

The Hardy Society Journal

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OFF THE PAGE, ON THE EAR –
RECORDING *TESS*
BY ROY McMILLAN

It sounds simple enough. Take one of the best-loved books in the language, record it and make it available to everyone. Roy McMillan, producer of the new recording of Tess of the d'Urbervilles from Naxos Audiobooks, explains how it happens.

Tess of the d'Urbervilles is one of the great English novels, one of the world's great novels; and that would have been reason enough for Naxos Audiobooks to record it. The market for audiobooks is changing, growing, shifting uncertainly. On the one hand, a recent survey suggested that people did not buy them largely because they did not even think to do so. Audiobooks were for the visually impaired, weren't they? At the same time, however, the range, style, and availability of recorded books are growing. From bodice-rippers to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, from twenty-first-century British blockbusters to thirteenth-century Persian mystics, specialist to broad appeal, popular to literary, people are realising that hearing a book can be as vivid and satisfying as reading it.

What's more, it suits the new audio fashion. The number of people downloading books is going through the proverbial. The accessibility and portability of the new technology makes the experience much easier for those who want to read, say, *War and Peace* but either found the book itself too daunting or – even if they chose the audiobook route – were tired of trying to remember (and find) which CD they were on. Sticking the whole thing on an iPod (other MP3 players are available) meant that they were able to jog, get to work, do the housework, fly somewhere – do almost anything – and at the same time have one of the immortal works of the human imagination brought to them.

For Naxos Audiobooks, the issue of recording *Tess* was one that required no delicate intellectual balancing. Naxos Audiobooks had done an abridged version in the past, but one of the label's aims is to have recorded the canon of great English literature in full. And if you're going to do that, you need to do *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Even if other publishers have recorded it in the past, or will do so again, it was important to Nicolas Soames (not the MP), MD of Naxos Audiobooks, to have the title in bookshops, record stores and on their virtual shelves. But profits in this particular branch of the publishing world are rarely large; and costs are substantial – recording, producing, designing and distributing a box-set of CDs at a price which is naturally well above that of a novel is not cheap, and the audience is still limited, despite recent developments. But even with those provisos, it mattered that *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* was available to Naxos Audiobooks's audience.

Having made that decision, the next was a more straightforward but equally important dilemma. Who should read – a man or a woman? In general, Naxos Audiobooks goes with the author – if a man wrote it, then it makes sense that his book should be read by a

man. But there are some characters, some works, where the voice required is different from that of the author; where the nature of the book requires a different approach. *Madame Bovary* is one; *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* is another. The central character has such a powerful presence throughout the work that giving the whole book a female voice seemed to be the only right way to capture the essence of it. So who should do it?

Anna Bentinck has performed in over 800 broadcasts for the BBC. She has recorded dozens of audiobooks, recorded the voiceovers for documentaries, corporate videos, commercials and cartoons. She is also a writer and producer. If you are planning to record a 150,000-word book that is loved by millions, you need someone with intelligence, experience and of course the ability to do it to the standard you require within the limited time available. So Anna got the call; the studio and a producer were booked for the five days (and one extra, just in case); and a copy of the text, transferred on to A4 paper to make it easier to read and manoeuvre in the studio, was sent out. The next stage of the process had begun.

It didn't begin comfortably, though – Anna's earlier experience of Hardy, when she was in her 20s, was of his being a bit of an old misery. Rereading him now, however, she discovered – thankfully! – the power of his storytelling. The first task was to read the book out loud, making notes on characters on a separate sheet of paper, while marking on the text any unusual pronunciations and brief directions, especially during narrative sequences. As a result, the script is peppered with instructions (like 'Cheer up here') in the margins.

But making the book come to life required something more than just vocal training. She was looking for a deeper sense of the atmosphere that pervades the scenery, the language, the characters, the settings. Paintings and photographs of the period in general were a start, but she was also able to see a photographic exhibition of early farm machinery, and used that as a means of getting a sense of what it must have been like for Tess to wear those gloves or work on that machine. Meanwhile, of course, she was imagining herself as Tess; inside Tess's body, feeling the physical weight of the clothes and the emotional weight of her experiences.

Then there was the matter of the voice – the narrator, the principals, the extras and of course Tess herself. Rather than just rely on her own experience, Anna called friends and contacts in Dorset and tried out the various accents and tones she had heard while reading the book. This was not easy – anyone with a genuine accent finds the attempts of others at reproducing it often rather embarrassing (as does the person trying it out); but she found she had nothing to fear, and, reassured, started developing the basic voice to suit the different characters that people the novel. So, for example, the strength of the accent was increased for the more rural characters, but toned down for Tess, who was influenced by the school-mistress as well as being concerned with pleasing Angel. So, with the script annotated and the voices decided, she arrived in April 2007 at a small recording studio in Finchley to record Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.

