

Robin Carmody, 2001

Wee have also sound-houses ...

"What is the noise supposed to be that precedes the two-o'clock Television News? It sounds like a nightmare in a railway train!" - Letter to Radio Times, 10th November 1960.

It starts with a slow, ominous lurch into life almost identical to that which begins the current (and superb) Broadcast album. The title - "Outside" - is as simple and perfect as could be imagined, in its anticipation, escape and excitement. Astonishingly, it is now 41 years old, the kind of fact that completely shakes up the supposed linear progression of Time. It is one of the early creations of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, one of the greatest and most surprising developments ever to emerge from the centre of Britain's Official Culture Industry. Its creator, Desmond Briscoe, may have been an obnoxious character who could never be shut up once he started boasting how he had taught Princess Margaret to ride a horse, but somehow that doesn't seem to matter. You're hooked, convulsed, you can't stop yourself.

There follows a succession of little masterpieces, every one of which chills the bone. Phil Young's "Science and Industry", "The Artist Speaks" and "The Splendour That Was Rome", such enticing promises for what lay ahead. Maddalena Fagandini's 1960 Interval Signal, the piece most likely to have inspired the letter quoted above, an extraordinarily addictive rhythmic incantation from an era of excitement and technological mystique surrounding broadcasting (this stuff sounded every bit as "alien" and "other" in Macmillan's Britain as the best rock'n'roll, and the ignorance of this fact is one of the many malign influences of Rockism). Briscoe's "Phra the Phoenician" and "Stick Up", Fagandini's "Ideal Home Exhibition" (Telstar futurism at its absolute peak) and "The Chem Lab Mystery" ... and then there's her finest achievement, "Time Beat", issued on a 7" single as the Workshop's first commercial release in 1962 (though under the cringe-making pseudonym Ray Cathode, and with the composer's credit going to "BBC Radiophonics", hence the obscurity for many years of its creator). Combining a metronomic rhythm with an extraordinarily beautiful Spanish violin sound, to make it resemble an electronic fiesta, "Time Beat" is, for me right here, right now, one of the greatest singles ever recorded. The B-side to that release - Fagandini's "Waltz in Orbit" - is even stranger. Space Age Bachelor Pad Music is too much of a mid-90s cliché to invoke now, but that's exactly what it is, the highest achievement (alongside "Telstar" itself) of the first generation of English space music. You can't believe these recordings are nearly 40 years old. All conventional estimations of the progression of Time are instantly subverted. But the Workshop's resident genius, Delia Derbyshire, had only just arrived. One of her earliest contributions - "Time

"On Our Hands" - is a superb subversion of a phrase which would normally evoke (especially in the context of 1962) new-found affluence, spare time and leisure, now rendered alienated, distant and isolated. "Arabic Science and Industry" is equally startling, but her finest early gambit was "Know Your Car", a devastatingly effective appropriation of the 1930s hit "Get Out And Get Under". The sound effects in the background are still dazzling, still a superb display of the art of studio recording. I am instantly transplanted back to Westminster reference library, BBC Radio's Study Session, 1963.

Pretty soon, we leave the early Radiophonic Workshop period - a succession of pieces whose quietly chilling quality would never be equalled - and move on to the second recognisable period of Radiophonic music before the mass availability of synthesisers in the early 70s began the long and painful bland-out of their sound - the 1964-71 era of signature pieces. The oft-underrated John Baker arrived with two striking, sharp pieces - "Choice" and "Hardluck Hall" - but it is Derbyshire's genius that continues to stand out.

Her "Talk Out" is incredible, based almost entirely on studio-recorded voices around 26 seconds of electronic delicacy, "Science and Health" is a succession of tumbling chords, descending with an elegance beyond almost anyone else, and "A New View of Politics" is devastatingly effective (and perfect for the optimism of early BBC2, for whom the piece was written). Less widely-acknowledged figures like David Cain, Keith Salmon and Brian Hodgson made significant contributions, the latter creating some of the most atmospheric incidental music ever heard on Doctor Who (the programme which ultimately came to trap the Workshop in the mass public imagination, as their name became so widely associated with it, at the expense of any widespread consciousness of their other work).

But it was the optimism of the Harold Wilson Labour government, as the 60s continued, which enabled the short, bright, optimistic and brilliant signature pieces of John Baker to come into their own. He wasn't the most talented figure at the Workshop in the 60s, but his work does seem to best embody the optimism and desire to go forward of the time.

