with the equipment because we had all this and so two chaps would unload the speakers ask me where I wanted everything. They would put them in place and then I would start to connect up and of course at the music you need to say the music club of London or whichever one it was the chaps would all come around - bees to the honeypot - there was these huge speakers it was all this wonderful modern equipment and there was this little girl with yards and yards of wires and she was poking things in here and connecting things there I mean it seemed awful it it looked a bit like something out of a space rocket or something but I knew what I was doing and it was a very complex and you were always aware of and with this little audience watching you just setting up and then there be: 'Excuse me Miss..?' - where people were wonderfully polite - or possibly: 'Dear what's that exactly?' And I'd tell them what it was, 'Oh, and what does it do?' and you tell them and they were wonderful I mean they would just all stand round there: 'And you know how to put all this together?' 'Yes.' 'Oooh, I wish you could come and show me how you know how to put mine up at home.' I still have a mass of wires behind my equipment that I suspect in the future everything will be wireless which would be a lot easier but you know it was it was always great fun because people would come up and talk to you and ask questions and we would go out, we'd we'd hire say St John Smith's Square for the afternoon and play the **new Meistersinger** or we'd go ... I mean when we did the Wagner Society I of course was a member and my boss at the time wouldn't let me see the script and there were various little plugs about how Decca had been invaded by the Wagner Society and I think we've we just got John Le Carrie and Tinker Tailor and 'We have a mole!' So I was known as the Wagnerian mole but it was... they were good times everything is very different now and I just count myself lucky that I can look back and remember some happy times. It's like everything in life you tend to concentrate on the good things because if you dwell on the bad things **[01:09:45]** well you'll just be miserable it's better to forget the bad well try to put them to one side and learn from the bad but it's far better to dwell on what was fun and what was good and and they were good days.

[01:10:02] CC: I saw Pauline Oliveros at St John's Smith's Square this time last year just before she passed away. It was .. she made us do.. I've forgotten what her practice is called but it's like a massive group singing, or was that? Deep listening? That's what she does, is deep listening so we all had to – the room was - we all sat on the floor, it wasn't that formal and it was packed though , must have been about 3 or 4 hundred people and we all had to sing a tone, a note but the idea was that you all kept in the same... you had to try and make the note go higher than it was and everybody had to do it and I can't sing at all but we were all just trying, you know and it went on for like 15 minutes?

RS: But when there's masses of you doing it you don't feel so bad because if you were told to stand up and do it by yourself...

CC: As part of it they did some Meredith Monk that night as well but yeah it was a really really

great... great space, I'd not been there before...

RL: Well what it was opposite us you see we would just walk and we go to the lunchtime concerts there because we could just walk over Lambeth bridge and across the little and there was St John Smith's Square so and of course if you were going to a concert I mean they were designed as lunchtime concerts but nobody minded if you were out and of course the best thing was when you went and took somebody to lunch whether it was an artist or met somebody from the BBC. There was a particular Indian curry house **The Mandir** which was round the back of Tottenham Court Road and I used to take so many people there I should have had some sort of discount because it was wonderful I kept taking people there and they liked it because it was nice and quiet the food was quite reasonably priced and you know and I know a number of BBC people would then go there afterwards people that you know we had some lovely times ... and I got to ride in taxis I never went in a taxi but you know if I was on business for Decca I could just hop in a taxi I had to take something up to Georg Solti who lived in Hamilton Terrace, St John's Wood so they said: 'Oh get yourself a taxi just nip up.' So I'd get in the taxi and I'd say whatever number Hamilton Terrace because **Charles Mackerras** was about three or four doors down I mean Hamilton Terrace was absolutely heaving with musical talent and so you'd arrive and I say: 'Oh would you mind waiting?' And you toddle off with whatever you know take it, deliver it and then you come back and I think: 'My goodness I'm getting paid for doing this!' And really I mean you could have had a messenger do it but for some reason it was it was extravagant yes but you know it was fun to ride in a taxi. Cos we couldn't afford taxis. I never went in the taxi.

[01:13:17] CC: So we returned again with Ros Lee and we're talking about and Decca Records on here Friday the 8th of September 2017. You had a couple of stories, you wanted to tell us?

RL: Yes a couple of things I meant to mention first of all where the name Decca came from because it's obviously made up,. There was a chap called Wilfrid Samuel who fancied himself as a bit of a linguist and he decided that he would take the name Mecca which of course apart from its over some Islamic meanings Mecca was always used to somewhere wonderful you know it had ballrooms and all that suddenly and then he took the D from the portable gramophones that they made which were the dulcet or the dulcephone and he took that D and decided to turn Mecca into Decca. Excuse me. They were of course amongst the very first portable gramophones and probably what the troops were actually taking to the trenches with them - you know in the 1914-18 war - so sad to think that they would end up and all that mud but would have given some comfort to the the chaps then but it was a totally made-up name and that's where he took the D and substituted it for the M. The other thing I was going to say was we had a recording session with Vladimir Ashkenazy and he was doing some ... at that time it was a piano recital he was doing I can't remember offhand but it might have been part of the Chopin series he was doing now I don't know whether you're aware of this but every musical instrument is quite individual I mean it's quite obvious with the strings of violins that sort of thing every instrumentalist has their own instrument and they feel different all the rest of it now obviously lugging a grand piano around the world with you is not as easy as taking your violin with you and whenever he came to London he always had a particular Steinway Grand and if I remember rightly it was number 421 - things do stick in my head - and so if we were going to do a recording session with Ashkenazy we would ring Steinway book 421 and a chap called **Bob Glazebrook** would come along and tune it - he was their main tuner - and we had a recording session at the Kingsway Hall so Bob Glazebrook turns up, Vladimir Ashkenazy turns up, the recording engineers turn up - but alas - the Steinway did not turn up. So they waited - London traffic - nothing so after half an hour we get a call: 'Where's the piano?' 'Well it should be with you.' So then on to Steinway: 'Ah, we booked a piano for a recital, where is it?' 'Oh it left this morning.' 'Well it hasn't turned up.' 'Oh?' Now there are expensive things Steinway Grands so there's a van two men and a Steinway Grand somewhere in London well it turns out that they've got somewhat lost and then they'd gone into a pub to ask directions and they thought while they were there they might as well have a drink and then apparently they had another drink and then they totally forgot they were supposed to be delivering this piano. Well the recording session had to be cancelled because it had to be that piano. People were not very happy and as I understand it when the van and the piano were found somebody else came along and took it away so when the two chaps came out of the pub there was no van, no Steinway. They did not as you can imagine last very long with Steinway. I think by the time they got back they would have been given

their cards but every piano was individual and each pianist would have a particular piano so whoever ever you were **Rubinstein, Alyssia Della Rocca** whoever they had their own particular favourite but I don't know who compensated us for the loss of the recording session ... fortunately **Vova** was a lovely chap - still is a lovely chap - and was quite stoical about the whole thing but it could have been a very tricky thing but we had a lot of interesting phone calls and the language got worse as the afternoon progressed - you can imagine : 'Where is that bleep bleep piano...?' But that was that was I think probably about the worst thing that ever happened but I thought you might like to know about the Decca the name.

CC: Yes, yes.

RL: But I I hope that will be well I hope whoever is listening in the future you haven't fallen asleep by now

CC: No, not at all!

RL: Hopefully there'll be some insights perhaps into life as it was an a company that was a good company to work for and but just really I think had he had a son who could have taken us forward things would have been different but he was then getting on getting ill and sadly had no ... you know. We stayed still but life moved on.

CC: Ok, thank you very much.

RL: Thank you very much

CC: Cheers