

Robin Carmody, 2001

Thanks to Mark Cola, Darren Giddings and Martin Fenton.

"The Fourth Dimension" by Paddy Kingsland (1973) / "BBC Radiophonic Music" by Delia Derbyshire, John Baker and David Cain (1971)

I recently received copies of the above two LPs (the first albums of Radiophonic music released commercially by the BBC, though there had been single releases in the 60s) and have naturally added them to the expanding universe of Radiophonic history on Elidor (it's almost becoming a kind of microsite ...).

Some of the sonics on *The Fourth Dimension* are fairly conventionally of-the-time; the standard idea of the prog wonderboy amid a bank of analog synths, and certainly Kingsland's theme to the Radio 1 series "Scene and Heard" is fairly conventional trendiness circa 1970, and not great. "Just Love", written for BBC TV, could almost be Rick Wakeman and therefore is Not A Good Thing. "Vespucci", not a signature piece, sees Kingsland getting a little indulgent when left entirely to his own devices; it goes on at least a minute too long, but of course a track timed at 3'20" is mercifully short by the standards of certain bands very prominent in 1973, and it could pretty much fit into his extraordinary soundtrack for *The Changes*, and therefore has at least something going for it. But you feel it would be more resonant and moving if written to order; there's something emptily early 70s about it, as though it's waiting for a purpose to make it seem special, and that purpose cannot be found.

Kingsland had a dishevelled, thoughtful appearance akin to, in Darren Giddings's phrase, any number of 70s worthy chunky pullover types. For lazy old punkies, it might, unbelievably, still be easy to denounce him as a kind of electronic hippy (I sort-of think of him as such myself, but use the phrase as a compliment). But the Mike Oldfield comparison, while sonically not inaccurate (*The Changes* soundtrack is pretty much what Hergest Ridge would sound like if it wasn't shit), is ultimately a red herring; the emotional effect in some of Kingsland's melody lines and chord changes is closer to the contemporary songs of Richard Thompson, John Martyn, Sandy Denny and Nick Drake than it is to the cheesy mainstream proggy of *Tubular Bells*. Indeed what amazes me about much of this music is how folky it is; just as folk-rock implied a rejection of the Wilsonian idea of pop (modernity-at-all-costs), Kingsland's music took the RW as far from the white heat of technology as "Who Knows Where The Time Goes" is from "We Can Work It Out". Kingsland was a firm believer in the use of non-synthesised

instrumental sound along with electronic and treated sound, breaking away from previous Workshop orthodoxy, and guitars propel many of the tracks here, but they never overpower the synths as happened on some of the more plodding "electronic" LPs to emerge from other sources at this time.

"Tamariu", written for BBC TV, the title track "Fourth Dimension", written for Radio 4, and "Colour Radio", written for BBC Radio Leeds, are the soundtrack for two slow dances and a waltz to be performed in the futurist- medieval costumes seen on the cover of the Fotheringay album. "Take Another Look" (written for a quiet, reflective BBC TV series full of timelapse photography - shots of speeded-up clouds and slow-motion shots of sugar-cubes falling into a cup of tea, etc., and oh how it sounds it) is essentially The Pentangle's "Light Flight" rewritten for analog synth; pretty much exactly the same song structure and melody line, it is an amazing widening of the range of emotions and feelings to be found in electronic music, and also anticipates Stereolab's slower-paced and more mournfully romantic moments ("Monstre Sacre" comes to mind).

Kingsland's theme to Radio 4's "Kaleidoscope" is pretty mundane bleepy, but "The Space Between", written for Radio 3, is quite perfect in its melancholia, a first cousin of The Changes soundtrack, gazing out over some beautiful, but strangely altered and quiet and ancient, English landscape. It is also the sound pastiched on the last 30 seconds or so of Gorky's Zygotic Mynce's "Patio Song" (quite appropriate, really, because that single - deliberate museum-piece though it was, and indeed it only worked because it had no pretensions to be anything else - was two pastiches in one; the Incredible String Band at their most consciously quaint followed by the analog synthery of much the same era).

Next to it, the non-purpose-written "Flashback" - conventional early 70s instrumental fare - seems like only a minor aberration. But ruralist reflection wasn't the only mood Kingsland could master; "Reg", written for the BBC African Service, is a drum-and-synth classic (the drum track is, however, identical to that used on the opening theme to The Changes, which shows how much off-the-shelf repetition of particular sounds was coming to influence the RW by this time) while "One-Eighty-One", written for Radio 4, is awesome, frenetic, biting analog rock, which comes close to out-freakbeating Pierre Henry and Michel Colombier, and anticipates the recent work of Add N To (X).

But however good The Fourth Dimension is, and at least half of it is at least as good as anything else from the analog synth (post-1971) era of the Workshop, you always have the sense and smell and feel of the time in which it was recorded while you're playing it, and it never comes close to challenging The Changes soundtrack as Kingsland's finest achievement. BBC Radiophonic Music anthologises the work of Derbyshire, Baker and Cain (oh for a parallel

universe where those names were as well-known and had sold as many records as, oooh, Emerson, Lake and Palmer) in the last few years before the arrival of the analog synth, and there's nothing of-its-time about it at all; rather, it defies canonisation and conventional ideas of how music "sounded" at any given time.

