

Selected Radiophonic Works on Radio 4 Extra

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There was a treat for fans of the Radiophonic Workshop on Radio 4 extra last Saturday evening, with [3 hours of programming](#) based around their output. It was presented by Richard Coles, a former keyboard player and singer with The Communards who made an interesting post-pop career move of taking up the cloth (he is a C of E vicar, the Rev. Richard Coles), and, as far as his ecclesiastical duties allow, is an irregular but always welcome commentator on and presenter of arts programmes. As a sort of prelude, Stuart Maconie played John Baker's Codename as the opening track on his Radio 6 Friday night programme [The Freakier Zone](#). It's Baker's theme for a 1969 BBC spy adventure serial, and can be found on the first of the two excellent volumes of [The John Baker Tapes](#) released on Trunk Records a couple of years ago. It's typical of his style, its springy melody riding effortlessly on infectious

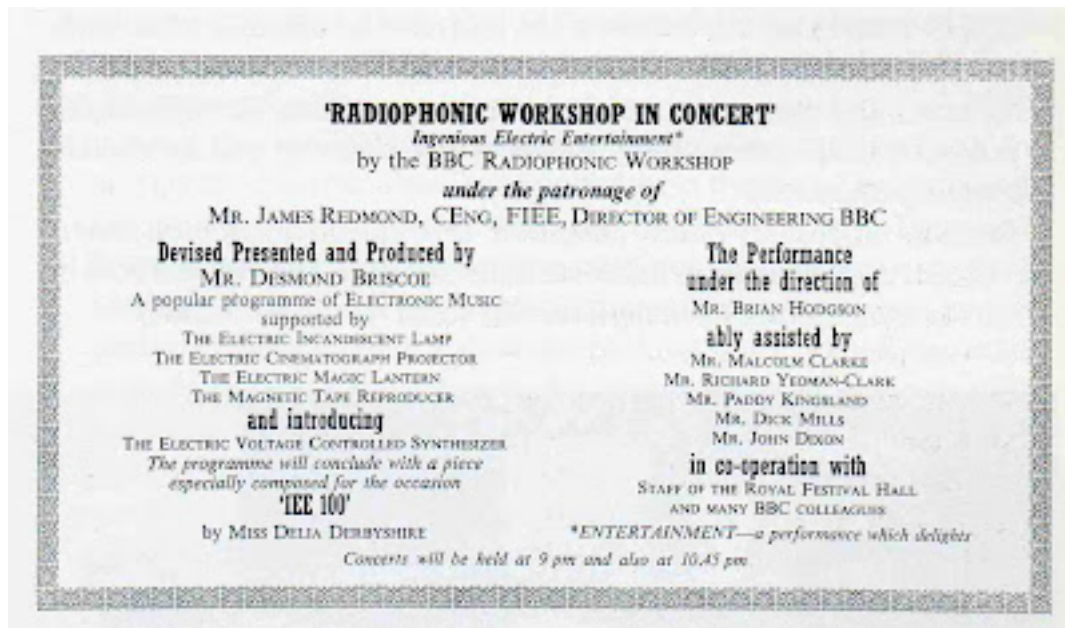
sprightly rhythms, the source sounds (usually of humble, everyday origin) edited together with immaculate precision.



Baroque portal - the entrance to the Maida Vale studio, home of the Radiophonic Workshop

The Radio 4 extra celebration presented several archive programmes featuring the Workshop's music and sound design, beginning with a 1971 documentary, *Electric Tunesmiths*. This was made at a pivotal moment in the Workshop's history, with fundamental changes in production methods occurring. Principally, this was due to the arrival of synthesisers, and in particular to the installation of the mammoth EMS Synthi 100 in April 1971, nicknamed the Delaware after the road in which the Maida Vale studios, where the Radiophonic Workshop was based, were situated. Incidentally, the studios are still there, as I discovered when, with an hour or two to spare before my train was due to leave Paddington Station, I took a walk to Delaware Road via Little Venice and the Regents Canal. There is still the same jarring disparity between the baroque, white-icing façade and the utilitarian, hangar-like roof which slopes up behind it. It displays an architectural split-personality similar to that evident (on a larger scale) in St Pancras Station, with its dark Victorian neo-gothic spires and towers masking the busy, modern railway interchange beyond and below. The Maida Vale studio really does look like a building which houses a busy workshop behind a fancy façade, although before the BBC moved in during the 1930s it had in fact been London's finest Edwardian roller skating rink. You can see a picture of it on

