



James Roriston laments the recently announced cuts to BBC Radio 3's *Late Junction* and *Music Planet* programmes, a big loss for musical diversity on British radio

To read that this autumn BBC Radio 3 will drastically reduce the output of *Late Junction* from three to one programme each week and *Music Planet* to one hour due to 'cost-cutting' came as a hammer blow in April. This will mean that world music output on UK radio will be significantly reduced and further marginalised. The changes mean that listeners will be consigned to a selection of classical pieces Monday to Wednesday, with *Music Planet* given the unenviable 12am-1am slot Saturday into Sunday. *Late Junction* will be a quick 120-minute stereo blast on Friday nights.

For those who haven't discovered the vibrant, edgy and eclectic late-night weekday output on BBC Radio 3, then they are missing what I regard as the BBC's best output and I know I'm not alone in saying this. A recent letter published in *The Guardian* on March 19 entitled '*Radio 3 cuts threaten musical ecosystem*' lamented the changes and was signed by more than 500 leading musicians and industry names, including Brian Eno, Shabaka Hutchings and our own *Songlines* editor, Jo Frost.

There's a completely unique and different vibe at night on BBC Radio 3. Soul searching, zany, adventurous, 'cool', ear-bending, mind-expanding – everything late-night BBC Radio 3 should be as a national station given public money to promote UK arts.

The late-night output (given its own 'after dark' branding) is the sort of radio that delivers constant and pleasurable discovery: from old recordings recovered from the deserts of Africa, soundscapes from Japan, yearning laments of European folk or alternative electronica to anything else. Having lived around the world, they are the programmes that connect me most fully to memories of distant friends, associates and cultures all from the confines of my home.

Roots and world music shouldn't be niche, yet sadly it is. The further chipping away of broadcast time means less exposure, less awareness. 'Discovery' algorithms available on music streaming services are no replacement for personally curated playlists by someone who cares.

What does the future hold for the presenters? They're some of the best and most knowledgeable presenters out there – Kathryn Tickell with her obvious deep understanding of the UK folk scene; Max Reinhardt with a dizzying knowledge of everything you've never heard before; Nick Luscombe with an unending passion for Japan and his astounding personal sound recordings and Lopa Kothari with her back catalogue of old South Asian hits. These are BBC talents that give warmth, personality, wit, insight and wisdom in a way that makes them a truly special part of BBC radio and I don't want them to disappear.

We all have our personal reasons for loving certain radio programmes. The dedicated fans of *Late Junction* and *Music Planet* have, over the years, shared them on tweets often read

out on-air. We've heard how the programmes help the creative night owls listening live, or the morning commuters battling tiredness against dark, winter night skies.

Personally, they helped me in the difficult days re-settling into the UK after seven years working abroad. They kept me connected with people and cultures that suddenly felt so distant, hearing those resonant voices associated with the landscapes now consigned to memory. On the rainy morning commutes, looking out at grey skies, there could be nothing better.

So the programmes are not being mothballed but they are certainly being consigned to the corner, further hidden – like a zany aunt who comes only for quick visits. This seems so counter-cultural, given the recent reinvention of both programmes with more features (*Music Planet* World Mixtape and Road Trip being two examples), guests and even an associated festival (*Late Junction* in Hackney).

BBC Radio 3 is the centre of arts culture on British radio and *Late Junction* and *Music Planet* are central to this. Programmes proud to stand alone and be unashamedly adventurous, bold

The programmes are not being mothballed but they are certainly being consigned to the corner

and daring. We don't need more Scala or Classic FM-style programming at night. Should the BBC even be chasing commercial rivals' programming style anyway? Radio 3 can sometimes (unjustifiably) be seen as a station for 'older' listeners. *Late Junction* and *Music Planet*, with their decidedly more contemporary take, are the antidote to this accusation. If the BBC's drive to increase diversity and reach out

to younger audiences is so important to them, then night-time Radio 3 already does this. Perhaps this is the thing that introduces them to the daytime output of Mozart et al?

I'm excited that Alan Davey announced Elizabeth Alker will have a weekly outing with her programme *Unclassified*. The two recent Sunday night mini-series were mesmerising and sonically beautiful. But I share the voices of listeners who say that say this isn't a replacement for *Late Junction*. It's a different style of programme for a different audience and it won't include much, if any, 'world music.'

I know the BBC is facing a massive funding crisis, and fundamental changes need to be made to reduce costs – but a ten-million-pound investment on BBC Sounds while reducing our much-loved output at a time of pinched wallets? The eye-watering sums seem out-of-kilter, and there are hugely critical voices out there who preferred the BBC iPlayer radio app (only recently launched). Who says that *Music Planet* and *Late Junction* can't be part of the BBC reaching out to a youth audience through BBC Sounds anyway? Now increasingly diverse, this new audience should be enticed into loving these programmes like the rest of us do. Perhaps it's simply a matter of prominence and promotion... BBC? ♦

ABOUT JAMES

James Roriston is a freelance journalist writing on a wide variety of subjects including world music. Having worked abroad in India and Sweden, he's led music education in two international schools. He plays the piano and organ.