

Daphne Oram

From the Daphne Oram Collection



Because of WWII, the role of women in society changed dramatically in the years following. Women had proved themselves more than capable technicians, producers and broadcasters during men's absence with the war effort.

Daphne recalled, "In 1942 it was arranged for me to go to Royal College of Music – but because of War time regulations, I would have to agree to be a music teacher after leaving RCM – I didn't want to be a 'school ma'am'! My Father entered me for Electro-Therapist at King's College Hospital (Denmark Hill). I passed the exams, the uniform was ordered but I went against my Father because there was practically no music. Eventually I won my Father round and I went to the BBC instead."

Daphne Oram was employed at the BBC as a Junior Studio engineer and music balancer.

She notes "As a Junior Programme Engineer, one of my jobs was to play the 78rpm gramophone records. With the help of a full score I had to change over from record to record, perfectly in time, so that a symphony, say on ten discs, was continuous. My other duties at the time, 1943-1944, was to assist my more senior colleagues with music balancing in the studios. I joined the BBC in October 1943. In November and December, while I was still 17, I assisted recitals by Eileen Joyce, Leon Gooseus, Isobel Baillie; and early in 1944, the London Philharmonic Orchestra..." In June 1944 Daphne also was working on the Proms in the Royal Albert Hall, on standby with gramophone records synced up to the live music that could take over in case of a bombing raid.

Throughout 1944, Daphne also attended several engineering training courses.

Other Junior Programme Engineers at the time were Anthony Craxton (later a TV producer) and Kenyon Emrys Roberts (TV & Film composer) and they were based in Marylebone High Street (formerly the Radio Times). She notes “I did not meet people such as Desmond [Briscoe] until many years later. For some years I was the only female Music Balancer, but not always the only girl in music.”

In November 1945 Daphne began the first of over 100 “Music in Miniature” chamber music programmes, alongside Basil Douglas. She claims that this gave her experience in creating acoustic contrasts with complex microphone techniques. “With no intermediate announcements to stop the flow, the programme enabled me to devise 25 minutes of continuous controlled sound, shaped as if it was a complete composition from beginning to end”.

During the late '40's, Daphne began to develop her ideas for an Electronic Music studio. In 1950 she completed 'Still Point', a piece for double orchestra and electronics. The piece was submitted to the BBC for the Italia Prize but was rejected. She noted “I received comment over the phone that Still Point could only be judged as a 'straight score' – so apparently adjudicators didn't understand the acoustic variations or the manipulated pre-recording techniques.”

In the early 50's Daphne wrote and disseminated (from her handbag) her paper 'The Broadcasting of Music'. She shared the paper with Rex Haworth and Harry Rogers, even getting it to Lindsey Wellington.

The development of electronic music in mainland Europe, which preceded developments in Britain, came out of the demands from national radio networks for an added dimension to the new post-war 'surreal', play-writing styles from the likes of Samuel Beckett, Jean Cocteau, Frederick Bradnum and Giles Cooper. Concurrently magnetic tape gradually came into common usage., giving rise to new approaches to making music. It was now possible to piece music together as a puzzle of 'pieces of sound' or 'sections of magnetic tape.' Sound sources could be anything at all, as music reached beyond the confines of orchestral, traditional instruments, and conventional notions of form and structure.

She developed an interest early in her career for electronic music, and was particularly interested in Schaeffer's *Musique Concrète*, his work on disk and with magnetic tape at the Radiodiffusion Télévision Française in Paris. Whilst Britain was noticeably dragging its feet with regard to acceptance of this new electronic music, Oram is known to have visited the Paris studios of the R.T.F. when working at the BBC and subsequently embarked on a relentless campaign for equipment to be made available to develop new techniques for sound design and electronic music.

She recalled,

I went along to the research department in Nightingale Square to ask one of the high up engineers there whether he would allow me some equipment and guide me technically towards this music that I was imagining. He reduced me to a very small height and said, “Miss Oram, the BBC employs a hundred musicians to make all the sounds they require, thank you.”(BBC Radio 4 1979: We have also sound houses).

In 1957, Oram composed music for a television play called ‘Amphytryon 38.’ Using a bank of single sine-wave oscillators, a Motosacoche tape recorder and home-made filters, she composed the piece, the first of its kind, from entirely electronic sound sources. Daphne Oram explained, “In 1957 I was asked to compose incidental music for ‘Amphitryon 38’ – a T.V. “World Theatre” play. I did this by collecting together equipment from many studios (once they had come off the air at night), assembling it in a sixth floor Broadcasting House studio, and working with it between midnight and 4 a.m. ...I could not, of course, use the very special equipment I needed... so, I evolved techniques, akin to Cologne and Paris, which could be achieved with the normal broadcasting equipment I had available”. (Oram 1962: 9).

The piece received favourable reviews and during that year she and Briscoe were inundated with demands for electronic compositions for new radio plays. The first of these, Frederick Bradnum’s play, Private Dreams, Public Nightmares, was subtitled A Radiophonic Poem. Daphne Oram and Desmond Briscoe were commissioned to create the sound montage. This was the first radio play to include explicit instructions for sound montage within the script.

Such were the reservations held by the BBC towards this ‘new music’ that, just before the broadcast went out, a title message was sent out to all its listeners, by way of an excuse and warning, “This programme is an experiment – an exploration. It’s not a masterpiece, not even a minor one. We think it’s worth broadcasting as a perfectly serious first attempt to find out whether we can convey a new kind of emotional and intellectual experience by means of what we call radiophonic effects.”

At the BBC, Radiophonic art was pioneered by Daphne Oram, in the early 1950s, but it wasn’t until 1958 after a considerable increase in demand for the services of Briscoe and Oram that a budget and accommodation was found to formally open The BBC Radiophonic Workshop. The official press release read as follows:

“The BBC has set up a Radiophonic Workshop at Maida Vale in London, the first installation of its kind in this country ...The BBC is now equipped to provide an aid to productions which neither music nor conventional sound effects can give.”

Radiophonic workshop colleagues (Delia Derbyshire, Maddalena Fagandini and Glynis Jones) have confirmed that Daphne Oram was the first Studio

Manager for the Radiophonic Workshop. Yet she is rarely credited with that role and most printed word defers to Desmond Briscoe and Douglas Cleverden as the leading founders of the Workshop. Her name is not included in Asa Briggs' 'The History of Broadcasting in the UK,' where there is an entry for 'The Radiophonic Workshop'. She is not included (nor is any other female) in Nick Brown's article on the history of the Radiophonic Workshop (1979). She was included in 'The International Who's Who in Music' until the 12th edition (1991) and is thereafter omitted. What is confirmed is that Oram played an important leading role in the foundation of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, and as such was a pioneer in the development of broadcast electronic music.

Daphne herself noted in 1983 "In March 1958 I disbanded the radiophonic unit and moved to Maida Vale to take charge of the workshop. The other permanent member of staff was Mr Richard Bird, recording engineer. My policy there was to arrange that the Studio Manager, who was to work on the final studio production, came along to the workshop for a few days to see and assist the crating of the specialised sound so that, subsequently, it would be sympathetically handled for transmission. Hence many drama studio managers, including Mr Briscoe, were employed at the workshop for short periods at a time. This is why Mr Briscoe's memory covers such separated patches only – he was there as holiday relief (July 1958) but he was not posted permanently to the Workshop until some 4 years later".