

THE HISTORY OF THE RADIOPHONIC WORKSHOP

In the days before synthesisers and multitrack machines, the BBC's 'soundsmiths' had to rely more upon their own highly developed qualities of enthusiasm and dedication than sophisticated electronic equipment. The equipment in their one room Workshop was primitive and they had to resort to a multifarious selection of sound sources, including an old piano frame, a water cistern and an enormous selection of bottles. Anything to make an interesting noise!

The Radiophonic Workshop opened in 1958 - the first of its kind in Britain. It was set up following the success of certain radio experimental programmes which had been made in normal studios equipped with their own tape-recording equipment. It was, in fact, the introduction of the tape-recorder generally into the BBC that allowed real experimentation, aimed at broadening radio's dramatic canvas.

In radio drama attempts had already been made to use existing recordings of musique concrete and electronic music as incidental music. These were not successful, however, because sound or music tailor-made for a particular programme is not easily transferred to another type of production.

All That Fall by Samuel Beckett, written for the BBC Third Programme in 1956 and first broadcast in 1957, was the first radio play in which a new sound convention was attempted rather than using music in its normal form. The experience gained in doing this programme led to similar techniques being applied to a very different play - The Disagreeable Oyster by Giles Cooper. This was a comedy, a fantasy set in a real world in which real things suddenly become an unfamiliar nightmare. It demanded extreme stylisation - a radio equivalent of the cartoon film.

A 'Radiophonic poem' followed. This was an attempt to take words and sounds specially written and described by author Frederick Bradnum, and build up something that could not exist on the printed page - a pattern of words spoken by actors, words which were manipulated and sounds which illustrated the words. These experiments, and others, led to the setting up of the Radiophonic Workshop with the aim of developing techniques to produce electronically the special sounds and incidental music required for radio and television productions.

The Workshop provided equally a service for radio and television, for regional and local broadcasting and for the BBC External Services. Its producers have undertaken work for every department of the BBC from Religious Broadcasting to Light Entertainment. More than 250 contributions were made to all the departments each year and, interestingly, the highest proportion of these were for educational programmes at all levels.

Situated at the BBC's music studio building in London's Maida Vale, the Radiophonic Workshop had five separate studios, where sounds could be manipulated and put together, with two acoustic studios and a film and video area. A far cry from those early experimental days...

The original premises comprised one large room with a small annexe used as a studio. It was largely equipped with sub-standard, semi-professional equipment.

There were no synthesisers or multi-track machines, and tape manipulation and editing were the main techniques employed. Several layers of sound could only be created by recording each one on a different tape and playing them together, all the while hoping that the tape machines would stay in synchronisation.

Much of the inflexibility, and certainly most of the bulk, of the early sound-generating equipment was eliminated by the introduction of voltage controlled equipment - the so-called synthesiser. Even the smallest of these needs only the addition of a tape machine and monitoring system to become a self-contained studio: with a multi-track tape recorder and a comprehensive mixing desk, more complex music and sound can be realised.

Some of the output of the Radiophonic Workshop has been issued on commercially available BBC Records and, while it is difficult to describe the quality of the sounds and of the contribution made to programmes, it is equally difficult to describe in words the complex techniques which are applied. The Radiophonic Workshop produced an output varying from complete background scores of electronic music to the voices and sounds of science fiction. Programmes ranging from Dr. Who and Blake's Seven to The Body in Question and Einstein's Universe, from Blue Peter to the Open University. Signature tunes composed in the Workshop introduced such popular features as Radio 4's Woman's Hour, You and Yours and PM and a number of jingles were produced for local radio stations.

In 1978 The Workshop's Paddy Kingsland was heavily involved in creating effects for Douglas Adams' ground-breaking radio series The Hitch-hiker's Guide To The Galaxy, and was also responsible for its post-production, mixing the show to stereo from the 8-track master recordings.

