

## Delia Interview

This interview, originally conducted in December 1999, first appeared in Surface magazine in May 2000.

*Sonic Boom: What was your route into music? Did you study music at school?*

Delia Derbyshire: No, but I studied piano to performer level outside school. I went to Cambridge University to read mathematics, which was quite something for a working-class girl from Coven- try, because Cambridge was at the time, and probably still is, the best place for mathematics in the country, if not the world. Tell that to the Americans! I managed to persuade the authorities to allow me to change to music, much against their judgement. After my degree I went to the careers office. I said I was interested in sound, music and acoustics, to which they recommended a career in either deaf aids or depth sounding. So I applied for a job at Decca Records. The boss was at Lords watching cricket the day I had my appointment, but his deputy told me they didn't employ women in the recording studio.

*This is the guy who turned down The Beatles, no doubt.*

No doubt. I knew the BBC had a Research Department, and I knew that there was such a thing as the Radiophonic Workshop, that was credited with doing fantastic sounds for broadcast pro- grams. People weren't generally allowed to work at the Workshop for more than three months at a time. They thought it would send people crazy.

*I think it'd send me crazy.*

Well, it's a beautiful way to be crazy, I can tell you.

*Absolutely. Would it be fair to say that you've often applied a mathematical relationship to mu- sic, or that you see the two overlapping?*

Oh, absolutely. Yeah, yeah. There's been, since the ancient Greeks, a very close link between music and mathematics.

*Since Pythagoras, in theory.*

Well, since Pythagoras in mythology. This is a sort of discipline. People think that composers sit there with their pen over the manuscript paper, and God sends his inspiration down the top of the pen onto the paper. Well, in some cases it seems perhaps they did; perhaps Mozart. But in other

cases one has to impose a discipline, and the discipline of number is an excellent discipline. The Fibonacci sequence people have been using for centuries.

*Is this the one where architecture and music relate in their proportions?*

Nature's numbers; the number of leaves on a fern, the number of seeds on a sunflower head, and how they are arranged... this is the Fibonacci sequence, used in art and architecture and music. Although when you hear it in music, it is not recognised. Even George Gershwin used it in Porgy and Bess. Now who knows that?

*I watched this thing on telly about Roman architecture, and they were saying that the proportions of the building were based on Pythagorean ratios, directly related to harmonic musical relationships. There is a magic, perhaps, to certain number relationships. Or even certain numbers themselves somehow have magic... or a strength at least.*

They're built into nature, so of course our bodies respond to those numbers, even at a subconscious level. And now everyone's working in fractals, and, for the last two decades, Chaos theory. Probabilistic random stuff. It's not totally predetermined from the start, what you're going to get. Surprise is a nice element in music.

*That's exciting. The best thing about having these rules is when you break them and it makes something beautiful. The Doctor Who theme was one of the first pieces that you did, and it's turned out to be one of the most important themes, ever: People recognise it within a few split seconds. The sound of it is at least ten years ahead of its time. If Kraftwerk had released that in the mid '70s, it would have sounded cutting edge then, over ten years later. It's interesting to me that almost straight away after joining the Workshop you were able to do a realisation like that. It seems a big jump from studio manager to that sort of thing.*

It's in my blood, it's just my instinct. Absolutely. That's all I can say.

*When you were a studio manager, did you ever get a chance to have access to any of the equipment and do any recording yourself?*

Well, I was an excellent studio manager. I was so brilliant at playing LPs of classical music! Some people thought I had some kind of second sight, because there was a programme called Record Review, and they just played tiny extracts from records. And one of the music critics would say, "Look, it's on this side of the LP. I don't know where it is, but it's where the trombones come in." And I'd just hold it up to the light and see the trombones and put the needle down exactly where it was. And they thought it was magic. So a brilliant instinct I must have had. I was appreciated the short time I was a studio manager.

*One thing that strikes me about the Radiophonic Workshop is how well it's remembered by a lot of people. But when you actually go through and back over the stuff, it's only a minority that is really great, and the majority of it was crap, churned-out-for-TV tunes.*

Well, this was the level of what was demanded, and this was why I eventually left. I didn't want to compromise my integrity any further. I was fed up with having my stuff turned down because it was too sophisticated, and yet it was lapped up when I played it to anyone outside the BBC. The BBC was very wary, increasingly being run by committees and accountants, and they seemed to be dead scared of anything that was a bit unusual. And my passion is to make original, abstract electronic sounds and organise them in a very appealing, acceptable way, to any intelligent person. But it was set up as a service to the drama department. It was nothing to do with music, and that's it.

*I heard a story that you made the longest [tape] loop in the Radiophonic Workshop, that went out into the corridor.*

Yes! It went out through the double doors and then through the next pair; just opposite the ladies toilet and reception. The longest corridor in London, with the longest tape loop!

