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BBC Radiophonic Workshop

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Everyone's heard of them, no one knows what they do. Mark Sinker investigates Auntie's best-kept secret. This article was originally published in *The Wire* 96 (February 1992).

Six composers, too shy to make claims for themselves, go to make it up. But Brian Hodgson, who's worked with the BBC Radiophonic Workshop since the early 60s, and headed it since the mid-80s, is less reserved. You think about it, and you begin to wonder if this pioneering institution's secret effect on Britain's ears might not be huge. "It's likely," he says when asked, "that the first Electronic Music that most of today's composers heard they heard when they were listening to *Listen With Mother*. Composers will say, 'I wanted to get into electronic music because of *Dr Who*.' We've changed the way that people listen to things ..."

Dr Who you knew about: everyone knows they did that. But also *Life On Earth*, *The Body In Question*, dozens of documentaries - *Horizons*, *Everymans*, whatever - hard and soft science, fiction; animals, plants, galaxies and minds; international prize-winning programmes for Radios 1 to 4; countless jingles, signatures and weird subliminal whispers, every week across 35 years. Turning out music for 150 programmes a year, to be half-heard at most twice, and then put away in their own vast, almost unused archive. Worldwide the only institution of its kind: product of its times (a nation happier with the past for once looking to the future): a labour-intensive music factory with a necessarily ephemeral output ranging from hardcore psychodrama to bridge-passages in politically sensitive documentaries, from the alien monster-noises for radio thrillers, all the way to the little songs on *Schools TV* that help kids remember how to spell.

In a long-ago pulped official history of the first 25 years of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, the fairly legendary Radiophonic Worker Delia Derbyshire tells how she created the *Dr Who* theme tune with a series of 'carefully timed handswoops' over oscillators - tomorrow's sounds yesterday, unforgettably.

The even more legendary Daphne Oram had created the Workshop - the UK's unobtrusive answer to Stockhausen's Cologne sound-labs and Pierre Schaeffer's concrete studios in Paris - out of little more than hand-swoops and vision, and the backing of the BBC's Drama Department (the Music Department then not remotely interested). Built up by Oram and later

Desmond Briscoe, the Workshop's Heroic Phase consisted in the wrestling of sound - for frontline drama, then-startling productions of Beckett, Ionesco, Copek and Cocteau, and of course for science fiction, always greedy for new noises - from laughably primitive equipment: "They basically had, in 1958, 2000, of which they spent 600 on a third octave filter - half of one, in fact, they couldn't afford the whole thing," says Hodgson. "2000, one room, a packet of razor blades and lot of nerve ... There were 12 oscillators turned on and off by pressing keys, tuning each note separately - wobblers - and an echo device you had to turn on the day before you wanted to use it."

Oram, Derbyshire and Briscoe are long gone, retired or moved on. Hodgson left for a while, exhausted either by the world's inattention (and 11 years of Dr Who), but returned in the late 70s. No less than three of the present six were BBC hands - with expertise in studio management and recording and audio technology - from those wing-and-prayer 60s days: Dick Mills (who joined the Workshop in 1958), Malcolm Clarke (1969), Roger Limb (1972). Peter Howell joined in 1975, Elizabeth Parker in 1978, Richard Attree, the most recent recruit, in 1985. Only Limb, Parker and Attree had previous academic music training.

You can tell an 'engineer' from a 'musician' on paper: their histories give them away. But in practice, all of them are expected to keep abreast of the technology to hand, from the dawn of tape to the computer, and all of them are expected - give or take pet skills - to take on whatever's come up. At the last possible minute, the fine cut - sometimes just a rough cut - arrives, and they sit down and watch it, with a director's possibly unhelpful brief in hand, and think about what they can do to make it more of what it already is, without being noticed. "Heightening the representation without actually telling lies," is Mills's description of one of his jobs.

Mills is in fact a genius with sound effects, tape loops and the rest: his first brush with Radiophonics, Plot On The Moon, was about two scientists (male) going to the moon (one falls for a Moon Maiden and comes back pregnant) - but he's also worked on a Prom performance of the Spanish-English composer Roberto Gerhard's Collages. Clarke blames his A-levels - Physics, Art and Music - for his ending here, where among other things he's provided sound-colour for radio programmes about the work of Picasso, Klee, Dali and others.

