

Obituary

Desmond Briscoe Radiophonic Workshop founder

by Virginia Anderson

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Harry Desmond Briscoe, composer, studio manager and sound engineer: born Birkenhead, Cheshire 21 June 1925; Head of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop 1958-83; married 1946 Gwyneth Evans (deceased; one son, and one daughter deceased); died Windsor, Berkshire 7 December 2006.

In 1958 Desmond Briscoe founded the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, the department of the BBC that supplied sound effects, emotive cues, incidental music and programme themes for radio and television. Throughout the existence of the workshop, and even before its official founding, Briscoe and other composers, engineers and sound designers created the distinctive sound of BBC programmes.

Born in Birkenhead in 1925, Briscoe moved when young to Manchester, where he worked with the BBC as an assistant. After Second World War service, Briscoe resumed his BBC career in London. His duties were similar to those of Daphne Oram, who began with the BBC in 1943: balancing the broadcast levels of instruments in performance of background music and also producing "diegetic" sounds, both to add to the realism of the setting and to indicate the psychological and emotional atmosphere of the plot. Sound effects had been part of radio throughout its history, but Briscoe, like Oram, was interested in achieving these sound effects electronically.

Briscoe heard recordings of musique concrète by Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henry. Schaeffer had worked as an engineer in the ORTF station in Paris. His manipulation of wax recordings and later of tape, beginning with *Etude aux chemins de fer* (1948, using recordings of trains), involved slowing and speeding up the source sounds, *aux chemins de fer* (1948, using recordings of trains), involved slowing and speeding up the source sounds, running them backwards, cutting them and arranging them as sound collages.

While Henry had studied under the composer Olivier Messiaen and wrote musically designated sound works (as the *Symphonie pour un homme seul* of

1950), Schaeffer thought of his early works as studies rather than compositions themselves, as he felt that he had not as yet found a musical language for musique concrète.

Briscoe found a practical use for concrète manipulation that the BBC could accept and support. In 1955, the BBC, impressed by the success of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* in Paris, commissioned what became a "radio text, for voices, not bodies" (as Beckett told Clas Zilliacus in *Beckett and Broadcasting*) called *All That Fall* (1957). Since the journey of the main character is presented psychologically, Beckett asked for natural sounds to be adapted in unnatural ways. Briscoe, as sound designer, and Norman Baines, gramophone operator, altered farm animal sounds from the BBC's extensive sound effects library using concrète techniques. As Martin Esslin, the former head of BBC Radio Drama, wrote,

"These experiments, and the discoveries made as they evolved, led directly to the establishment of the BBC's Radiophonic Workshop. Beckett and *All That Fall* thus directly contributed to one of the most important technical advances in the art of radio (and the technique, and indeed technology, of radio in Britain)."

In 1958, with Oram, Briscoe established the Radiophonic Workshop. Initially the workshop mostly consisted of outdated equipment and was confined to two rooms at the BBC's Maida Vale Studios (formerly a roller-skating venue). Briscoe became Senior Studio Manager. Oram left the workshop after a year to pursue her own compositions, but other founding members remained, including Baines, Dick Mills, and Richard "Dickie" Bird, its first engineer (upon his death, Bird was replaced by the resourceful Dave Young, who had created radio sets from almost nothing while a prisoner of war).

Usually, workshop employees worked in pairs consisting of a studio manager and a technical assistant. Briscoe and Mills, for instance, created the sound design for the live televised premiere of Nigel Kneale's *Quatermass and the Pit* (1958). Trevor Duncan, the named composer on this programme, created more traditional instrumental cues and Briscoe and Mills provided live deployment of taped effects.

Briscoe and his colleagues blurred the division between what was sound design of pure effects and what was music. Dick Mills's famous cue for Major Bloodnok's stomach in *The Goon Show* (from the late 1950s) may easily be considered an effect, but many of the cues used in BBC radio and television programmes, from *All That Fall* forward, act as incidental music in all but name. Even in 1963, in a BBC Engineering Monograph, *Radiophonics in the BBC* by F.C. Brooker (based on information from Briscoe and Dave Young), "radiophonics" were "the production of sounds from natural sources to convey mood of a broadcast programme, but not the creation of musical composition as such":

Although the techniques employed sometimes follow the lines of that employed in the creation of the French musique concrète, it is not the aim of the BBC's Radiophonic Workshop (at least, up to the present time) to create musical compositions per se.

This distinction had a financial benefit for the BBC in that technical work was not subject to the payment of composition royalties (Ron Grainer received royalties for his score of the theme to Dr Who, but the Radiophonic Workshop composer Delia Derbyshire received none for her iconic realisation of it). Briscoe, like other workshop composers, often received little or no credit for his sound design on radio, television, and films (including *The Ipcress File*, 1965, and *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, 1976) at the time of release; when he did it was usually as part of the sound department rather than music or composition.

However, the Radiophonic Workshop became known for its themes and incidental music; under Briscoe's guidance it had a house style, even when particular composers - Delia Derbyshire, John Baker, or Brian Hodgson (who became head of the workshop on Briscoe's retirement in 1983) - maintained distinctive individual styles.

Briscoe wrote *The BBC Radiophonic Workshop, the First 25 Years: the inside story of providing sound and music for television and radio, 1958-1983* with Roy Curtis-Bramwell in 1983. He kept Francis Bacon's description in *The New Atlantis* (1624) near his office:

"Wee haue also Sound-Houses, wher wee practise and demonstrate all Sounds, and their Generation . . . Wee haue also diuerse Strange and Artificiall Eccho's, Reflecting the Voice many times, and as it were Tossing it: And some that giue back the Voice Lowder then it came, some Shriller, and some Deeper . . . "

Described by the *Radio Times* in 1979 as "a scholarly man in a suit and open-toed sandals, with a domed, electronic-orb of a forehead", Briscoe said, "We are essentially concerned with programmes about people, for people. Without equipment we could never have done anything, but all the equipment in the world won't produce a single note of music or a worthwhile thing to listen to without people."

Virginia Anderson

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