*Although it's like a really labour-intensive process, your music sounds incredibly organic.*

Oh yes, organic's good. And the feeling of it growing quite slowly, as one's putting it together. When you hear it for the first time when it's put together, it's such a delight. Yes, very labour-intensive. I used to work all night. I used to work nights a lot, and never really admit to how long I spent recording.

*It's a good time to work. You know the phone isn't going to ring and Joe isn't going to pop in from next door for a chat.*

And you don't have to listen to the engineers' love life problems. But also at night I could use all the Workshop's equipment. But this loop I made in the middle of the day, unfortunately.

*We believe in limited resources, don't we?*

Absolutely. I'm dead keen on limiting resources.

*It stretches the mind more.*

To be given total freedom... I mean, we come back to Maya Angelou- "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings." You need to have discipline in order to be truly creative. If you're just given total freedom to do anything you like... You've got to impose some discipline on either the form you're going to use or the sounds you're going to use.

*Aphex Twin was saying that he's sold a lot of his equipment, because he'd sit there and look at it, and couldn't make up his mind.*

If you cannot discipline yourself...You'd end up... "Oh I like this, I like that, I want it all at once."

*There's a lot of mood and organic feeling encapsulated in your sounds, which some people wouldn't immediately associate with electronic music.*

The boss man [at the BBC] had said that "it's impossible for electronic music to be beautiful... until Delia came along."

*Talking about limited resources, I think one thing that appeals to us both about Peter Zinovieff's EMS VCS3 machine is that it's really quite a limited selection of resources, but it's got infinite possibilities of interconnection and patching.*

Peter Zinovieff was doing the most interesting things. He didn't claim to be a musician, he didn't claim to be a composer. But imagine one of these beautiful London townhouses... the drawing room on the first floor was totally crammed with telephone relay equipment, where he was working on his random sequencers.

*Probabilistic stuff.*

And I thought, golly, this is the way things should go. And, I think, it was my belief in Peter that encouraged Victoria [Zinovieff] to really believe in him. Because he was Russian aristocracy, and the circle in which he mingled regarded him as a dilettante. That was a beautifully interesting time, everything was mechanical. This was before voltage control. So we worked together for a couple of years.

*Yes, as Unit Delta Plus?*

Yes.

*You set up the organisation to bring electronic music more to the fore in advertising and TV and film music?*

We wanted to bring it to the public, yes.

*How about these 'happenings' you were involved with? I know there was an event in 1966 at the Chalk Farm Roundhouse called Rave or Rave On, and Paul McCartney was top of the bill...*

Oh yes, there were two of the Beatles there, Paul and George. It was basically a concert of pre-recorded electronic music.

*Carnival of Light, it's called. It's apparently a legendary piece [Both laugh]. It's meant to sound dreadful. But no one's ever heard it, and for a Beatles thing, that's the big deal.*

Well, they'd played around with, er... sounds.

*You were also involved in an event at the Watermill Theater near Newbury.*

Peter Zinovieff organized an evening of electronic music and light effects. The music was in- doors, in a theatre setting, with a screen on which were projected light shows done by lecturers from Hornsey College of Art.

*Didn't they have light boxes in the lake?*

Yes, that was outside, yes, in the mill pond.

*That was September, '66?*

Yes, it was billed as the first concert of British electronic music. I mean, that was a bit presumptuous...

*How about the piece you did, I believe that was around '66, with Anthony Newley?*

Ah... That was a bizarre, er... ditty!

*Quite a psychedelic...*

It isn't psychedelic!

*It's a sort of '60s humor psychedelic...*

The late Anthony Newley told his label that he wanted to do something electronic. So they got on to me. So I produced this bloopy track and he loved it so much he double-tracked his voice and he used my little tune.

*It's one of the most surreal records of the period. It has a pervy lyric about how he can't control himself, and the sight of all the girls and their flashing pink thighs.*

The winking knees in the rain, and their mini-skirts. I'd done it as a lovely little innocent love song, because he said to me that the only songs are, "I love you, I love you" or songs saying "you've gone, you've gone."

*This is "I can't control myself." It's called Moogies Bloogis or something.*

Yes, Moogies Bloogis! I'd written this beautiful little innocent tune, all sensitive love and innocence, and he made it into a dirty old raincoat song. But he was really chuffed! Joan and Jackie Collins dropped him off in a limousine at my lovely little flat above a flower shop, and he said "If you can write songs like this, I'll get you out of this place"! It was only a single-track

demo tape. So he rang up his record company saying "We want to move to a multi-track studio". Unfortunately the boss of the record company was on holiday, and by the time he returned Anthony Newley had gone to America with Joan Collins, so it was never released.

*There's a visionary piece you did, Ziwzeh Ziwzeh Oooh Oooh Oooh ...*

Oh, I adore that!