Meanwhile, the producer (Roy McMillan) was going slightly insane. Most people know how to say most of the words they use, but as soon as you become aware that they are to be said out loud, recorded, and listened to by thousands, even the most straightforward ones are like small minefields. For a start, there are those that you have simply been wrong about all your life. Take ‘valet’, which had occurred in a previous book. Many people assume it is pronounced ‘val-ay’; but in fact it should be pronounced ‘VAL-et’. The problem with this is not so much getting it right as knowing you were wrong in the first place. And having been warned that a word you had never had a problem with before was now something to be wary of, every other word, however apparently innocuous, contains that potential. Then there are the traditionally controversial ones – like ‘controversy’. ‘CON-tro-vuh-si’ or ‘con-TROH-vuh-si’? ‘LIE-zuh’ or LEEsah’? To say nothing of ‘Ostium sepulchre antiquae familiae D’Urberville’ (there are five different ways of pronouncing Latin, apparently; but even if you know that, and how each one differs, which one should you go for?). And then there are the nineteenth-century technical or slang terms, or unusual words that are no longer in fashion (‘flexuous’ being a particularly lovely example). It is often easy enough to find out what they mean; but remarkably few glossaries offer advice on how to say them. And what about personal or place names? Thankfully, organisations, academics, linguists and especially the Thomas Hardy Society were all prepared to be consulted and pestered for advice and assistance.

The producer is also to a slight extent like a director, in that he needs to be able to suggest alterations to the way sentences are phrased, or offer ideas about the intentions of a character, as well as proffering support, interpretation and advice on difficult passages. He or she will also have some idea of the textual variants. *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* is quite complicated in this regard, with some half a dozen different versions published in Hardy’s lifetime. The text used will normally be one in the public domain, but it will be cross-referenced during the recording with a copy that benefits from notes and information on which sections were excised or added at other times during the publication’s history.

The reader reads, and the voice is recorded. It is recorded onto a computer, but a back-up is made as well in case of some catastrophic crash (or carelessness from the producer, of course). When the reader makes a mistake, the audio is replayed up to, for example, the beginning of the sentence in which the error occurred. The reader then picks up the narration again at the beginning of the sentence, and carries on – hopefully getting beyond the place where the mistake was made. If not, they go back and do it again ... and again ... One of the producer’s principal jobs is to keep an eye on the text and to ensure that words are not missed out – which is surprisingly easy to do – or mispronounced; and to ensure that the reader is maintaining the right energy or ‘feel’ for the passage in particular, and the book as a whole. The finished recording, while not exact, is at least a fair representation of how long the completed piece will be. This matters. You can fit about 78 minutes on a CD, and if the recording amounts to significantly more than, say, 780 minutes, the finished product will require 11 CDs rather than 10. That is 10% more CDs to have duplicated, packaged and distributed – a serious issue to consider when trying to budget a production. There’s no suggestion of cutting the text, but an accurate idea of what will be required in the next stages of the production is essential.

During the recording, the script is marked up by the producer to show where there have been edits or if there are any extraneous noises. This audio is then edited to make it as smooth as possible – all the joins between takes evened out and corrected, the little clicks, pops and muffled bumps that intrude on any recording removed, and the whole divided into CD length segments, marked with cue points every five minutes or so, to allow the listener to navigate around the finished production. Then it is sent to a listener, who has a copy of the script to cross-check what is heard against what was written. Any noises, interference or inaccuracies are reported back to the editor, who removes what can be removed and corrects what can be corrected. Once again, it is listened to; and then, once it has been through and passed these stages, the final version (with a copy placed somewhere very safe, just in case) is sent off for duplication.

While all this is going on, the pre-publicity is underway. Retailers are informed of what Naxos Audiobooks will be releasing during the next six months; subscribers to the newsletter are told what to look out for; the sleeve notes are written; the reader's biography and photo included in the booklet; the design approved. A designer has been working on the layout of the information on the CD itself, on the accompanying booklet and, of course, on the front and back covers of the box. While all this needs to carry the recognisable imprimatur of Naxos Audiobooks, each audiobook also has to attract anyone who happens across it by chance, either in a shop or online, as well as pleasing those who would look for a title anyway. More than a year after the original decision to record the book was taken, during which the retailers and the public have been forewarned that a new version of Hardy's magnificent tale will be available, and many months after the recording itself was completed, the Naxos Audiobooks unabridged version of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* read by Anna Bentinck goes on sale.

Simple, really.

[Naxos Audiobook's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* will be reviewed in the Summer 2008 *HSJ*.]