

# Obituary Desmond Briscoe

*Pioneering sound engineer who brought electronic music to radio and television*

Louis Niebur

Tuesday December 19, 2006 The Guardian

The pioneering sound engineer Desmond Briscoe, who has died aged 81, was among the first in Britain to realise the potential of electronic music in the 1950s, initially through composition and eventually as manager of the BBC's electronic music studio, the Radiophonic Workshop, from 1960 to 1984.

His breakthrough commission - the success of which ultimately led to the creation of the studio - was Samuel Beckett's first radio play, *All That Fall* (1957). Realising Beckett's wish for a new kind of "pure radio" - one that blended dialogue, music and sound effect - Briscoe used the Parisian techniques of *musique concrète* (music made by editing together and manipulating bits of prerecorded magnetic tape) to create sounds previously unheard on British radio, thus bringing to public attention the potential for electronic tape effects in drama.

Briscoe was born in Birkenhead, but moved to Manchester as a boy. The son of a telephone engineer, he inherited his father's interest in technology; as a teenager, he began his musical career as a drummer, then as conductor of "Harry Desmond and his Band". After persistent attempts to get a job with the BBC, he started work as a junior programme assistant in Manchester, aged 16. Assigned to the Guards during the second world war, he left after being transferred to the Education Corps, where he became music adviser to the London area. On one of his courses, he met Gwyneth Evans, whom he married in 1946.

That same year Briscoe was sent to teach troops in India. He left the military two years later and returned to the BBC features department in London, working as programme operations assistant in radio drama with such producers and writers as Dylan Thomas,

Louis MacNeice and Lawrence Gilliam. It was here that he developed his love for the spoken word in radio.

Initially, his job was to control the balance of instruments in musical performances and drop recordings of sound effects into drama productions, but he also worked with producers to start incorporating more unusual effects. Although he had never been to Paris specifically to hear musique concrète, he had heard recordings of early electronic music by Pierre Schaeffer and Karlheinz Stockhausen, and was fascinated by it. Gathering redundant equipment from more affluent departments and working into the early hours, he laid the seeds of the Radiophonic Workshop.

Briscoe's greatest artistic achievements were in the anarchic pre-Workshop years of 1957-58. In addition to *All That Fall*, he created electronic sounds and music for revolutionary productions of works by Giles Cooper, Franz Kafka and James Hanley. With the opening of the Workshop in 1958, Briscoe, fellow electronic music pioneer Daphne Oram and engineer Richard "Dickie" Bird learned through trial and error how to create unique soundtracks. Especially in the early days, they worked with anything that made a noise to create weird and atmospheric sounds and music.

One of Briscoe's biggest early successes was the unearthly noises and disturbing music of *Quatermass and the Pit* (1958), the first time original electronic music had been used in British science-fiction television. His second collaboration with Beckett, *Embers* (1959), utilised a more traditionally "musical" approach, moulding the abstract sound of the sea using distinct pitches.

As manager of the Workshop, Briscoe's job changed from composition to administration, but he occasionally found time to pursue his love of radio features; in *Narrow Boats* (1969), for example, he captured the lives of canal boatmen using their words and music. He was particularly interested in life on the canals - he had his own boat, was involved with groups fighting against canal closures and for their restoration, and chaired the London branch of the Inland Waterways Association for several years in the late 1960s.

A love of poetry and a meeting with the poet Norman Nicholson led to the creation of an evocative Workshop programme, *A Wall Walks Slowly* (1976), capturing the Cumbrian landscape in the words of the poet and the people who lived there. Briscoe won three awards from the Society of Radio Authors for this production.

Under Briscoe's management, scores of in-house composers produced exciting music for hundreds of radio and television programmes, using natural sounds manipulated on magnetic tape and then purely electronic sounds. Most famously, Delia Derbyshire's 1963 arrangement of the Doctor Who signature tune made the Workshop a household name. The Workshop closed in 1998, the result of the BBC's decision to shut all departments that could not pay for themselves.

Briscoe's chief administrative quality was an ability to support and encourage the composers under him, indefatigably fighting with BBC administration for more equipment, space and money. These efforts resulted ultimately in one of the most influential electronic music studios in the world, whose impact continues to be felt in both popular music and the music of film and television.

Briscoe is survived by his son David. Gwyn and his daughter Penny predeceased him.

**Harry Desmond Briscoe, composer, sound engineer and studio manager, born June 21 1925; died December 7 2006**