*What was it used for?*

This was for a television science fiction film. I did the music for the whole programme. It was probably in the mid '60s and this bit of the drama was when they had this big boss robot who starts a new religion, and he's like the high priest, and all the other robots sing this hymn to him.

*What did the robots look like?*

Oh, I don't know. I never watched the stuff. I had a script, that's all. The actors, I got them to chant. The words they were singing were, "Praise to the master, his wisdom and his..." something... "his wisdom and his glory." I turned it backwards first, then chose the best bits that sounded good backwards and would fit into a rhythm, and then speed-changed the voices. Then I used just this one bar repeated which had [previously] been rejected from a science and health program for being too lascivious for the schoolchildren. It was like a science program... it was supposed to be about sex, but under another name. And then the producer had the nerve to turn down my music, saying it was too lascivious. It was just twangy things with electronic pick-ups, and I just used a single note and then did little glissandos on it and pitched it and treated it. But the 'Ooh-oooh-oooh' isn't me... that's wobbulator, pure wobbulator. That's a piece of test equipment that does wave sweeps.

*Peter Zinovieff and you had been friends for a few years, and he'd been building his studio up and starting to get into computers, which was some of your early exposure to computers. Didn't you introduce [avant garde composer] Stockhausen to Peter Zinovieff at one time?*

Oh! I would collect everybody! I took Pink Floyd there in a taxi.

*Didn't Brian Jones come and visit you one day in the Workshop as well?*

Oh yes, the late Brian Jones.

*The late Brian Jones. I like how you say that.*

Well, everybody's dying off around me. I'm still here, in spite...

*You're definitely not the late Delia Derbyshire.*

I cried into my washing-up when I heard he'd died.

*You cried into your washing-up!?*

In the days when I used to do washing-up. I've perfected my minimalist living technique so it is no longer necessary. I can cry into my...

*Garlic.*

Into my chopped garlic, yes.

*So it seems you were quite pivotal in introducing people to [each other] around that period. Pink Floyd were one of the first bands to use electronic sounds in mainstream music. Even Mick Jagger bought a Moog. It isn't very well documented, that whole period of time. It's an interesting period... the sort of cross-fertilisation. You were around there and introducing people.*

That's right, yes. I was always very generous in telling people everything I knew. Some people made themselves into little islands. They were very secretive about their work and their techniques... but I was always very generous.

*You worked with Yoko Ono for a while. What was that all about?*

Yes, I did a film soundtrack for Yoko Ono. While she slept on my floor.

*That must have been 66-ish.*

No, later than that. It would be '67 or '68. It was about the same time that she met John Lennon. Because when we were having our or... oh... orgy on the carpet. We had a... golly, my goodness! So yes, she did her Bottoms film. And we did the soundtrack for the shorter film, which was the wrapping of the lions in Trafalgar Square, which was a happening. I also did the music for Peter Hall's first feature film, Work is a Four Letter Word. I did the electronic part of the music... the bloopy bits when they'd taken the magic mushrooms.

*You did the psychedelic scenario bits! What did you do after the Radiophonic Workshop?*

[laughs] I made my name in several spheres...

*You did all sorts of jobs, none of which were music related...*

Yes, I was "the best pipeline radio operator ever": An unsolicited testimonial when British Gas was crossing the country in the mid 1970s. Then I worked and lived with one of the founding members of the first group of Chinese abstract artists, the late Li Yuan Chia.

*So how long ago was it that I met you?*

We first met September 1998.

*When I first started talking to you about music, it didn't seem to be something from your past. You seemed to have very strong thoughts about sound and music, and about wanting to make music again.*

I'm passionate!

*The music I've heard you working on now has a lot of the qualities from your material of 35 years ago.*

Yeah.

*Do you feel that you're on the same musical quest, almost?*

I just have a passion to make abstract sounds. A deep-rooted physical passion.

*We are also planning an electronic music festival. What's our acronym, Delia? MEMA, is it?*

No, MESMA. Multi-sensory Electronic Sound, Music and Arts. That is because there is a line which people might like to draw for themselves... the difference between electronic sound and electronic music. And we want to associate it with light, and vibrations of every sort, including tactile vibrations. A tie-in between sound and light, movement, sculpture...

*A whole day or two of experiences, for people to check out electronic sound from the past, and the present, and hopefully the future. We're considering various workshops including one where Delia would show some of the techniques involved with tape splicing...*

And a VCS3 with an elongated joystick...

*And very simple things like a theremin. For people to be able to try a theremin... it'll be a big deal to a lot of kids. What sums it up best, apart from electronic, is interactive. We're very keen for people to be able try stuff, and experience the joy of it...*

And lie on the vibrating bed!

*To experience sounds in as many ways as possible and experience the joy of it through various unusual sound controllers and performances by various pioneering sound sculptors...*

...and by smelling the fibre-optic flowers.