Music Printing

The Halstan Process

DONALD BURROWS:
In the 20th century the UK firm of Halstan's pioneered a process that bypassed the engraving stage, instead directly preparing music scores for the camera and therefore for printing by photo lithography. Bev Wilson worked on the production of music editions for Halstan's for nearly 30 years.

BEV WILSON:
Well when I first left school in 1965 I didn't really have any idea what I wanted to do. Somebody said to me go and work in print, there's money in print. So that's what I did. I applied to a local music printers in Amersham and they agreed to take me on. I had no idea what I was going to do when I went round there and they offered me the job of becoming, as they called it, a music processor and that's where I went and started to learn to do the Halstan process.

I worked in a very open plan office and the two gentlemen that taught me the job were both ex-engravers themselves and I did an apprenticeship for approximately five years.
When the Halstan process was developed by two brothers Harold and Stanley Smith, that's how it came by its name, it was totally innovative in its day and it really is sharp and clear in comparison to what old engravings tend to look like. They tend to look as if they've been printed on blotting paper. But with this process because your working oversize to such a huge degree when it's put in to camera and reduced in size you're going to get the sharpness and clarity that you want.

DONALD BURROWS:
So here's a page of music made up with the Halstan process, presumably the first thing was to layout the page and tell us how that was done?

BEV WILSON:
Well the page would normally arrive, it you would have all the stave lines and the subsequent three blue ledger lines either side of the stave lines already drawn, so if you could imagine that page that's how it would look with just the stave lines. You would then go on to using a pair of dividers to actually space the music using a com, finding the most common denominator note along the top, in this case quavers and you would keep going across until you got equal distance between the edge of where the time signature ended to where the double bar line is there. You then while spacing you had to allow for things like chorus words as on this page, like for instance here where you have "when the" and you have this semi-quaver which normally should be a lot smaller in size than a quaver, has had to be considerably bigger to allow for the two words. Once the plate has been spaced you drew blue vertical lines down from the dots that you had and in a pale blue pencil you used to do a shorthand version writing in the notes and everything else all over the page – blue so that it wouldn't photograph in camera. And then eventually when it had all been written in blue somebody would then go through and the first stages they would stencil all the single notes then go through and do all the accidentals.

DONALD BURROWS:
The stencils were used for the notes and for clefs [correct] and for the sharps and flats?

BEV WILSON:
That's correct yes [yes right]. The treble clef of course had to be done in 2 stages, [right] because obviously if you had a stencil with that shape, the middle would fall out… /

DONALD BURROWS:
Oh right, yes.

BEV WILSON:
So you had the top part of the clef you stencilled, all of those first, and then you'd go back and you'd go over the clef and it would marry up like a jigsaw so you'd stencil the other part. Similarly the same thing happened with flats, anything that was open like a semi-breve, er minims and sharps and naturals of course...

DONALD BURROWS:
And then when the stencil part had been put on, it was then worked with a pen was it?

BEV WILSON:
That's right. You'd use the pen for doing things like the stems…beams…and the ledger lines.

DONALD BURROWS:
So actually we, we've got a stencil process and then your filling in stems and beams with a pen [correct] but the words have been type set and are stuck on as little pieces of paper, [that's right] for each syllable isn't it?

BEV WILSON:
Yes that's correct. All the text was handset. You would then just literally cut the words out and you would stick them on the page where they were required, that includes syllables, copyrights, everything else.

DONALD BURROWS:
So what was the last process?

BEV WILSON:
The last process before it was actually proof read as you might say, was the person who would actually draw the slurs.

DONALD BURROWS:
Right, and how was this done?

BEV WILSON:
Well they were done originally in the early days when I was at Halstan, very complicated actually, because it was actually like a paintbrush. And on the end of paintbrush was like, although there was no bristles there was a little wheel, with a little box over the top of the wheel that you had piano felt in, that you filled up with Indian ink. [Right] And you literally had to go across the page like that, you'd do your first line of the slur, then you'd go over again moving out slightly either top or bottom to make….

DONALD BURROWS:
So as to thicken up the….

BEV WILSON:
Thicken the slur…

DONALD BURROWS:
… Middle of the slur.

BEV WILSON:
That's correct.

DONALD BURROWS:
Because each one of course has a separate shape.

BEV WILSON:

That's right it does.

DONALD BURROWS:
Depending of the context in the music [That's right] which is something that varies enormously between one place [that's correct] and another on the music.
And then when you'd finished the page you'd send it to be proof read. How did you make corrections if there was something wrong?

BEV WILSON:
Well there were various ways. In the earlier days the original way to do it was as a place like here for instance where the note was wrong. When the person would have ruled these pages initially you'd have spare stave so that it would match the stave and you would literally just patch it over and then restencil the note…..

DONALD BURROWS:
Like there it's actually got a piece of paper stuck over the top….

BEV WILSON:
That's correct but obviously that wouldn't show once it was photographed. But later on snowpake used to be, for a note, the odd note or accidental that needed correcting you could just paint it out with snowpake, retouch the stave lines in with the rotaring pen re-stencil the note go through all the procedure again.

DONALD BURROWS:
And that sort of thing was only really possible because of the large size you were working in, I mean it, it made it a lot easier.

BEV WILSON:
Oh, it did, yes, I mean working on this size as opposed do something smaller, yes, I mean it was far easier, a lot easier than working with say other processes like letraset or notraset rather, things like that.

DONALD BURROWS:
And it also meant if you made a correction in that way and you had to repair the lines, when it was shot down to the smaller size you didn't notice it so much, did you …

BEV WILSON:
… no you didn't notice, you could never see the joins.

DONALD BURROWS:
No, right so that was another of the benefits of doing this on large size?

BEV WILSON:
That's right, yes it was, I mean it was so much easier. A page like this would be a nice size to work on erm as I've said before when doing stuff like Delius scores where you have every instrument under the sun, they can be literally 4 times the size of this. So then they became slightly unwieldy because obviously you had to have the top of the page hanging over the front of your desk or you literally threw it over your head and you were working away underneath it like a tent.

BEV WILSON:
The Halstan process is now sadly obsolete. As you can perhaps appreciate the amount of time taken to engrave a page using the Halstan method could be anything from 3 to perhaps 6 hours per page and is very costly. Halstans along with most other engravers have now moved away to the various computerised setting of music.