the back of Volume 1 of the John Baker Tapes, or in its 60s state (little different from the present, actually) in the Masters of Sound documentary on the Radiophonic Workshop included in the extras of the Doctor Who dvd Edge of Destruction (the follow up to the very first serial An Unearthly Child).



It's marvellous to be able to hear extracts from Delia Derbyshire's piece IEE, written on the Delaware to mark the 100th anniversary of the Institute of Electrical Engineers. It demonstrates her analytical approach to music, drawing on her mathematical background (she studied maths at Cambridge), her own interest in engineering matters, and her philosophical belief in a Pythagorean order to the universe, and to the structure of sound. She translated the letters IEE into morse code, with syncopating dots in between, and produced melodic material by treating IEE100 as musical notation and code. The I became a B, and the 100 a C in Roman numerical form. It's a very modernist way to go about things, somewhere between the chance compositions of John Cage, such as Atlas Eclipticalis, created by the superimposition of musical staves over a star chart, and the fixed serialist systems of Pierre Boulez and early Stockhausen – compositional calculus. The result of Derbyshire's codified musical transpositions, intended to convey the 'simplicity and loneliness' of a man walking on the moon, is hauntingly, melancholically atmospheric. It's not a million miles away from her earlier, tape-created piece Blue Veils and Golden Sands, showing that a strongly defined musical personality could bridge the new technological divide. The piece was one of those presented at the IEE100 Radiophonic concert in the Royal Festival Hall on 19th May 1971, with the Queen present to hear it. Desmond Briscoe sent out a memo to Workshop members before the concert, suggesting they tone down the challenging and adventurous qualities of electronic music in their contributions. Ironically, given both Derbyshire's

technological facility, Daphne Oram's tireless efforts to initially establish the Workshop in the late 50s, and the significant number of women composers who worked within it, Briscoe's reasoning for such timidity is couched in the most cringingly patronising and obsequious terms. He wrote that 'the calibre of the audience is such that while there is a natural interest in music, electronics and the arts, the social nature of the event and the presence of the ladies requires that the programme is non-technical, entertaining, aesthetically pleasing and as visually interesting as possible'. This kind of attitude was increasingly prevalent beyond the immediate demands of the concert performance, and was immensely frustrating to both Derbyshire and John Baker. Indeed, Briscoe can be heard in the programme taking in his authoritative managerial voice about the need for the Workshop composers (or 'producers') to subsume their personal artistic aims in order to provide for the requirements of the programme at hand. Something of independent artistic value might be produced, but only incidentally. Art can in some cases disguise art, as he puts it.