The very titles - "Fresh Start", "New Worlds", "Festival Time", "The Chase" - say it all, although his work could also be slow, bitterly cold and predatory, as with "P.I.G.S."

Baker's "Radio Nottingham" is the best radio station signature piece ever (David Cain's "Radio Sheffield" is the second best), and his version of "Boys and Girls" is in fact far superior to the more famous version used over the opening sequence of the BBC schools programme Near and Far, although I do have a vague memory of its being used over the closing credits to that series. David Cain's "Autumn and Winter" also stands out from this period, and

Baker's "Factors" is astonishingly modern in its rhythmic compulsion and drive (the "riff" is identical to that which propels Asian Dub Foundation's "Naxalite"). Nevertheless, the superiority of Delia Derbyshire's work to anything else from the Workshop always stands out - three of her 1969 signature pieces, "Environmental Studies", "Chronicle" and "Great Zoos of the World" display all her astonishing tricks with sound, the last-named including the most accurate set of animal noises ever created electronically. Her "Ziwzeh Ziwzeh Oooh Oooh Oooh", based around a resplicing of "Science and Health", is her most terrifying moment, tumbling into a nightmare, the sound of childhood at its most chilling. Pram started here. The Workshop saw out the 1960s as an astonishing hive of creativity.

A major change and, ultimately, a serious decline was around the corner, though.

Derbyshire had always felt held back by the demands of the Workshop, how everything had to be designed for some specific promotional use, and mixing as she did with people as diverse as Peter Zivonieff, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Yoko Ono, Pink Floyd and Brian Jones, she found herself increasingly disillusioned with her surroundings. Her departure in 1971 (she would later be, among other things, a pipeline radio operator for British Gas in the mid-70s) coincided unfortunately with the mass availability of analog synthesisers, which removed the need for the sounds to be created in the studio, with tape loops running the length of corridors. This enabled the ever-increasing use of off-the-shelf effects, which would recur in piece after piece, and make individual works sound much less inspirational and individual. Coming to the fore in the 70s were Dudley Simpson (perhaps more closely associated with Doctor Who than any other RW composer), Paddy Kingsland (clearly their most talented composer of the era), Peter Howell, Dick Mills, Malcolm Clarke and Roger Limb. While Limb's "Swirley", well-remembered as the theme to BBC Engineering Announcements, is perhaps the most overrated single piece in the RW canon, some fine work was done between 1972 and 1979. Peter Howell's "Greenwich Chorus" is possibly the best individual piece of the analog synth era, a brilliant English approximation of the same dichotomy (an electronic reanimation of ancient, inscrutable London, with the people of centuries ago surviving as digital spirits) that Nick Currie asserts at <http://www.demon.co.uk/momus/thought110600.html>. Howell's "The Secret War" and Mills's "Thomas the Rhymer" are pretty good, and a number of Paddy Kingsland pieces are superb, especially the striking "Reg", and "A Whisper From Space", one of the very few analog-era pieces to quietly and effectively send chills down the spine in the way the best early pieces did.

Kingsland's masterpiece, however, was his soundtrack for "The Changes" in 1975 (<http://www.bilderberg.org/changes.htm>), arguably the greatest, and

certainly the most ambitious and stimulating, children's television drama ever made in Britain. In its evocation of an England returned to the days before the Industrial Revolution, a world turned upside down, where machines are considered "evil", where the weather turns from perfect midsummer to snow overnight, and where Arthurian legend has been invoked to change everything, it could not work better. It makes the English countryside seem like the strangest and most alien place in the world (which, in "The Changes", it is) and with its electronic spirits, it evokes definitively and perfectly all the concepts in the Momus thought mentioned above. It works absolutely perfectly and flawlessly, and fits wonderfully with Peter Dickinson's epic vision.

If only it all lived up to that standard. When you dig further into the Workshop's music of this period, you have to contend with Limb's hideous, literally unlistenable "Quirky" (which lives up to its title in the most nightmarish way imaginable), Clarke's dismal "Contact", and Howell's horribly bland "Colour Rinse". You're also faced with Howell's album "Through a Glass Darkly" (from which "Colour Rinse" comes), an aspirational Mike Oldfield album about five years too late which now has that inexorably bland, syrupy feel that only the most washed-up tail-end-of-prog concept albums have.