While playing it, I tend naturally to concentrate on the tracks I haven't heard previously and which are obviously therefore newer and more exciting to me, but it works and makes sense as an entity; the two radio station signature pieces "Radio Sheffield" and "Radio Nottingham" make a perfect brave-new-world introduction to the album to entice listeners in 1971 who were still, for the moment, holding on to the Wilsonian idea of electronic sound equalling progressivism, before it can show its true range and breadth further in (BBC local radio itself signified a brave new dawn for the Corporation in the late 60s and early 70s, breaking the grip of the formal post-war institutionalism of the old regional Home Services). At the risk of repeating myself, though, I'll comment here only on the pieces not mentioned somewhere above (or in my comment on John Baker's work from late last year, which can be read at <http://www.elidor.freemove.co.uk/oldthoughts3.htm>), and as ever it's Delia Derbyshire's genius that stands out. "Mattachin" is a fine reworking / extension of the structure of her "Talk Out", but the real masterpiece is "Pot Au Feu". This is three minutes and nineteen seconds of paranoia, virtually a rave track circa 1991 in its structure; a stattering, pounding teleprinter-paced bassline worthy of Timbaland as the tension builds, then a moment of chaos and crisis, an alarm-bell of a hook recalling the "panic / excitement" lines so prevalent in early 90s hardcore (The Prodigy's "Charly", Quadrophenia's "Quadrophenia"). The day someone loops "Pot Au Feu" (and I wouldn't be surprised if some kid in one of London's anonymous satellite towns with an older relative's collection of stereo test records and suchlike actually did back in '91 or so ...), they'll have a Number One hit waiting.

Baker's theme for "Tomorrow's World" is fine popular futurism of its time though nothing special, but Delia's "Blue Veils and Golden Sands" is, as one might expect, phenomenally atmospheric; such is its surround-sound quality that it totally transcends the narrow constraints of simply coming from my speakers, instead filling the room, my consciousness, the air itself. And yet virtually nothing happens, but with Delia's music nothing needs to happen; the fullness and totality of it all render any desire for novelty or thrill or quick fix an utterly absurd and unnecessary concept.

Other pieces have different defining qualities. Cain's "Artbeat" simply defines and expresses a time when young people thought it was cool to be thoughtful and creative, a world away from today's empty, rampant, all-pervasive hedonism. Baker's "Christmas Commercial", meanwhile, comes pretty close to the essence of pop music itself (irreverence, irreligiosity, utter disrespect

for all that it is imposed that we should bow down to) with a harsh fucking-over of O Come All Ye Faithful, every note of the melody rendered into the sound of a shop till, as an acknowledgement (along with the piece's title itself) that the endlessly rattled-on-about "true meaning of Christmas" has long been usurped, and obviously loving and revelling in every moment of it. While a complete knock-off by the RW's standards, it's the greatest pop record the Workshop ever gave us (in the same way that, say, "All Around My Hat" is better pop than anything on Liege and Lief); I'm shocked and startled every time I hear it, that apart from their innovations in other senses, the RW also had this much healthy disrespect for all that was revered in Old Britain's Official Culture (a key bastion of which, of course, kept them going; oh, the joys of pop's dependence on institutionalism while at the same time joyously pissing on everything it stood for).

Delia Derbyshire's "The Delian Mode" pretty much defies description and is all the better for it; you don't want to have to resort to mere words to describe such a perfect sound, utterly deserving the self-definitive title Delia so knowingly gave it. "Structures", meanwhile, shows how menacing and brilliant a composer John Baker could be when not making his fast-paced optimistic pieces; psychologically, hearing it feels like being coldly questioned and harshly interrogated inside your brain.

Delia's "Towards Tomorrow" (presumably written for a 1968 BBC TV series of this title) is, like her earlier "Time On Our Hands", a perfect subversion of a classic brave-new-world dynamism phrase. The "tomorrow" I imagine here is the antithesis of that which the BBC in the 60s made much play of promoting to its audience; instead, it could easily be some kind of dystopia, a state of decay or de-evolution. With "Door To Door", meanwhile, Delia shows that she could also do the upbeat promotional thing well; the rings and knocks are worked perfectly into the perfect 60s advertising campaign soundtrack. David Cain's epic "War of the Worlds" has all the menace its title deserves, and his short "Crossbeat" has all the thrill of a ride across London by monorail in 1968 (the RW's music is at least as much about period fantasies as the mundane period truths), before Delia's "Air", an ice-cold, nocturnal rewrite of "Air on a G-String", the stuff of a seven-year-old child's most unforgettable nightmares and thus even more obviously and clearly proto-Pram than "Ziwzeh Ziwzeh Oooh Oooh Oooh", completes the album. And I'm gasping at what I've just heard.

It can never be said too many times, though I think I've come close. The work of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop between 1958 and 1971, and much of its work between 1972 and 1979, is eternal.

Robin Carmody, 26th March 2001