



[Delia Derbyshire Day 2013](#)

[Band on the Wall](#) Manchester and [FACT](#) , Liverpool

Reviewed by [Denis Joe](#) January 2013

An event celebrating the work of **Delia Derbyshire** held a lot of promise. The day began with a showing of ‘[The Delian Mode](#)’, the award winning documentary by the Canadian film maker Kara Blake. Blake’s film is a great exploration of the work of a genius who would go on to influence both pop and serious music.

Taking her most famous creation, the realisation of the theme music for the TV series **Dr. Who**, we can see how much impact this would have on later music, in particular the movement that became known as

Krautrock

, in the late 1960s - before the availability of commercial synthesisers. The score was composed by

Ron Grainer

, though realised by

Derbyshire

who was working as a sound engineer at the

BBC Radiophonic Workshop

. Each note was created by various sounds recorded onto analogue tape, which were then manipulated by varying the speed of the recording, and then splicing the tape together for the overall theme.

Such painstaking work led Grainer to suggest that Derbyshire be credited as a composer on the score. The BBC would have none of it. Delia Derbyshire was employed as a sound engineer. The BBC already employed musicians and to credit Derbyshire as a composer would have led to confrontation with the Musician's Union. So, although central to the composition of one of the most famous TV themes in the world, Derbyshire would not be able to claim royalties.

In '***The Delian Mode***' there is no suggestion of bitterness on behalf of Derbyshire over this. In fact, from the little that we learn of her personal life in the film, we find someone who comes across as single-minded; devoted to the work that she obviously loved, to the exclusion of nearly everything else. An interesting aspect of the film dealt with Derbyshire's childhood during the bombing of Coventry in World War Two. She talks about the air-raid sirens and the all-clear, describing them as music. She was then sent to Preston where the sound of workers feet on the cobbled streets also resonated as music to her.

The strength of Blake's film is that it is not interested in Delia Derbyshire's personal life, and we are left with an outstanding portrayal of the process of creativity. Throughout the film former

colleagues **Brian Hodgson** and **Dick Mills**, and collaborators including Peter Zinovieff (EMS) David Vorhaus (White Noise) talk about working with Derbyshire, while fans including Peter Kember (Sonic Boom), Adrian Utley (Portishead) and Ann Shenton (Add N To (X)) assess her influence.



During the Q&A, after the screening of '*The Delian Mode*', there were a number of questions from the audience, including the obvious one about a woman having to struggle in a man's world. In fact this was not the case, and the film certainly confounded any views that a woman always has to struggle to gain recognition. As Kara Blake pointed out, during the war there were two professional occupations where women excelled: radio announcers and engineers. Delia Derbyshire was seen as a colleague by her fellow associates at the BBC Radiophonic Workshop and made clear that the issue of her being a woman just didn't arise.

The mini symposium that followed had a distinguished panel: The composer and caretaker of Delia Derbyshire's archive, **Mark Ayers**; The senior lecturer of screen studies at the University of Manchester,

David Butler, the University of

Manchester's

James

Percival

who stepped in for Teresa Winter and

Kara Black

. The session was chaired by Manchester's foremost music journalist

Cath Aubergine

.

The talk itself was interesting and we learned much about why the focus was on Delia Darling. Her output was vast - composing, not just for radio and TV but also incidental music for theatre, and she took part in the first electronic music event in North England in Liverpool. Mark spoke of the 267 reel-to-reel tapes and a box of a thousand papers that were found in her attic after she died and the continuing labour of archiving the work. As Delia shared many samples with other composers and her colleagues it was difficult to tell which recordings were hers and which were the compositions of others.

Interesting enough was her attitude to classical music. I felt that some of her correspondence which was quoted by members of the panel seem to suggest that she saw her work outside of that tradition. Yet around the late 1960s and early 70s many European and American composers, especially around the Darmstadt festival, were working with pre-recorded sound - such as **Luciano Berio**, **Bernd Alois Zimmermann** and **John Cage**.

Certainly, as Kara Blake pointed out, the music made to accompany TV programmes by the BBC Workshop, drew a lot of bemused comments from viewers and listeners. Yet many of those programmes were aimed at children. Certainly, ***Dr Who*** and ***The Tomorrow People*** had some strange musical accompaniment, yet as children we were not fully appreciative about what constituted music, and as such, we simply accepted the noise we heard as music. Unbeknownst to us we seem to have acknowledged Edgard Varèse's definition of music as "organized sound".

