



A 'palette' of basic sounds is fed into the recording machine

Scenery in Sound

IT COULD be a tonsil operation on a hyena, but, opening the door, you find the screeching comes from a brace of tape-machines re-winding. And that funereal 'clumph-clumph' which, out in the passage, sounded like a ghost in goloshes is explained to you inside as the plucked string of a double-bass filtered and filleted electronically to convey the sense of a lost soul plodding across the sand dunes. Such are only samples of the noises that tickle your ear-drums in the Workshop at Maida Vale.

This is one of the newest and strangest departments in the BBC. It is so new that, as Brian George, Head of Central Programme Operations, will tell you, it is only just out of the experimental stage. And strange, not only because it is concerned largely with the macabre and unreal but because results are achieved only by the uncanniest blending of creative art and technical skill.

The Workshop exists to supply 'scenery in sound' for both radio and television. 'Radiophonic methods are akin to painting technique,' says Desmond Briscoe, who heads the creative side. Richard ('Dickie') Bird—swathed, if he is not careful, in magnetic tape—is the technical boss. 'In practice, we work as one team,' says Briscoe.

Watching the Workshop in action it is easy to follow the painting analogy. Instead of paint they deal in sound, which includes anything from pure music to sheer noise. Their 'palette' is the tape-recorder, on to which they mix tone colours from every conceivable source. And the 'easel' is a multi-knobbed desk where during my visit dark-haired Maddalena Fagandini was evolving a background pattern of sound for a radio play, *Dune Roller*.

Technical assistant Richard Mills was feeding in strips of tape. The wind moaned over the marshes against a straining heart-beat tortured into various timbres and intensities as Miss Fagandini's hands played over the controls. On the desk was her weird 'orchestral' score: 'Meteor falling out of sky, splash in water. "Glitter" sound like small pieces of broken meteor—tiny—possibly single note with sort of shimmer—strange but quite beautiful.' And, lower down the score: "'Glitter" again, but this time large, ominous, monsterish.' And if I doubted the limitless aims of radiophonic music, there was this on another score: 'Possible sound for Katherine's ideas on seeing large bowl of flowers.'

'Fantasy of any sort is our ideal medium,' says Briscoe. 'But we are at the disposal of any producer and can take on anything.'

On the funny side, their *pièce de résistance*, in more senses than one, is a recording of Major (Goon Show) Bloodnok's rebellious stomach, compounded of genuine explosions, whoops from electronic oscillators, water splashes, synthetic burps, and cork-like pops.

Pure oscillating whistles, with 'feed-back' echoes, lent chilly horror to J. E. A. Seager's recent radio play, *The Window*. In Karel Capek's *The Mother* 'dead' characters were conjured up by reversed reverberation: the echoes preceded the voices.

'Our basic noises are mainly from musical instruments,' Briscoe explains. 'By tricks of feed-back and speeding-up, we alter the timbre and can produce rhythms unplayable by any instrumentalist.'

Radiophonic music is not confined to the Workshop. Sometimes it goes to the studios, as with Karel Capek's *Insect Play* on television. Desmond Briscoe sat with producer Hal Burton in the control gallery and cued in pre-recorded insect sounds from three tape-recorders.

The Workshop's stock-in-trade includes every sort of noise-maker—drums, electronic guitars, toy musical instruments and, as the latest acquisition, an old piano minus its case. The plucked strings will provide basic electronic fodder for anything from a chatter of starlings to an erupting volcano.

A typical example of radiophonic music opens the BBC Television Service each day, just before the two o'clock Television News. It piles sound upon sound on the basic theme of Eric Coates's *Television March*.

ERNEST THOMSON