John Baker joining and splicing

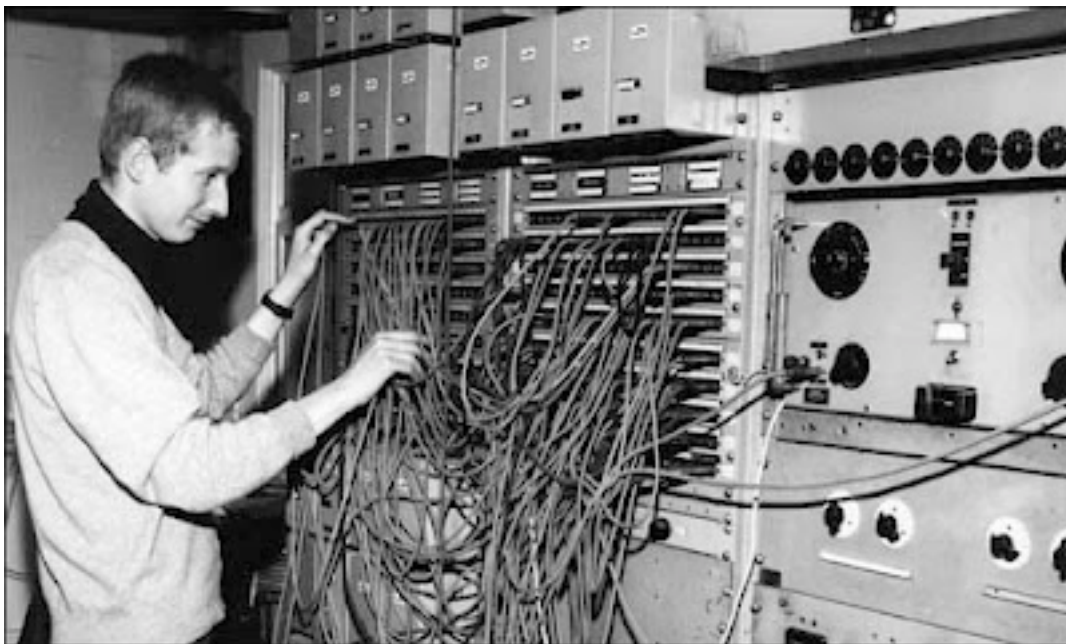
The abandonment of time-consuming tape-based composition which had been the predominant means of production in the 60s resulted in a demand for increased output. Derbyshire and Baker, both perfectionists with a proprietary pride in their work, were used to being allowed to work to a great extent at their own pace and in their own time. This necessary in the context

of the labour-intensive work of splicing, editing and re-recording countless, often tiny lengths of tape. Synthesisers theoretically allowed for a more instantaneous creation of the desired sound, and with a keyboard attached, the means to mould it directly into musical forms. But actually getting the machine to produce the sound you wanted was often a long and exasperating process, and subsequently reproducing it an imprecise art. Both Derbyshire and Baker, whilst they were fully capable of using the Delaware and the other Workshop synths to original musical ends, found this nascent technology more limited in scope than the concrete and more home-made electronic sounds they had become used to. It was simply incapable of realising the sounds in their heads.



In Louis Niebur's book on the Radiophonic Workshop *Special Sound*, he relates Brian Hodgson's tale of Derbyshire's inability or reluctance to finish her IEE piece on time. As she was still working on it the night before the performance, he got Workshop engineer and later composer Richard Yeoman-Clarke to run off an extra copy of her 'final version', knowing that she was unlikely to let her work go out in what she considered an incomplete

or imperfect form. The following morning, he discovered that she had destroyed her tape, and Hodgson used his copy, together with sound clips garnered from the BBC archives, to present an impressionistic history of electronic communications spanning the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from Thomas Edison, through opening and closing broadcasts from the BBC studio at Savoy Hill (leased out to them by IEE between 1923 and 1932), and culminating in the launch of the Apollo 11 rocket and the messages from the moon delivered by Neil Armstrong. With a hint at lingering exasperation at having to resort to such subterfuge on behalf of his friend and close musical collaborator (they would continue to work together outside the Workshop in Unit Delta Plus and the Electrophon studio), Hodgson told Niebur 'somebody had to produce something, the fucking queen was going to be there, for Christ's sake, in the Festival Hall! It wasn't brilliant, but it was there, it sounded loud, and if it's loud it sounds impressive'. Indeed, its loudness is commented on in Desmond Briscoe and Roy Curtis-Bramwell's book *The BBC Radiophonic Workshop: The First 25 Years*, in which they write that 'the powerful punch of Delia's take-off threatened the very fabric of the Festival Hall', no doubt rattling Her Majesty's jewellery at the same time. The EMS Synthesi 100 which took centre stage, and which was played by Desmond Briscoe, wasn't the fabled Delaware but a model lent by its creator Peter Zinovieff. Getting the gargantuan beast into the Radiophonic Workshop studio had involved enough Laurel and Hardy-esque rigmarole, and they weren't in any hurry to shift it again.



