

Obituary: Daphne Oram

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DAPHNE ORAM, the first director of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, was, with Delia Derbyshire (also at the BBC) and Pauline Oliveros (at the San Francisco Tape Music Center), one of the great women pioneers of analogue electronic music. She was first employed as a music balancer for the BBC in 1943, aged 17, sometimes "shadowing" live concerts with recorded versions of the same work so that if the concert were interrupted by enemy action, the broadcast could go on.

As is common in electronic studio work, Oram's activity at the BBC was nocturnal. She borrowed equipment from other BBC facilities, experimented with them, and restored them to their places by morning. Her *Still Point* for orchestra (1950) has been cited by the historian Hugh Davies as the first piece to manipulate electronic sounds in real-time (as opposed to presenting pre-recorded sounds as an adjunct to live performance). Unfortunately, this piece, like many of her later innovations, was never performed and thus is almost unknown.

Oram's efforts provided background music for the BBC and, after she strenuously pressed the BBC to see the value of electronic music and electronically manipulated real sounds (*musique concrete*), she was appointed to be the first director of the BBC's Radiophonic Workshop in 1957. Government-sponsored radio in Europe, such as services in Cologne and Paris, had, from the early 1950s, sponsored electronic studios devoted to music research in *musique concrete* and other art music. The BBC instead gave the workshop a practical role, as a division of the drama rather than music department. Here Oram provided music and effects for radio plays, including Beckett's *All That Fall*, which calls for completely unnaturalistic sound effects.

Her early leadership set the style of the workshop and its composers, which would include John Baker, David Cain and Delia Derbyshire, but her tenure was brief. Frustrated with the lack of status accorded the Workshop as a musical entity due to the conservatism of the music department, Oram left the BBC in 1959, thus just missing the modernisation instituted by William Glock in the 1960s.

Oram set up her own, freelance studio in a former oasthouse, named Tower Folly, in Wrotham, Kent. There she wrote and created music for television and film (including eerie electronic effects for *The Innocents*, 1961, a film based on *The Turn of the Screw*, on which she collaborated with Georges

Auric), for schools (the LP Electronic Sound Patterns), and for advertising (for Nestea).

She developed her own system of electronic sound production by graphical interface, called "Oramics", in which sounds are created by making marks on 35mm film which is then read by photo-electric cells, thus bypassing the need for cutting and pasting using audio tape. This graphic representation of score to sound was contemporaneous with Cornelius Cardew's revolutionary graphic score *Treatise* (1964- 67) and other innovations in notation, and was the most successful graphic-based composition machine available until it was superseded by touch-sensitive digital machines such as Iannis Xenakis's UPIC.

Oram was able to give up most of her commercial work through a grant from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation for research into Oramics. She wrote *An Individual Note of Music, Sound and Electronics*, which forms a dizzying combination of electronics, aesthetics, acoustics and metaphysics, an exercise in what she called "a-MUSE-ment". Central to this book was her concept of ELEC and CELE, the tangible "spark" of electrical tension and the intangible "essence" behind it. ELEC/ CELE is most easily exemplified by the immediacy and physicality of notation as opposed to the intangibility of interpretation. Oram expanded the duality of ELEC and CELE to life, death, and rebirth, to the yin and yang of the Chinese Pakau symbol. This concept treats electronic interaction like Oramics as an organic, kinder version of Man-Machine interface: she said, in a BBC interview in 1972, "[T]his I talk about a lot in my book, the way machines can be humanised, and not only music machines but machines in other fields."

To explore her work and ideas through CELE, Oram coined the term *montaigne*, "to consider facts from all directions" (after Michel de Montaigne, who wrote, "When I play with my cat, who knows whether I do not make her more sport than she makes me?") Oram similarly used the mundane as imagery in her arguments, introducing acoustics through cookery:

. . . with the whole world of sound to explore, who wants to hear just sine and square waves? It would be rather like eating watery porridge, together with ginger snaps, for every meal!

She supplied a list of recordings and works which she recommended for listening, without linking them to her arguments, as she wanted the reader to make up his or her own mind. This list forms an intriguing cross-section of experimental and avant-garde music, some electronic, some using traditional orchestral instruments, some diametrically opposed in aesthetics to others - a *montaigne* of modern music at the time.

Oramics were superseded by digital instruments and composition machines in the late 1970s and 1980s, and Oram followed, using an Apple II and an

Acorn Archimedes computer. Friends and acquaintances speak of her generous nature, which extended to her project in the late 1980s, Out and Round About with Music (bringing music to the aged), and to a Christmas hamper scheme for the Performing Rights Society.

Oram's death has brought renewed interest in her work, which is currently almost entirely out of release. This is a shame, as her work is genuinely unique and startlingly inventive. That she seemed to have more problems in her work with the BBC because of her desire to make music, as well as sound effects, than because of her gender, points to her strength of character and the regard in which her work was held at the time. It is time to reissue Oram's music and to bring a fresh appraisal of her written ideas as well as her sounds.

Daphne Oram, composer: born Devizes, Wiltshire 31 December 1925; died Maidstone, Kent 5 January 2003.

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