

Mark Ayres Interview BBC Four, 2006

Mark Ayres, archivist at the Radiophonic Workshop library, talks about its groundbreaking origins, his favourite "Radiophonica" and why the Workshop later declined.

BBC Four: *Why do you think the composers from the Workshop were important?*

Mark Ayres: Here was a department, part of a major broadcasting organisation, which was there to do electronic music for the masses as part of the general diet of popular entertainment. There were a lot of electronic music studios around the world, mainly doing experimental music and not actually producing very much, but the Radiophonic Workshop was always a service department, working on real projects, making real electronic music for real people. If an audience watching Dr Who wants to hide behind the sofa when the monster is made from rubber, then there has to be something else going on. It fascinated me that the sounds that you heard when you watched something affected how you reacted.

BBC Four: *We're about to show a documentary about the great screenwriter Nigel Kneale whose Quatermass and the Pit was the first TV programme the RW worked on. How effective do you think the drama's soundscape was?*

MA: It was extremely effective. You've got those sequences of the hauntings when the ground is rumbling underneath the characters, and again, you look at it and it's a nice effect, but there's obviously someone underground poking it with a stick. But the loud noises which were assaulting your ears at the same time really helped suspend your disbelief.

BBC Four: *It all seemed so new, this desire to experiment with sound, where do you think it came from?*

MA: In the mid-1950s people were experimenting with new forms of radio, new forms of sound. Forbidden Planet, the well-known science fiction film, had come out and that had an electronic music score. The score wasn't credited as music, it was credited as "electronic tonalities" and it was a different way of using sound.

People were doing experimental radio productions in which they wanted to get inside people's heads, creating radio plays that weren't the standard kitchen sink dramas. They wanted to create stuff which was more psychological, more exploratory and you just can't go to the BBC sound effects library, brilliant though it is, and get out the sound effect of someone having a

nervous breakdown. You need another way of telling that story and that is to try and imagine the sounds that a person having a nervous breakdown might be hearing in their head. The only way of doing that is through pure imagination and manipulation of sound in new and interesting ways.

The people experimenting with this kind of radio were really doing it after hours when everybody else went home. It became apparent that this wasn't satisfactory and that these people were doing it in their spare time because they really wanted to. Because programme makers were finding uses for this work, eventually BBC management found one room at Maida Vale and sent a couple of people there on attachment to set the department up. That was how the Radiophonic Workshop came about, as a service department to do this sort of stuff.

BBC Four: *What would you select as your favourite Radiophonic Workshop track?*

MA: I think that's almost impossible. The most famous is obviously Dr Who and I think it has to be on everyone's list of interesting tracks. Even now it sounds more grown than performed, it's a very organic piece - a lot of people hear it now and they can't work out how it was done because it doesn't sound synthesised. But a lot of Delia Derbyshire, the Adventures for Radio that she did with Barry Bermange which use pure sound in a very impressionistic way, I think those were quite remarkable as well. It's very difficult to put your finger on one piece and say "That is pure Radiophonica".

BBC Four: *Why did the Workshop go into decline?*

MA: I think the problem was that there was not the will within the BBC to be as experimental. Everything had to justify its costs so you couldn't put a composer on something for six weeks and then say "Well it doesn't matter if it doesn't work". So they started, I think, really going for the obvious targets as a way of surviving. That meant composing music for television and radio programmes in the manner of pure music composition rather than trying to be creative with sound.

The problem with that was that the technology was changing so fast during the 1980s that people were setting up studios to do very much the same thing in their homes. At the beginning of the 1980s the Fairlight synthesiser, one of the first commercial sampling instruments, would cost you the price of a small house. By the late 1980s and mid-90s you could buy a £200 sound card for your PC which would do the same thing. The Radiophonic Workshop, being a BBC Service department under Producer Choice and the Birtian, just couldn't afford to survive when these services were available more cheaply elsewhere.