

JOHN BAKER

John Baker, composer of music for radio and television programmes, died of cancer on February 7 aged 59. He was born at Leigh-on-Sea on October 12, 1937.

IN THE heyday of the Radiophonic Workshop, the BBC's electronic music studios in Maida Vale, three composers were predominant: David Cain, Delia Derbyshire and John Baker. Before synthesizers and multitrack tape recorders became common, Baker used everyday sounds as his "instruments" — the wanging of a ruler, the noise made by blowing across the top of a bottle or the plip of a cork being pulled. He changed their pitch on tape, edited the sounds together (sometimes measuring notes inexactly to introduce a syncopated feeling) and used, perhaps, three tape recorders running simultaneously side by side to put together the final composition.

In the official history of the Workshop, there are references to so-called "Baker techniques" in "realising" electronic music. They were used for many years after he had left.

John Baker was a descendant of a successful family of firework manufacturers in the East End of London. After graduating at the Royal Academy of Music he joined the BBC in 1960. He worked first

as a studio manager, a job which, in those times, could entail playing discs on the Light Programme's *Housewives' Choice* one day and editing foreign correspondents' dispatches on 78 rpm records for *Radio Newsreel* the next.

Three years later, Baker moved to the Radiophonic Workshop, which was then in the vanguard of electronic music work. While there, he composed the signature tunes of many BBC radio and television shows, including that of the Radio Four current affairs programme *PM*, the jingle for the listeners' letters slot on *Woman's Hour* and the theme of *BBC English by Radio* on the World Service.

Producers commissioning his work used to see him at the Maida Vale studios to give him an idea of what they wanted. He merely listed each of the adjectives they used to describe their programmes — words he then had by him when he came to work on their music. As with *BBC English by Radio*, he often embodied the rhythm of the programme's title into the pieces he composed.

Baker, provided incidental music and special effects for many plays, one of them a Third Programme production in 1969 of Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken*, starring Ralph Richardson. One of the more unusual requests made to him came from a man from the

Royal Shakespeare Company, who wanted a sonata composed from the sound of his kneecap being tapped. "You record your knee-cap and I'll do my best," Baker told the man. He never heard from him again.

The stress of being continuously inventive and of balancing, say, several commissions in his head at one time, coupled with the painstaking process of assembling the music, all took its toll of Baker's health. In addition, he worked hard away from the BBC, providing effects for many TV commercials and writing a good deal of mood music, some of which was used in the Beatles film, *Help!*

John Baker was a resourceful and innovative jazz pianist in the André Previn/Dudley Moore mould, although he largely confined his playing to his native Southend-on-Sea. He composed and orchestrated a jazz Mass for a local church.

Ill-health forced him to part company from the BBC in 1974 and he never really recovered from the shock of his departure. A shy, sensitive and courteous man, he was blessed with a heightened sense of the ridiculous, which helped him to cope with illness. In his latter years, he liked nothing better than to spend his days (and nights) listening to his favourite programmes on Radio Three.

He was unmarried.



Baker with tape machine and mixing desk in the BBC Radiophonic Workshop

+ W2 + WMS

15 Feb 1997