John Baker searches for the right sound

Delia Derbyshire and John Baker, such central figures in the 'golden age', or glowpot days as they are described in Briscoe and Curtis-Bramwell's history,

of the Radiophonic Workshop, didn't stay on much beyond 1971, the year in which *Electric Tunesmiths* was broadcast. Derbyshire left in 1973, and more or less stopped producing music shortly thereafter. The programme also features the gently-spoken voice of John Baker, who guides us through his methods of creating a short piece from an initial sound recorded on tape, a means of production which was already largely redundant by this time. His piece *New Worlds* is played without, for once, reference to *Newsround* as the rise and fall of its final punctuating, percussive cadence had yet to become indelibly associated with the John Craven-helmed children's news programme. Delia Derbyshire's realisation of the *Doctor Who* theme is often cited as the piece which brought experimental electronic music to the masses. A similar claim could be made for John Baker's many and varied short but vital and joyfully inventive themes and local radio call-signs. They were little bursts of playful musique concrete which introduced electronic music to many households on a daily basis, without listeners even really noticing that they were enjoying such new and experimental sounds. The PM theme, Radio Nottingham station call-sign or the intro to *Woman's Hour* would probably still be instantly recognisable to many on an instinctual level. The *Woman's Hour* theme is here picked apart into its simple component sounds: a cork being pulled out and liquid poured from a bottle. Baker was descending into a slough of depression and heavy drinking as he entered the 70s, and was unable to cope with the pressures of studio demand. He would deliberately try to avoid the attentions of Desmond Briscoe, who had effectively abandoned his own music-making career to manage the Workshop, a source of frustration for him too. As Brian Hodgson, who was also to leave the Workshop in 1972 to open his own *Electrophon* studios, puts it in Niebur's book, 'the strain of the Workshop and Desmond became a great bogeyman at some point in the 1960s. He (Briscoe) was seen as an obstacle rather than anything else'. Richard Anthony Baker paints an affectionate but unflinchingly honest and deeply moving portrait of John, his brother, in the sleeve notes to *The John Baker Tapes Volume 1*, describing him as 'my hero'. He notes that he was already in a bad way when their mother, Vi, died in 1971. They had been very close, and it was a devastating blow. Baker left the Radiophonic Workshop in 1974, sacked according to his brother, and subsequently never made music in public again. If Baker and Derbyshire are anything to go by, the Workshop could be an emotionally and creatively exhausting environment, which was unforgiving towards more sensitive or unconventional souls. The 1971 documentary acts retrospectively as something of an elegy to the 'golden age' of the Radiophonic Workshop, and it's difficult to listen to it without a sense of sadness at times and people passed and gone.



Delia at the controls

More from this golden era comes in the form of the Inventions for Radio programme *Dreams*, produced in 1964. This was a collaboration between Delia Derbyshire and Barry Bermange, a marriage of words and sound of the sort that had been a specialty of the Workshop since its inception in 1958. Indeed, a major impetus behind its creation had been Samuel Beckett's 1957 radio play *All That Fall*, which was written with a particular sound world in mind. That world was recreated by Desmond Briscoe from concrete sources, and anticipated the Workshop's key role in coming up with sounds for dramatic productions. For *Dreams*, Bermange recorded a number of people relating their dream experiences, and then edited them into a structured collage of voices, with repetitions and thematic passages giving it a musical form. Five general areas and recurrent themes provide 'movements': running, falling, land, sea and colour. The tone is dark, with repeated references to pursuit, drowning, disorientation, unspecified or half-defined dread, and death. Derbyshire provides a suitably ominous backdrop of low-pitched, humming atmosphere, summoning up the emotional inner landscapes recollected through the obscuring mist of waking consciousness by the participants. Her subtly modulated, undulating electronic drones are reminiscent of those which would be produced by the French composer Eliane Radigue some years later, initially on tape and then on her trusty ARP 2500 synthesiser.



