

The BBC Radiophonic Workshop

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The BBC Radiophonic Workshop (l to r): Desmond Briscoe, Dick Mills, Delia Derbyshire, Keith Salmon, Brian Hodgson

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“Established in 1958 to provide original sound treatment for Third Programme drama,” intones the dry and unassuming blurb on the back cover of the 1968 LP *BBC Radiophonic Music*, “we now provide a creative service for radio, television, local, regional and external broadcasting.”

Which is one way of describing the BBC Radiophonic Workshop – and were we merely discussing the sound effects unit of a public service broadcaster, we could settle on an underwhelming summary, tidying away references to experimentalism and *musique*

concrète and batshit crazy. The point being that the Workshop was so much more than a bunch of disparate technicians and composers tasked by Auntie Beeb to add a little pizzazz to *Play Of The Week*; through the corridors of the BBC's Maida Vale complex skulked some of the leading figures of mid-20th century sonic radicalism – Daphne Oram, Delia Derbyshire, Brian Hodgson, Maddalena Fagandini. By definition their musical output was atmospheric – otherwise TV and radio producers wouldn't have commissioned it – yet it was also weird, textured, nuanced, esoteric, pioneering, and – above all else – fascinating. Sound as bricolage, subverting boundaries between music and noise. And whilst the Workshop was an umbrella beneath which artists functioned primarily on an individual basis, there's also a commonality in play; a framework through which spliced tape, ring modulators and early synths became states of mind as much as base instrumentation.

This continuity of spirit is an integral element of the allure, especially considering that, in its forty-year existence, the unit was in constant flux, be it churn in personnel, shifts in focus (initially from radio drama sound effects towards generating musical identities for television as well as the wireless), and technological evolution – as with many a great institution there was something of a schism as synthesisers replaced more organic methods of sculpting sound. Also, this being the BBC, wider commercial considerations were an afterthought, resulting in a rather fractured discography; with many pieces released on record retrospectively and out of sequence (generally via various, unimaginably-titled compilations), the chronology becomes somewhat blurred.

The first commercial release was **Time Beat**, a 1962 single credited to Ray Cathode (Fagandini, assisted by a pre-Beatles George Martin). Combining jug-band tape loops with strings and surf guitar, as a track it's difficult to pin down, combining the jaunty angles of 60's British comedy cinema with Stockhausen-esque allure.

Indeed, much of the Workshop's output is deeply – and delightfully – idiosyncratic. It sounds unusual to contemporary ears, especially on vinyl, divorced from original context, but it's also important to

remember that this was weirdness broadcast to and intended for mass consumption. Take John Baker's **Radio Nottingham** for instance, first heard as a local radio calling card, later to appear on that *BBC Radiophonic Music* LP. Electronica plus found-sound percussion, it sounds like mathematics reinterpreting a news bulletin intro as some sort of popcorn-flavoured, futuristic sea shanty.

Maths was important to the Workshop aesthetic, and you were just as likely to have the mathematically-trained (Derbyshire; David Cain) as the classically-trained in the ranks. It's boffin-pop. Trainspotter electronica. Retro-futurism. Music made whilst wearing lab coats (and a direct influence on acts such as Stereolab, Broadcast, Add N to (X), and anything ever released on the Ghost Box label).

That the BBC Radiophonic Workshop was a progressive environ is further underlined by the number of prominent women who passed through its doors (as opposed to the rest of the music industry, which still considered women as little more than totty). Delia Derbyshire could have cut an obscure figure; not always the easiest to work with, a penchant for the bottle truncating her post-Workshop career. However, her reputation has blossomed since her death, and listening to her compositions, such reverence is easy to understand. **Blue Veils And Golden Sands** was pieced together using oscillators, reel-to-reel tape machines and (apparently) a lampshade. It's mournful. Introspective. Sinister yet obliquely so, and stylistically more akin to a Shirley Jackson novel than the simpleton's fayre clogging up much of the hit parade at the time.

