

Robin Carmody, 2001

"The Radiophonic Workshop" (1975) / "BBC Radiophonic Workshop - 21" (1979)

This will surely be the final extension to this piece, given that I now have all four of the worthwhile official RW releases, plus the fan-circulating The Sounds of Science and Industry compilation CD (apart from the Doctor Who CDs which I've only just ordered; the only Radiophonic music currently officially available, these merit their own piece and will get one). I have a quite romantic attitude to the Workshop in that I don't want to hear any more of their creative wilderness years than I already have; my collection more or less stops at 1979, and I have no desire to expand it; the thought of actually hearing Peter Howell's *Through A Glass Darkly* in its entirety is not one I feel I can stomach.

I'd previously underrated Malcolm Clarke's contribution to the Workshop based on his mediocre tracks on The Sounds of Science and Industry, but hearing The Radiophonic Workshop makes me realise what a talent he was. He is, indisputably, the star of this show, particularly because Paddy Kingsland's two contributions are of little interest by his high standards of the time - "The Panel Beaters" and "The World of Science" are both likeably upbeat children's TV-type themes, but neither go anywhere near the places he took us on The Fourth Dimension, though the sweetly folkish "World of Science" threatens to. And it should be a sign of the low regard in which I hold Roger Limb that, while I like his two tracks here - "Geraldine" and "Kitten's Lullaby" - more than almost anything else I've heard by him, both are ultimately too irritating in their schmaltziness and sentimentality for me to really love them. John Baker, by this point well past his creative peak, reworks his old rhythmic undertows to less creative effect on the ultimately forgettable "Brio".

That's the stuff not really worth saving. What is cherishable is so indeed, a snapshot of the Workshop shortly before its creative decline in the synth era really started to kick in, and also notable for its diversity (long musique concrete pieces segueing into brief sound effects and then into jaunty themes). The opener, Clarke's "La Grande Piece de la Foire de la Rue Delaware", is infinitely refreshing in its joie de vivre and bounciness; this is the cuddly, child-friendly incarnation of the Workshop at its best (it has all the squelchy production that Plone love, but none of their occasional schmaltziness). "Bath Time", meanwhile, is one of the RW's best uses of the technique of approximating a common sound (in this case, water and soap almost frothing out of the speakers) as the rhythmic basis for a track. It works through its masterful construction; melody line of elegant functionality over rhythm track of peerless contrivance, complete with baby crying.

When it fades to rubber duck and water flowing out of the plughole, you're left stunned at Clarke's ability to make the most mundane aspects of life sound magical and wondrous (Boards of Canada learnt a lot here, quite possibly).

"Nenuphar", a collaborative effort between Clarke and Glynis Jones, is one of those quietly unobtrusive minimalist masterpieces that defies description among those like myself trained only in popcrit; suffice it to say I always feel intensely privileged and awestruck to hear it, as though I shouldn't really be trespassing here. Jones's "Veils and Mirrors" and "Schlum Rooli" are similarly not pieces I feel I can adequately describe in words; suffice it to say that this music is far greater than any monolithic corporate institution ever really deserves, but it was lucky to have it, and whatever use it was put to (sadly, it's hard not to imagine the cliched horror / thriller / psychological drama / possibly even, gulp, Doctor Who) would have been a good use. The young girl's call of fear in "Schlum Rooli" is a pinnacle of the Workshop's ability, at its best, to make your hair stand on end, and yet at the same time avoid any of the cliches of the territory.

Richard Yeoman-Clark's fine "Waltz Antipathy" also fits into this category; suffice it to say that the "chirpy jingle" side of the Workshop in the mid-70s is very much sidelined on this LP.

Clarke's "Romanescan Rout", meanwhile, has crept up to become one of my favourite RW tracks ever, with its slow build of tension, quietly elevating synth ripples and wonderfully skin-penetrating noises leading up to the elation of a dramatically sped-up conclusion.

The other notable presence on The Radiophonic Workshop is Dick Mills; more skilled on the technical side than in the creation of memorable individual pieces, he was nevertheless the last remaining original RW staff member left by 1975, 17 years into the Workshop's existence, and this endurance is acknowledged by the sentimental inclusion of "Major Bloodnok's Stomach", the brief sound effect he created for The Goon Showback in 1959. By this time he was best known for his work on Doctor Who, and his "Adagio" would have made a fine piece of background on that programme, even if it inevitably pails next to the other pieces of perfectly-executed minimalism on this LP. Far more striking in its off-kilter pop sense, though, is Mills's "Crazy Dazy"; the sounds of summer in open country, the instantly-familiar melody line ("give me your answer, do ...") briefly tinkling on a bicycle bell, then vicious traffic noise and explosions and the idyll totally disrupted, then the tune flowing back in and those outdoor sounds, almost mockingly, returning to fade. All within a minute. As a representation of Britain's desperate nerves and unease at this period over the conflict between its lingering Arcadian sense of itself and the results of the full-scale industrialisation and suburbanisation and "newness" of the 60s, it could

hardly be bettered in its brief, startling perversity, and is a sign that the representation within Radiophonic music of the cultural feelings of the world outside at the moment it was recorded can be at least as effective when presented implicitly and humorously (as here) as obviously and spiritually (as on Kingsland's soundtrack for *The Changes*).

Most of BBC Radiophonic Workshop - 21 I'd already heard on *The Sounds of Science and Industry*, but not the opening track, Desmond Briscoe's "Quatermass and the Pit".

Recorded in the Workshop's inaugural year, 1958, it has an instant menacing effect and striking sense of a new age of musical invention dawning. At the time, this would have been an astonishing opening shot for the Workshop and a perfect introduction for that incredibly memorable TV series; a nation being single-handedly drawn into fear and terror by the organisation it looked on as its cosy, reassuring Auntie, and the RW kick-starting itself into creative life through such means.

There's also Delia's original Doctor Who theme of 1963, but reviewing that now is rather like reviewing, say, "My Generation" on a compilation of The Who; it's not that it's bad, it's just pointless considering its status as a cultural cliché and how much fascinating material there is surrounding it. Likewise Brian Hodgson's original sound effect for the Tardis, now so familiar as to pretty much speak for itself. And then we're onto the comparatively dispensable 70s themes; Kingsland's theme for "The Broken Biscuit Club" on children's TV is bouncy uptempo fluff I'd be happy never to hear again, and Richard Yeoman-Clark's "Mysterioso" from Blake's Seven pales next to much of the similar work on *The Radiophonic Workshop* and probably owes its reputation to the cult status of that series. Malcolm Clarke's "Hurdy Gurdy" is, however, quite startling in its imposing heaviness, towering neo-medievalism rendered harshly aggressive in its sense of ruling over all it surveys, rather than a charming relic. A similar sense of the enemy's arrival at the gate is conveyed by Kingsland's "Newton", which could alert anyone to the importance of the moment and what they have to defend.

That's all for this page. But the chronicling of the Radiophonic Workshop's achievements on *Elidor* is far from complete; I've recently bought the two Doctor Who CDs which constitute the only officially-available Radiophonic music in the UK at the moment, and the 1969 White Noise LP *An Electric Storm* which features a considerable contribution from Delia Derbyshire, and will be reviewing them in time. For the moment some tentative thoughts on the RW's continued influence, and the places people have taken its echoes, are here: <http://www.elidor.freemove.co.uk/rwinfluence.htm>.

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