

Tristram Cary

Sound pioneer and composer of music for Doctor Who and The Ladykillers

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The composer Tristram Cary, who has died aged 82, was widely regarded as the father of British electronic music. While he also produced conventional works, he realised early on that a new form of music could be constructed out of "pure" sound, of natural or electronic origin, and that the ideal device for honing it was the tape recorder, developed in Germany during the second world war. Though he did not know it at first, similar experiments were taking place at radio and television studios in Paris and Cologne, creating a distinctively postwar sound world.

Tristram's first electronic commission came in 1955, to accompany the radio play *The Japanese Fishermen*, about a fishing boat caught up in the Pacific hydrogen bomb tests of 1954. His first conventional piece to be performed was the *Partita for Piano* in 1947, and it was in 1955 again that he made his breakthrough into films, with the score for the classic Ealing comedy *The Ladykillers*.

From then on, he produced work in both conventional and electronic disciplines, often combining the two, for concert hall, cinema, television and radio. His films included *Quatermass and the Pit* (1967) and *Blood from the Mummy's Tomb* (1970), while on television his electronic sounds pushed Doctor Who's daleks on to the screen for the first time (1963), alongside conventional scores for *Jane Eyre* (1963) and *Madame Bovary* (1964).

For the British pavilion at Expo '67 in Montreal, Tristram created a sound environment that included music for 16 film loops running concurrently. In the same year, he founded the electronic music studio at the Royal College of Music, London, and built a similar facility for himself at the new family home in Fressingfield, Suffolk.

Keen to create an instrument capable of producing controlled electronic sound for his compositions, Tristram then formed, along with Peter Zinovieff and David Cockerell, EMS (Electronic Music Studios) in 1969, and set about co-designing what was to become the VCS3 (Putney) synthesiser. The instrument was equipped with scientific vernier dials for the precise selection of frequency. It was soon joined by a small keyboard add-on, which infuriated some, bringing electronic music back to the 12-tone chromatic scale from which it had been trying to escape. Nevertheless, the VCS3 (and its 1971 derivative, the Synthi A - built, James Bond-style, into an attache case) became the must-have tool for a generation of musicians, including Pink Floyd, Brian Eno, White Noise, Jean Michel Jarre and, of course, the BBC Radiophonic Workshop.

The third son of the novelist Joyce Cary and his wife Gertrude, Tristram was born in Oxford. He left Westminster school early to study science as an exhibitor at Christ Church,

Oxford - his father, whose earnings as a writer were modest, was anxious for his son to enter a profession that offered financial security. But Tristram's studies were interrupted when he joined the Royal Navy as a radar specialist from 1943 to 1946.

The Cary household had always been full of music, with Tristram learning to play the piano from an early age, a hobby that ran parallel with a keen interest in radio. In the navy, supported by the required training in electronics, he found his interest in music, connecting with the world of science. He returned to Oxford, swapped courses to philosophy, politics and economics, and graduated with a BA, before moving to London and enrolling at Trinity College of Music. In the evenings, he taught to top up his funds, and started to build his home studio.

In July 1951, Tristram married Doris (Dorse) Jukes. They had two sons, John and Robert, and a daughter, Charlotte. Much of the family home in London was let to provide income for the struggling young composer's family, while the corner of the living room in their own bohemian flat (always full of artists and musicians, especially after closing time) was given over to "the machine", a choice collection of electronic equipment, much of it army surplus or home-built, including a disc-cutting lathe (on which Tristram had spent his £50 demob pay from the navy), mixing equipment, oscillators and (from 1952) an early tape recorder.

By 1974, Tristram was frustrated by having to write commercial music over the more experimental works on which he wished to concentrate, and moved to Australia, taking up a teaching post at Adelaide University, where he was later appointed honorary visiting research fellow, and awarded a doctorate of music. Dorse and Charlotte joined him briefly before returning to England, and the couple soon divorced. In 1986, Tristram resumed self-employment, operating as Tristram Cary Creative Music Services, continuing to work on new commissions up until the time of his death. In 2003, he married Jane Delin, his "wonderful companion" for some 20 years.

Tristram underwent heart bypass surgery in 2001, after which he and I worked, across the continents, on a double CD of his Doctor Who music. His re-recording of a suite from The Ladykillers won Gramophone magazine's best film music CD award in 1998. He also produced Soundings, a collection of his electronic and electro-acoustic works also a double CD. He was, however, disappointed never to have had a "hit".

Those of us to whom his work was an inspiration would disagree - he was a true pioneer, and for his services to Australian music received the Medal of the Order of Australia in 1991. He is survived by Dorse, Jane, and his three children.

- Tristram Cary, musician, born May 14 1925; died April 24 2008

- This article was amended on Thursday May 15 2008. Tristram Cary composed incidental music for Doctor Who and The Ladykillers, not the theme music as we suggested in the standfirst of the article above. This has been corrected.

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