Limb plays piano in jazz-bands almost every night: "There's a lot of ignorance," he tells me cheerfully, "even within the BBC. We still get letters from people who expect us to mend Radiophones, go round in white coats with soldering irons." Howell has put as much work into sound search-and-retrieval computer programmes and the Workshop's pioneering computer-

studio design as his radio interpretations of Dante's *Inferno* and the *Book of Revelations*. Even as a child, Parker's only wish was to write the music for television programmes. Attree, the youngest, the pop kid, sees the avant grade electronic sector they orbit - Planet Darmstadt and satellites - less as over-fiercely 'modern' than simply a bit old, a bit grey: "If I'm doing a Radio 1 piece", he says, "I approach it exactly as if someone had asked me to write a symphony for The BBC Symphony Orchestra."

And Hodgson - the boffin turned administrator - has quietly transformed this backwater department of a supposedly ageing and sluggish State Broadcasting monolith into a buoyant, trend-setting unit, with *Music and Technology* magazines beating a monthly path to its door. My poor little Sony is overwhelmed, and somehow forgets to record two of the seven interviews: Parker and Clarke lose out.

So there's this music pouring daily out of the corridors of Maida Vale, from the heart of the Official Culture Industry. Inevitably, part of it simply domesticates this or that vanguard, turning revolutionary wild-style to soap opera ends. And certainly some of it, put together in haste and routine, is lame and derivative.

But this is only part of the story. To work successfully here, you don't only have to know and understand all music, from plainchant to HipHop, you also have to recognise every little advert trick as it turns cliché, to second-guess every misleading sonic gesture.

"It's always been a problem," Howell explains. "Sound association from people who aren't experienced enough using their ears to realise it might be a different sound they're listening to. You could come up with a menacing string sound that sounds like bees, but you can't use it in a context that would be effective, because of its associations. You often hear it on the air where people have been very courageous in use of sound, and what they actually come up with is something that's confusing. The listener doesn't know if it's a sound effect or incidental music commenting on an emotional level. And as soon as you confuse the listener for a split second, you've crashed in flames." Is that a tortured soul, or is it just the Hoover? The liberation of dissonance turned suddenly daft: in the court of the ear's subconscious, there are no plea bargains. Unlike 'real' composers, Radiophonic Workers understand that less is often best, that you can't bury mistakes under artistic 'explanation', that the priority of computer's intention is a long-fled myth.

Howell has a poster up on his wall, advertising performances of a work of his, and a work by Parker, at an Electronic Music Festival in Milan last year, alongside such Euro-luminaries as Xenakis: substantial recognition, in its

way. He's mildly critical of Britain's resistance to - for example - a prestige cultural venture like IRCAM, a state institution dedicated to the Experimental and Music On Fast Forward, but it's obvious that he and the others are really more in love with the very specific challenges Radiophonic Work throws up, the variety, the loopy pressures, the expertly-crafted anonymity, the creative stamina demanded by 30 or 40 commissions a year, the bulk of them generated and judged - though not composed - by someone else: "What the Workshop doesn't need," states the official history somewhere, "is half a dozen Mozarts."

This is the age of the synthesizer, the sampler, MIDI. The Mad Scientist days recalled by the quaint old name - when the Workshop was pioneering sound-collage, audio treatments and the first steam-powered synthesisers - are vanished forever: the rich control and possibility of Digital on one hand the underrated sonic experience of listeners and viewers on the other mean that this technocentric age, ushered in under Hodgson's direction, leaves them more than ever cultural cogs, craftworkers of enormous resource, touching and dabbing behind the scenes. The way they more than half like it. So is the only reward a job well done in the time allowed?

"One of the great thrills," says Roger Limb simply, "is that I have heard kids singing my songs, coming out of school, having just watched Look & Read, or whatever."

So there's a kind of immortality too?

"Yes. Everyone's immortal for five minutes."