Fourth Dimension - Radiophonic pop from Paddy Kingsland

The 1971 documentary also looks forward to the future, with Richard Yeoman-Clarke demonstrating the sound range of the Workshop's EMS synthesisers, from the pure sine wave tone to the undifferentiated hiss of white noise, and then showing how they could be added to or subtracted from to produce all manner of different tones and effects. Paddy Kingsland showed the more conventional rock or pop context into which synthesisers could be incorporated with a piece he was composing for the Schools Department's USA 72 programme, which ended up on his Fourth Dimension Radiophonic Workshop LP. The synths are here used mainly to provide the melody, over a guitar, bass and drums backing which Kingsland had recorded in another of the Maida Vale studios. Dick Mills, who had been at the Workshop since 1958, initially as an engineer, was introduced as the resident 'comic composer', a somewhat belittling categorisation based on his enduring miniature of apocalyptic gastric eruption Major Bloodnok's Stomach. His sound design for Don Juan's descent into hell, also featured, made it clear that he was capable of more than mere tomfoolery (impressive though his efforts in that direction undoubtedly were). The potential for comic sound effects were thoroughly explored by Spike Milligan, a regular visitor to the Workshop studios. The Goon Show episode The Scarlet Capsule is included here, a take-off of

Quatermass and the Pit, whose music was originally created by Desmond Briscoe. The Workshop is thus left effectively parodying itself.



In the loop - Dick Mills keeps an eye on the spooling sounds

Relativity, from 1975, is another blend of sounds and words, a piece of 'lingual' sound poetry written by Lily Greenham in collaboration with Workshop composer Peter Howell. Language is the musical material here, with words looped and layered to bring out their inherent sound qualities. The basis of Greenham's linguistic sound blocks is Einstein's theory of relativity, and specifically his $E=MC^2$ equation. Words are repeated, overlaid and stretched in a manner which recalls Steve Reich's early tape pieces such as *Come Out* and *It's Gonna Rain*, without the element of phasing over time. It all ends with Richard Baker announcing that 'the silence you have just heard was the velocity of light'. Peter Howell was also responsible for a later dramatic piece from 1983, *Inferno Revisited*, which was written in the form of a package tour around the circles of Dante's Hell. Briscoe and Curtis-Bramwell's Workshop history, published in the same year, looks forward to

this as being one of the 'major radio events of 1983'. The sounds and music were all composed and edited together on the Fairlight Computer Musical Instrument, a top of the range example of the new digital synthesisers which the Workshop had bought (at not inconsiderable expense) in 1981. The hellish soundworld which Howells conjures up is impressive in its own brittle, glassy way. It sounds at some points like one of John Carpenter's horror film soundtracks (particular when the keyboard is used to produce relatively conventional synth chords); at other times it is reminiscent of parts of Stockhausen's Licht cycle of 'operas', which have a similar glinting digital sheen. It was produced by Brian Hodgson, who had by this time returned to the Workshop as its head, replacing Desmond Briscoe, who for all his sometimes fractious relationships with his staff had done so much to nurture and develop it since its initial creation. The Radio 4 extra overview was peppered through with samples of the Workshop's work through the years, with snatches of Paddy Kingsland's fantastic theme from *The Changes* to Delia Derbyshire's eternal *Blue Veils* and *Golden Sands*, Desmond Briscoe's terrifying sounds for *Quatermass and the Pit* and Dick Mills' airy *Dandelion Countdown* to Malcolm Clarke's charming electronic nursery song *Bath Time*. Finally, Richard Coles informed us that since the Workshop's closure in 1998, Brian Hodgson had gone on to run a restaurant and Dick Mills had written a bestselling book on the care of tropical fish. An appropriate indication of the diversity and range of interests which made the Workshop such an inventive place, creating marvels with unconventional means and materials. Perhaps they sometimes wonder what marvellous sounds might be produced from the food or the fishes, and contemplate the *Music for Restaurants* or *Fishtanks* LPs they might one day produce.