By the late 1970s, the decline was becoming unstoppable, and it would only worsen in the decade ahead.

The analog synth era provides nostalgic memories for many, and Plone (<http://www.elidor.freeseerve.co.uk/plone.htm>) bear its influence far, far more than they do the 1958-64 or 1964-71 "eras". But for me it's mostly a sad comedown from what had been achieved previously, typified by the replacement, in the late 70s, of Delia Derbyshire's magnificent realisation of the Doctor Who theme (revised in 1969, as the programme went into colour, from its original incarnation in the black-and-white era) with a vastly inferior version by Peter Howell. This also underlined the Workshop's increasing problem as synthesisers became more and more common in pop music - how could their music possibly retain the "otherness" it had had up to about 1972? It's become a terrible cliché to say this, but the original Dr Who theme sounded like it was coming, literally, from another planet when it was first heard in late 1963, as Gerry and the Pacemakers and Freddie and the Dreamers infested the charts. Howell's version sounded indistinguishable from Cerrone's "Super Nature" or Gary Numan / Tubeway Army's "Are 'Friends' Electric?", both hits around the time it was recorded, and inferior to both, in my opinion, in its use of much the same electronics. As synthesisers became much cheaper in the early 80s, this problem increased - by 1982, synthpop ruled the charts to such an extent that a reissue of Kraftwerk's "The Model" / "Computer Love", far superior to most of the records at that time

"influenced" by it in some way, could reach Number One. And, sure enough, this further cheapening of synthesisers, and their ever greater ubiquity in pop music as a whole, impacted itself on the Workshop as they declined further and further during the 80s, becoming most widely associated with Elizabeth Parker's synthesised pan pipes. Some good work was done (Roger Limb's theme to the 1987 BBC children's drama "Aliens in the Family" is brilliant, and uncharacteristically sombre for Limb, and his score for that series is probably the last good music ever to come from the Workshop) but mostly it was mediocre background / incidental music for various schools TV and radio programmes, and similar work. While this stuff has nostalgic significance for me, and it was the first Radiophonic music I heard, it clearly doesn't stand up in retrospect.

In 1989 the BBC very nearly abolished the Radiophonic Workshop altogether, and it was saved principally because the final series of Doctor Who had been commissioned; it was as though the Workshop's general public association with that programme had imploded back on it in the most hideous way. The BBC could seemingly not imagine DW continuing without the RW (although I've seen episodes of the series from 1970 which have orchestral music conducted by Carey Blyton, and they somehow seem incomplete without any Radiophonic contributions) so it was the brief reprieve of Dr Who which, in turn, caused the reprieve of the Workshop. The 1989 series of Dr Who proved to be the last ever, and the Radiophonic Workshop struggled on, as a low-profile operation ultimately reduced to Elizabeth Parker, Roger Limb and the technical expert John Hunt, for another seven years.

Having said all that, the Workshop deserved better than to become yet another casualty of John Birt's destructive, sub-Thatcherite, obsessively bureaucratic near-destruction of the BBC. The end of the Radiophonic Workshop, in December 1996, was brought about by Birt's ludicrous "Producer Choice" scheme, which established an internal market within the BBC where producers would, in Mark Cola's words, "shop around both in and outside the BBC for the best price." As the Workshop now had to "cost" all work at hourly rates, it had to cheapen its techniques, and cut corners, to arrive at the right price, or else producers would go elsewhere for their sound. The effects of this meant that the Workshop was renamed "Radiophonics" (the word "Workshop" doubtless deemed not modern enough - Birtism seemed to combine the worst aspects of both Thatcherism and Blairism) and 38 years after its creation in 1958, it was finally merged with (i.e. taken over by) Radio Production Resources at the end of 1996; the name "BBC Radiophonic Workshop" is still used by John Hunt, but its work is almost entirely in remastering old recordings. While its glory years were clearly long past, it deserved a more dignified and less painful departure than that.

Nevertheless ... eternal, untouchable, indescribably important, a range of moods and feelings that seems unending - that is the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, 1958-1971 and (to a lesser extent) 1972-1979. It's a legacy unacknowledged by the BBC itself (which refuses to reissue any RW material other than that used for Doctor Who) and viewed with a certain snobbism by certain curators of electronic music, simply because of its being thrust into the background of millions of British lives. But it is there, and the importance and influence of this music has rarely been equalled.