

Variations on the Dr Who Theme



Abigail Davies and Luisa Prosser portray the two sides of Delia Derbyshire. Picture: Stephen Mansfield

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WHEN THE DR WHO THEME MUSIC beamed out into the living rooms of Britain for the first time, in 1963, it began a new era in sound. The unearthly whines, throbs and howls seemed to come from the future. In a way, they did. The great British public was getting its first taste of electronic music.

While the theme went on to become one of the most recognised in TV history, Delia Derbyshire, who created the eerie futuristic soundtrack, is virtually unknown. Yet she was one of the pioneers of electronic music in Britain. Among Derbyshire's many credits is the music for a film by Yoko Ono. She also worked with Brian Jones, shared a bill with Jimi Hendrix, even discussed collaborating with Paul McCartney.

Her many achievements have not been entirely forgotten among those working in her field today, and Orbital, Portishead and the Chemical Brothers are among many bands who have been inspired by the pioneering musician.

Now the fascinating, often turbulent, life and tragic death of Derbyshire will be brought to a wider audience for the first time in *Standing Wave: Delia Derbyshire in the 1960s*, a theatre production being developed at the Tron in

Glasgow by Reeling & Writhing Theatre Company, with a script by Nicola McCartney. Each performance will be followed by a programme of new electronic music composed in Derbyshire's memory by Scottish contemporary composers.

One of them is Drew Mulholland, a Glasgow-based composer and musician who got to know Derbyshire in the last five years of her life. "She was a hero, a pioneer," he says. "She was a completely unique, one-off composer. Her stuff sounds ahead of its time even now, never mind in 1965. When you realise she was just beavering away at the BBC in Maida Vale with the most basic equipment, it is amazing."

Derbyshire was born into a working-class Catholic family in Coventry in 1937. She would later say that growing up to the sounds of air-raid sirens and the clatter of clogs on cobbles first awakened her lifelong fascination with sound. She studied piano to performance level and graduated in mathematics and music from Girton College, Cambridge.

Always single-minded, when Derbyshire graduated she made straight for Decca Records where she was told, curtly, that women were not employed in the recording studio. She spent a short time working for the United Nations in Geneva, where she heard the latest European experimental music and returned to London in 1960 as a trainee studio manager at the BBC.

She excelled, demonstrating an instinctive grasp of sound which enabled her to find extracts of orchestral music simply by studying the grooves in an LP. As soon as she could, she sought an attachment at the BBC's Radiophonic Workshop, created in 1958 to supply music and sound made with the day's "new technology". Although the secondment was for a maximum of three months, Derbyshire stayed for ten years.

She had not been there long when she was handed an assignment for a new family show about a time-travelling police box. "Did I really write this?" asked a delighted Ron Grainer, a TV composer, on hearing the finished version. "Most of it," was Derbyshire's caustic reply.

In 1963, when tape recorders were still new and synthesisers were very much in their infancy, electronic music was manual and time consuming. Pippa Murphy, who has written the score for *Standing Wave*, says: "It was a question of hitting a lampshade, getting a 'ding' sound, recording it and manipulating it, changing the pitch until you had a range of pitches. Then those sounds would be combined with more textured sounds, keys jingling, a cheese grater, a colander. You made a composition by cutting and sticking together bits of tape. This is where the maths comes in, the ability to calculate how many beats in a length of tape." It's said that Derbyshire always kept a book of logarithm tables in her back pocket. "What was radical about it was that she was getting the music heard by lots of people for the first time."

Tim Nunn, artistic director of Reeling & Writhing, says: "It's very difficult to imagine the impact this music had. In the era we live in now, no matter how strange a sound is, we know somewhere there was a computer or a synthesiser that manipulated the sound. At that time, these sounds were coming out of the TV or the radio, and people hearing it had no idea how that music was made. It was terrifying. The really scary thing about Dr Who wasn't the man in the silly scarf, it was the music."

Derbyshire went on to compose widely for the BBC, although company regulations prevented her from being credited by name for her compositions. Even today there is no complete catalogue of her work. Her successes included her work with poet Barry Bermange, early sci-fi drama *Ziw-zih Ziw-zih Oo Oo* and even a theme tune entirely made

of animal sounds. "It was impossible for electronic music to be beautiful," one BBC boss said, "until Delia came along."

But a number of her compositions were rejected by the BBC for being "too sophisticated", causing her to seek out other avenues for her work. These abounded in the 1960s when London was a centre for pop music, performance art and all-round experimentation. It was then that she made the music for Yoko Ono's film, worked with Jones and Hendrix, and met McCartney to discuss her input on *Yesterday*. "I remember asking her about this," says Mulholland. "She said: 'Oh yes, he came round, with the other one, the one with the glasses.' That would be John Lennon!"

But Derbyshire's life was often difficult. Katherine Morley, director of *Standing Wave*, says: "During this period, she had several important relationships with men that ended badly. She wasn't treated as she should have been. Perhaps she tended to be attracted to the wrong type, but you also need to consider that she was probably as committed to her work as to anything."

However, things were changing at the BBC and synthesisers were being rushed into the Radiophonics Workshop. "She became quite disillusioned with what was going on," says Morley. "The very early synthesisers were being heralded as the great new thing, but they were quite dictatorial in the way they encouraged people to make music. She found that incredibly difficult. Everything she had built up was suddenly being superseded."

In 1973 she left the BBC for good and withdrew from making music. She struggled with a drink problem and a series of jobs - as a radio operator, in an art gallery, in a bookshop. She was even briefly married to an out-of-work miner. However, a measure of stability arrived when she met Clive Blackburn, who became her life partner.

When Mulholland first made contact with her in 1996, she was bitter towards the BBC and the music industry, which had seemed to ignore her

achievements. "She was an eccentric. She phoned me five times in 20 minutes one night. She had such a brilliant mind. She was great but there was a kind of melancholy about her. You always felt a kind of duty to cheer her up. One thing she always said was 'No-one will remember me'."

But even as Derbyshire said this, she was being sought out by a new generation of electronic musicians who recognised the achievements of those early years, the focused atmospheric work made without any of the luxuries of digital equipment. Among those who credit her as an influence today are Orbital, Portishead, Aphex Twin, Add N to X and the Chemical Brothers. The Electronic Bible, a new compilation just out on the White Label, is dedicated to her memory.

Pete "Sonic Boom" Kember became a friend and he and Mulholland gently coaxed Derbyshire to return to making music. She and Kember were making an album when she died. Just before her death, Derbyshire wrote: "Working with people like Sonic Boom on pure electronic music has reinvigorated me. He is from a later generation but has always had an affinity with the music of the '60s... Now, without the constraints of doing 'applied music', my mind can fly free and pick up where I left off."

But her comeback was cut short. Though recovering from breast cancer, Derbyshire succumbed to illness and died, aged 64, in 2001.

Morley says: "We wanted to commission six composers as well as Pippa to look at what Delia might have done had she lived. Where could she have extended to if she had used today's technology in association with her own? Those six pieces are very special, they go off in six different directions, explore the places she might have gone."

To Mulholland, she is a much-loved, much-missed friend. "She was a lover of life. She was very funny, very sarky. She was the only person I've ever known in my life who could say 'Oh golly' and it didn't sound forced. Even after she died I could never put a line through her name in my address book.

"I wish she had lived and finished her record. She really could have got huge amounts of recognition. All that's left now is the music. That's how people are going to judge her. But what a way to be judged."

Standing Wave - Delia Derbyshire in the 1960s is at the Tron Theatre, 7-23 October. For more information visit the website www.deliaderbyshire.co.uk