Oh – and there's **Doctor Who**. Not a Derbyshire composition; the theme for what was initially envisaged as educational sci-fi for children (with limited expectations of durability) was written by the far more conventionally-calibrated Ron Grainer (who – amongst many other pieces – wrote the theme tune to *Steptoe And Son*). But it was Delia who deconstructed the notes on the page, transforming a perfectly serviceable proposition into something genuinely otherworldly.

Here in the twenty-first century the theme's impact is diluted – we've heard it too many times. But back in the 60s, leaking into suburban living rooms from the black and white in the corner, it must have been a deliciously unsettling experience. The oscillator-driven minor key. The high-register bass riff, doing all the legwork beneath the discordance of the melody. The locomotive pacing; the whooshes, feints and swerves. Entire stanzas sound detuned, as if Derbyshire was deliberately crafting imperfections. And befitting sci-fi, it's a piece of music that's detached from time's moorings; it may not have been recorded in 1794 or 2219, but either year feels just as likely as 1963.

(The BBC dropped Delia's arrangements for an 'updated' version in 1980. The idiots).

Having worked on a number of non-Workshop projects, Derbyshire left the BBC in the early 70s, by which time the next wave of musicians, technicians and mathematicians were busy staring at the wires of their new-found synths. Glynis Jones' *Veils And Mirrors* and *Adagio* by Dick Mills appear on the Workshop's eponymous 1975 collection, with both continuing to explore that same essence of meditative foreboding – except here the methodology is consciously electronic in both tone and texture...

...which isn't to suggest the Workshop janitor chucked out any object that wasn't a synth, but in later years the musical output did become synonymous with a certain aesthetic, both in terms of its musical output, and the type of TV and radio shows who'd commission sounds effects and theme/incidental pieces; obscure radio drama, educational programming for schools (itself a weird genre), and (of course) science fiction – *Blake's 7* and *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy*. The theme tune to the latter uses a break from an Eagles instrumental (*Journey Of The Sorcerer* from their 1975 album *One Of These Nights*), but elsewhere the show ripples with Radiophonic Workshop fingerprints – including **Brighton Pier** by Paddy Kingsland. Again, its meditative and vaguely portentous; sweeping synth chords amidst background hubbub, although reflecting technology's advance it sounds slicker,

less put together with sticky-backed plastic. (It's also a lovely piece that works as a standalone).

Brighton Pier appears on the 1983 compilation *The Soundhouse*, along with twenty or so other tracks that demonstrate how disparate composers working with conflicting emotions still manage to make music that sounds part of a continuum; you can tell whose hands are on the tiller should you wish to be anorak about the back cat, but above all else, the BBC Radiophonic Workshop *sound* like the BBC Radiophonic Workshop – be it the ambient reflection behind Dick Mills' **Seascape** or the frankly quite bonkers re-imagining of Saint-Saëns' Aquarium from his *Carnaval des Animaux* suite, renamed **Fancy Fish** by Peter Howell and the aforementioned Mills, tongues firmly in cheek.

The Workshop closed in 1998, the victim of budget cuts (and, perhaps, a concern that a department for experimental sound had outlived its use, considering that technology had by this stage made it possible for all of us to channel similar vibes in the comfort of our own bedrooms). Yet that isn't the end of the story – or even the entire story; several more Toppermosts could be filled with the many other tracks and artists who deserve discussion, as well as the influence, interest and reputation that – if anything – continues to grow, if the number of re-releases are anything to go by. The spirit of experimentation remains strong... which in a way, takes us back to the beginning, and Daphne Oram, who having been pivotal in the Workshop's establishment didn't stay long, but whose work – based upon images drawn directly onto 35mm film, then converting them into sound – exemplifies what the Workshop as a whole was trying to achieve; sound as something instinctively new. **Amphitryon 38** lasts for 49 seconds, and remains one of the eeriest pieces of music I've ever heard – submerged, oblique, yet endlessly fascinating; much like the rest of the Workshop's legacy.



Clockwise from top left: Daphne Oram, Maddalena Fagandini, Glynis Jones, Delia Derbyshire

Desmond Briscoe (1925–2006)

Daphne Oram (1925–2003)

Maddalena Fagandini (1929–2012)

Delia Derbyshire (1937–2001)

John Baker (1937-1997)