

1958

“The past”, wrote LP Hartley, “is a foreign country; they do things differently there.” To the future reader this year is alien, as strange a land as that of Queen Victoria or the Aztecs, devoid of personal computers, of mobile phones or tablets, a place where its inhabitants cannot even imagine the Internet. It is a world of dusty linoleum-floored hallways, clanging telephone bells, teleprinters and ticker tape, and televisions that show ill-defined pictures only in black and white.

I am six years old: on first entering school I gave my mother not even the slightest backward glance, much to her sorrow. But also for others, this is not a time for looking back: only thirteen years have passed since the most terrible war in human history, the Holocaust, the atom-bomb unleashed and the loss and ruination of millions of lives, despite only forty years gone since the last terror, the Great War.

We can only look forward, driven towards a ‘brave new world’ by science and invention. All of the past, steam trains, mill chimneys, the soot-blackened terraces, must be swept away and replaced by white-walled towers, ‘new Jeruslems’ rising across our ‘green and pleasant land’.

Science is the new god, in science fact and science fiction. In both forms it allows us to escape from the ruination of the war, the destruction done to our infrastructure, and lets us imagine a better world, away from the struggle of ‘make do and mend’ that fills the lives of many.

The BBC Radiophonic Workshop is a creation of its time. Modernism and the avant-garde, held back by conservative forces in the interwar years is now fully unleashed: the fixed forms of structures in art, music, and architecture have, along with innocent lives, been destroyed by war.

The traditional patterns of music, of melody, tonal intervals and rhythmic patterns, are relics of the past, vestiges of bourgeois privilege, of class, empire and slavery, as outdated as Victorian houses and weaving machines, fit only for the dustbin of history.

New forms of sounds, the ‘art of noises’, are those of the future. The Workshop is to manipulate real sounds to make something new, but it will also create entirely artificial sounds using modern electronics.



This publicity picture for the opening of the Workshop, taken on 13th May, shows the scientific 'spirit of the age', as radio producer Donald McWhinnie, clearly in charge, points as if to some distant horizon. Studio manager Daphne Oram sits almost Madonna-like at the mixer controls, Desmond Briscoe, the second studio manager, manipulates a recording tape and engineer 'Dickie' Bird looks on.

Although this appears an image of clean modernity, the window and the room beyond were first created for experiments with wire sound recorders prior to the war and the mixer is a throw-out that once graced the Royal Albert Hall. In the spirit of 'make do and mend', much of the equipment is second-hand, unwanted by others, often not suited to Radiophonic work and requiring the constant care of 'Dickie' Bird.

The cumbersome tape recorders are unsuitable for editing and will soon have to be replaced by more flexible machines that can accommodate the need for the precise editing of sound samples and sequences.

Daphne Oram

Despite the emancipation of forty years ago, few women venture into sound engineering, or at least appear visibly within it. Unlike some organisations, the BBC welcomes anyone with talent, although only women of a certain class and of a very strong determination seem to make themselves heard. Daphne Oram is one such person.

In the picture above she may seem subservient, but it is her at the controls, she is the one who determines the results and she the prime candidate as the Workshop's studio manager.

In 1942, with ambitions in music composition, Oram denied herself a place at the Royal College of Music, instead joining the BBC and began unofficially experimenting with tape recorders. As a musician she is in a strange position, for the BBC's Music Department insists that the Workshop cannot make what they call 'music', only 'special sound' for radio and television, atmospheres, incidental noises or artificially created sounds that mimic ordinary sounds for special effect.

Also, we cannot see if she is happy with this ramshackle studio, her hope being that the Workshop should match other great European centres of electronic music. Given that the BBC is primarily a public service broadcaster, limited in money, and that its approach to the Workshop is both meagre and experimental, her hopes look to be dashed.

