

Delia Derbyshire

by Brian Hodgson

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In 1963, soon after joining the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, Delia Derbyshire, who has died of renal failure aged 64, was asked to realise one of the first electronic signature tunes ever used on television. It was Ron Grainer's score for a new science fiction series, Dr Who.

Grainer had worked his tune to fit in with the graphics. He used expressions for the noises he wanted - such as wind, bubbles, and clouds. It was a world without synthesisers, samplers and multi-track tape recorders; Delia, assisted by her engineer Dick Mills, had to create each sound from scratch.

She used concrete sources and sine- and square-wave oscillators, tuning the results, filtering and treating, cutting so that the joins were seamless, combining sound on individual tape recorders, re-recording the results, and repeating the process, over and over again.

When Grainer heard the result, his response was "Did I really write that?" Most of it, Delia replied. She deserved at least half the royalties, insisted the composer. She did not get them. At that time the BBC preferred to keep members of the workshop anonymous and uncredited.

Shortly after Delia had arrived at the workshop in 1962, I was also invited to join. I was stunned by her beauty, awed by her talent, and we began a friendship and a working partnership, within the BBC and outside, which was to delight and infuriate us for 40 years.

Delia was born in Coventry and educated at Coventry Grammar School and Girton College, Cambridge, where she took a degree in music and mathematics. After briefly working for the United Nations in Geneva, she joined the BBC in 1960 as a studio manager.

In those days BBC career progression was a slow affair, but before long she was sitting in, off-duty, at the new Radiophonic Workshop in Maida Vale. The senior studio manager, Desmond Briscoe, realising that the tall, quiet, auburn-haired young lady was not only enthusiastic but enormously creative and talented, invited her to join the department on attachment; she was to remain until 1973.

Delia used, he realised, an analytical approach to synthesise complex sounds from electronic sources. "The mathematics of sound," he said, "came naturally to her."

Delia thought that perhaps she just had a very strange mind. She analysed everything: the pace, the cutting, the editing of a film, every inflection, every comma, the subtleties in the human voice. "I suppose in a way," she observed, "I was experimenting in psycho-acoustics."

Although Dr Who made Delia and the Radiophonic Workshop nationally famous, it was her other drama and features work that showed her true talent. Her collaborations with the poet and dramatist Barry Bermange for the Third Programme showed her at her elegant best.

He put together *The Dreams* (1964), a collage of people describing their dreams. It was set by Delia into a background of pure electronic sound. In a second 1964 Bermange piece about people's experience of God and the devil, *Amor Dei*, he asked her to create a gothic altarpiece of sound. She composed this with snippets of archive and voices, again with only the simplest of equipment and facilities, often working through the night, for weeks on end.

Among her outstanding television work, one of her favourites was composed for a documentary for *The World About Us* on the Tuareg people of the Sahara desert. It still haunts me. She used her own voice for the sound of the hooves, cut up into an obbligato rhythm, and she added a thin, high electronic sound using virtually all the filters and oscillators in the workshop.

"My most beautiful sound at the time was a tatty green BBC lampshade," she recalled. "It was the wrong colour, but it had a beautiful ringing sound to it. I hit the lampshade, recorded that, faded it up into the ringing part without the percussive start.

"I analysed the sound into all of its partials and frequencies, and took the 12 strongest, and reconstructed the sound on the workshop's famous 12 oscillators to give a whooshing sound. So the camels rode off into the sunset with my voice in their hooves and a green lampshade on their backs."

In those days, the Radiophonic Workshop received a stream of visiting musicians, composers and writers - from Berio to Brian Jones - and she entranced them with her intellect and the joy of her company. But Delia was never starstruck; she cheerfully devoted as much time to encouraging young students as to talking with celebrities.

In the mid-1960s she and I worked with Peter Zinovieff, the composer and visionary pioneer of synthesisers, in a company called Unit Delta Plus. Delia became involved in an early electronic music concert at the New Mill Theatre in Newbury that also featured a pioneering light projection show by Hornsey College of Art and magnetic sculptures by Paul Takis.

She worked on Guy Woolfenden's electronic score for Peter Hall's 1967 Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Macbeth* with Paul Scofield, and on

Hall's film *Work is a Four Letter Word* (1967). It was at Zinovieff's Putney studio that she first met Paul McCartney.

Later, Delia, her protege David Vorhaus and I set up Kaleidophon, a Camden Town-based independent studio. There she worked on the album *Electric Storm* (1968), now considered a classic, which was credited to White Noise and released on Island Records.

At Kaleidophon we put together electronic music for the London theatre of the late 1960s. There was *Medea* and Alan Dobie's *Macbeth* for the Greenwich Theatre; *On the Level*, a musical by Ron Grainer; and Tony Richardson's *Hamlet* at the Roundhouse.

She also took part in a Roundhouse concert of electronic music including early electronic works by McCartney. She even recorded a score for an ICI-sponsored student fashion show, which was the first in the world to use electronic music.

Her 11 years and nearly 200 programmes at the workshop represented probably the most productive times of her life. They also took their toll. To work with Delia during the late 1960s and early 70s was to witness the joy and energy-sapping pain of creation. "I think I must have reverse adrenalin," she said. "As the deadline gets closer most people speed up - I just get slower."

By 1973 Delia had become progressively more unhappy with her life at the workshop and she left to join me at *Electrophon*, an electronic music studio I had set up in Covent Garden. There, unfortunately, she found little relief from her unhappiness and decided to leave London. She became involved, bizarrely, in the laying of the national gas main as a radio operator, she worked in a Cumbrian art gallery, and she worked in a bookshop.

In 1980 she met Clive Blackburn, who was to be her partner for the rest of her life. Probably for the first time, she found happiness and settled into what, for her, was a normal existence.

For others it still appeared to be organised chaos - yet she did have a tidy and organised mind. She was still fascinated by the act of creation; still encouraging, scolding and praising her many friends.

In the last few years she was beginning once more to take an interest in electronic music, encouraged by a younger generation to whom she had become a cult figure. The technology she had left behind was finally catching up with her vision.

One night many years ago, as we left Zinovieff's studio, she paused on Putney bridge. "What we are doing now is not important for itself," she said, "but one day someone might be interested enough to carry things forwards and create something wonderful on these foundations." Her partner survives her.

Delia Derbyshire, composer and arranger, born May 5 1937; died July 3 2001