I was amused that some of the discussion centred around the amount of laborious work involved in creating the sounds and music at the BBC Radiophonic Workshop. There was a yearning amongst some members of the audience, and the panel, to get back to those days as modern technology was seen as something of a cop out. It was made clear during the discussion that, although she had worked with them, Delia Derbyshire was none too impressed by the synthesisers of her day. It seemed rather odd that there was a feeling of nostalgia for

what was agreed to be the music of the future.

In the final session of the day *the Delia Darlings*: classical composer and writer **Ailís Ní Ríain**; artist

Naomi Kashiwagi

and artist and engineer in sound

Caro C

, spoke about the work they had done towards creating the Delia Derbyshire Day and about the three compositions that each had written for the event, and being performed later in the evening. It was great to get some insight into the creative process and although each of the artists claimed inspiration from a particular composition by Delia Derbyshire, at the end of the day the compositions were not to be seen as imitative but by each composer in their own right. I couldn't stay for the evening event, but I did catch it at FACT in Liverpool a few days later.



The Consequences Of Falling is a new piece by **Ailís Ní Ríain**. Composed for trumpet and double bass and featuring **Heather Tudor** and **Brendan Ball**

, and **Brendan Ball**, the piece is unlike any other of the works I have heard from Ní Ríain. Brendan Ball has already performed two world premieres for Ailís Ní Ríain, *In Sleep* with Ensemble 10.10 and *Treasured* in Liverpool Anglican Cathedral and is something of a champion of this exceptional composer.

Because of the combination of instruments *The Consequences Of Falling* initially sounds jazz inspired, the short trumpet notes that open the piece do have a jazz feel, yet also they replicate a repetitive rhythm that you sometimes hear in compositions for tape. Heather Tudor's playing is taken at a slightly slower pace and the work creates a feeling of insecurity. At 12 minutes plus, *The Consequences Of Falling*, must be a challenge for the musicians, both physically and technically. There are sudden changes of tempo as well as plucking and bowing on the double bass. Yet the work flows beautifully and I wondered how the piece would work as a dance number.

Ní Ríain is certainly one of the most original and hardworking composers around today. Her output is considerable and each work of hers that I have experienced is tight and considered. Her composition for trumpet finds a great exponent in Brendan Ball. And as *The Consequences Of Falling* illustrates, Ní Ríain is not afraid to enter new territory.

Naomi Kashiwagi work ***Blues*** could be described as a sonic sculpture. Using a wind-up

gramophone and a modern turntable, Kashiwagi presents us with a work that we can see, by projection behind her, as it is being created. First we see and hear the winding up of the gramophone and the playing of a 78rpm shellac of an Arties Shaw recording.

A recording of the 78 had been looped and pressed on to a dub plate (45rpm). Moving between the two recordings and manipulating the playing of the 78 disc, live, Kashiwagi creates a fascinating and unique experience. At one point putting tape on the 78 disc and drawing out a rhythm that was not intended by the original recording. What is great about this piece, and brought to mind John Cage, was that much of it relies heavily on chance so I would imagine that each performance is a unique experience.



Caro C's piece, ***Ipsi Audient*** was inspired by Derbyshire's piece *Blue Veils and Golden Sands*. This was a new challenge for Caro C using a laptop in her performance. I won't attempt to explain how the process of the recorded music came about, I barely understand it myself (I have

tried). Caro uses acoustic sounds of a Ping-Pong ball and a thwacking of a ruler as well as her own voice. The overall effect is a beautiful work that might be described as ambient music (*a la* Brian Eno) but moves into *musique concrete*, before returning to an andante-like conclusion.

I had heard previous work by Caro C and I found it fascinating. It is certainly some of the most inventive sounds I have heard in a long while, and this Manchester based musician certainly set a challenge for herself with this piece.

All in all the Delia Derbyshire events were a resounding success. If there was one failing it was that the Delia Darlings, who had organised all the events, had underestimated the interest that this project has generated as each event has sold out.

It would be a great shame if this was all we are to see of the Delia Darlings project. Delia Derbyshire was a pioneer of electronic music, and her inspiration can be heard even in contemporary techno dance music. Techniques such as sampling were being done by Derbyshire and her colleagues at the BBC Radiophonic Workshop 40 years ago. I didn't come away feeling nostalgic, as the event in Manchester showed possibilities being turned into reality. And this was not about the woman but about what she created and the impact that is still being felt to this day.