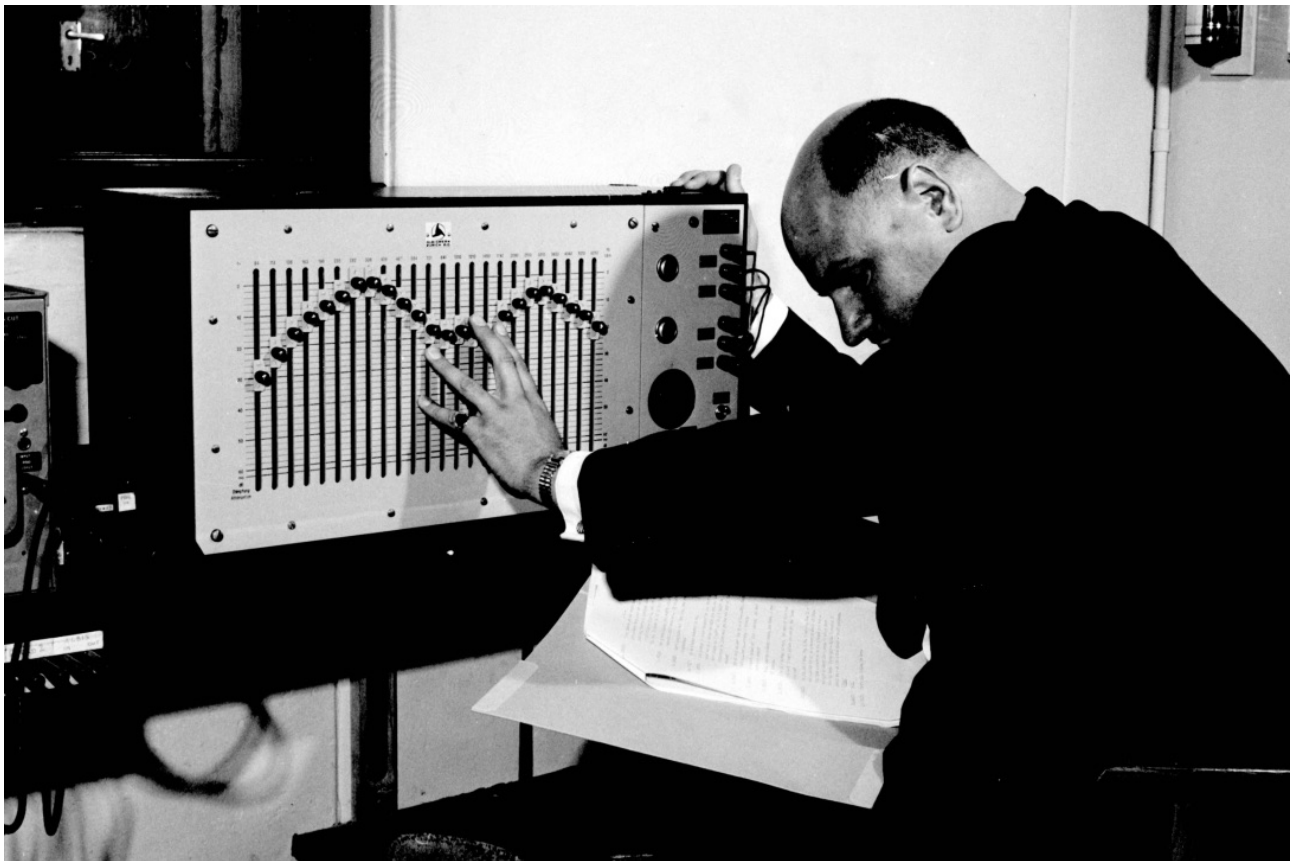
These restrictions in creativity at the BBC will undoubtedly be intolerable for Oram. Her childhood imagining was that sounds could be drawn and then realised, and it is to this idea that her future points. But the prospect of completing this huge project is limited by today's science.

As with the Countess of Lovelace, the mathematician who worked on Babbage's proposed mechanical computer, Daphne Oram was born at the wrong time for her ideas. In the not-so-distant future a headphone-wearing traveller on a Tube train will draw the pattern of a sound on a screen and then hear it. They may never have heard of Oram or Lovelace and their struggles, but that is the fate of so many pioneers.

Desmond Briscoe

The second candidate for studio manager is Desmond Briscoe. Born in working-class Birkenhead, south of Liverpool, Briscoe moved to Manchester and formed the 'Harry Desmond' band in his teenage years.

No doubt the work of his father, a telephone engineer, stimulated his interest in radio, and he joined the BBC as a junior programme assistant at sixteen. The BBC's main centre of operations being in London is a deterrent to anyone from the regions, but he moved there following the war, developing his own techniques in *musique concrète* and eventually working on pioneering dramatic programmes alongside Daphne Oram.



Beyond the Workshop, one of his passions is inland waterways, no doubt stemming from his younger days around the cities of the north. His plummy accent seems acquired, his nature constrained, but behind the avuncular facade there is a slick operator, a fighter and a survivor of an origin that seems like a mix of Irish, Italian and northern English.

Briscoe, perhaps because of his life's upward struggle is not averse to wrestling with the shortcomings of 'make do and mend', as can be seen in the picture above. Indeed he seems to see it as a challenge, as a contribution to the art of creating sound, perhaps in the same way that a stone carver may see flaws in the stone as forming part of their work, an element of serendipity, part of a game of chance. Those working in Radiophonic music in the future are unlikely to share his view.

When Oram leaves, as she inevitably will, Briscoe's skills as a manager, as an instigator, as one who struggles to get what he wants, one who nurtures the talents of others instead of using his own, will come to the fore. Sadly, this must divert him into the world of administration, hidden behind the glamour of those who create new sounds and music, perhaps leaving his massive contribution not fully recognised.

We now live only in dusty black-and-white photographs, in blurred films with strangely unfamiliar accents. We had our battles, as you have yours, but they are different struggles and you can never repeat our achievements. We looked only to the future, as too must you...

© Ray White 2018

<https://whitefiles.org/rwi>

For detailed information on the establishment and history of the Radiophonic Workshop you should refer to:

Special Sound: The Creation and Legacy of the Radiophonic Workshop
by Louis Niebur, © 2010 by Oxford University Press
ISBN 978-0-19-536841.