

Delia Derbyshire, producer of Doctor Who theme music, has legacy restored

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The Times, 2008

A long-lost collection of tapes representing the legacy of the musical genius who arranged the Doctor Who theme has been rescued from irreversible decay by a team of academic musicologists.

Delia Derbyshire, who battled with depression and died, aged only 64, a hopeless alcoholic in 2001, was the godmother of modern electronic dance music.

She carried out pioneering work for the BBC Radiophonic Workshop in the early 1960s, producing the familiar Doctor Who signature tune and collaborating with Brian Jones and Jimi Hendrix among others.

Her experimental work fell out of fashion following the advent of the synthesizer but, in recent years, she has enjoyed a revival of interest especially among bands like The Chemical Brothers and Portishead to whom she is a legendary figure.

After her death the collection, which comprises 267 tapes, correspondence and scores, was entrusted Mark Ayres, the Radiophonic Workshop.

The material had languished unheard for 30 years until it was passed to Manchester University's School of Art, Histories and Culture to catalogue and preserve. The material, in poor condition, had to be played on a 1960s Studer A80 tape machine lent by the BBC's Manchester studios before it could be digitised.

Among the tapes is one of the earliest electronic dance music compositions composed by Ms Derbyshire for radio more than two decades before it became a popular cultural phenomenon.

A recording features the actor Nicol Williamson's famous portrayal of Hamlet at the London Roundhouse complete with the composer's special sound effects.

Others jewels include a recording of the way she electronically manipulated the sound of her own voice to create her celebrated composition 'Blue Veils and Golden Sands'.

Dr David Butler, in charge of the cataloguing, said: "Delia Derbyshire never really received the recognition she deserved as one of our most influential composers of the past 30 or so years.

“Though brilliant, the Doctor Who theme is just one small example of her genius which was held in high esteem by figures across music, television, theatre and film, including Paul McCartney and John Peel, the disc jockey”.

She studied piano and mathematics at Girton College, Cambridge, and, in 1962, joined the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, a department created in 1958 to supply the corporation with the latest technological sounds. The secondment set for three months lasted ten years.

She had not been there long when she was given the task of translating a melody for a new Saturday early evening series about a mysterious time traveller who lived in a police box. The resulting music was a revelation in 1963, and remains one of the most easily recognised themes of all time.

The composer, who always kept a book of logarithms in her back pocket, used a combination of musique concrete techniques including the tape manipulation and electronic gadgetry to create her sounds. Her favourite instrument was a green lampshade which she would strike and then manipulate the resulting sound to achieve the desired effect.

Pippa Murphy, who wrote the score for a play about Delia Derbyshire's life, once said: "It was a question of hitting a lampshade, getting a 'ding' sound, recording it, 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".

Ms Derbyshire was also a woman of her times, clad in Biba or Mary Quant, her hair in a Vidal Sassoon bob, a fixture at the parties of Swinging London where she was known for her chaotic but exuberant love life. She worked with Brian Jones, the late member of the Rolling Stones, Yoko Ono and Jimi Hendrix and met Paul McCartney to discuss an opportunity to work on Yesterday.

She left the BBC a disillusioned woman. She and struggled with drink and a series of unsuitable jobs, including radio operator. At one time she married an out-of-work miner but eventually settled in the Midlands where she lived in relative obscurity and would rail, between drinks, against her lack of critical recognition.

The transferral of the tapes, all made between 1962 and 1973, into digital form was overseen by Louis Niebur, a visiting professor of musicology from Nevada University.

Dr Butler said: “Many of the tapes have no labels so it is a case of using detective work to find out what they are. We cannot even be certain Delia composed all the music.

“But it has proved to be an Aladdin’s cave and we have just started to scratch the surface. The collection includes her freelance work and really does give us a better sense of her range as a composer.

“It is fitting that we are doing this almost exactly 50 years after the BBC Radiophonic Workshop was launched in 1958”.

Dr Ricardo Climent, from the university’s Novars Research Centre, said: “The tragedy is after leaving the BBC in 1973, she withdrew from composition until 1996. That can be attributed to her struggle for acceptance but also the rise of the synthesizer in electronic music.

“She was not comfortable with that as she felt the off-the-peg sounds removed the creativity of her compositional techniques but at long last her pioneering sounds can be heard again”.