

THE HIDDEN CIRCLE GAZETTE

AN INDEPENDENT 3DXCHAT NEWS PUBLICATION.

2024-06-17

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MUSIC

Delia Derbyshire

BY CURT WOODMAN — 2024-06-17



In late 1963, a good year before the first Star Trek episode aired, the BBC launched its quirky science fiction show Dr. Who¹. But what has this to do with music you may ask?

The iconic theme of Dr. Who is widely regarded as a significant and innovative piece of electronic music. Arguably it was one of the first pieces of electronic music that reached a mainstream audience. In 1963, it would be another year before Robert Moog² would introduce the first commercially available synthesiser however, so how was this music made?

Written by Australian composer Ron Grainer, it was the genius of Delia Derbyshire³ at the BBC Radiophonic Workshop⁴ that made this piece of music a reality. Each note was individually created by cutting, splicing, speeding up and slowing down segments of analogue tape containing recordings of a single plucked string, white noise, and the simple

¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doctor_Who

²https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_Moog

³https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Delia_Derbyshire

⁴https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/BBC_Radiophonic_Workshop

harmonic waveforms of test-tone oscillators which were designed for calibrating equipment and rooms, not creating music.

Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75V4ClJZME4>

--- @youtube(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFQRyXq3OR8>)

When Grainer heard his own composition, he was so amazed by her arrangement of his theme that he asked: "Did I really write this?", to which Derbyshire replied: "Most of it". Grainer attempted to credit her as co-composer, but was prevented by the BBC bureaucracy because they preferred that members of the workshop remain anonymous.

Although hardly known, Delia Derbyshire has been referred to as "the unsung heroine of British electronic music", having influenced musicians including Aphex Twin, the Chemical Brothers and Paul Hartnoll of Orbital. It is only fitting then to remember her in this blog.