

# Special Sound

The Creation and Legacy of the  
BBC Radiophonic Workshop

LOUIS NIEBUR

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compositional experience—he had been composing since he was fourteen—led to the possibility of “realizing music as a recording rather than a performance,” using the technology of magnetic tape and turntables (much the same realization Schaeffer had made at roughly the same time).<sup>30</sup> Without Schaeffer’s resources, though, and without access to contemporary writings on the subject, he was only able to theorize his ideas.<sup>31</sup>

After the war, Cary continued his interrupted college education and studied composition in London, incorporating the electronic techniques he had experimented with since the war using a lathe purchased in 1946 for £50. He bought his first tape recorder in 1952. Cary made his living composing traditional incidental scores for the BBC (including, in 1954, *The Saint and the Sinner*, *The Trickster of Seville*, and *Belshazzar’s Feast*, all produced by Frederick Bradnum), which brought him to the attention of Terence Tiller, who produced *The Japanese Fishermen* for Features Department to be broadcast on the Third. The music was created on Cary’s equipment in his Earl’s Court studio and used sine oscillator pitches recorded onto 78rpm discs, since tape was still quite difficult to come by, and Cary, like Pierre Schaeffer, had perfected his techniques on shellac discs. The electronic sounds he recorded were used in combination with traditional percussion instruments, also treated, such as pitch-altered drumbeats and reversed xylophone melodies.<sup>32</sup>

Cary’s production was followed, in December 1955, by Douglas Cleverdon’s first *musique concrète* project: *Night Thoughts*, a “radiophonic poem” by David Gascoyne, with music (both concrete and traditional) by Humphrey Searle, portrayed London by night. Cleverdon and Searle worked together, composer Searle learning as he went, unfamiliar with the techniques of *musique concrète*. He recalls:

To accompany the long dream sequence in the centre of the feature, we asked the famous percussionist James Blades to record all possible kinds of percussion sounds. We then played these backwards at various speeds; we could only make the speed either twice or four times as fast or slow; the BBC had no variable-speed controls in those days. In spite of these technical handicaps, we produced some very interesting sounds and were later congratulated by a French composer of electronic music on what we had been able to achieve with such meager resources.<sup>33</sup>

Cleverdon produced the third in Henry Reed’s popular *Hilda Tablet* series of satirical plays, *A Hedge, Backwards*, broadcast February 29, 1956. Mary O’Farrell starred as a domineering amalgam of Elisabeth Lutyens, Ethyl Smyth, and

Benjamin Britten (both Lutyens and Britten thought Reed was poking fun at them in the character of Tablet, and were furious). Always desperate to try new compositional things, and usually failing dramatically, Tablet attempts her own special brand of *musique concrète* for her new production of *Anthony and Cleopatra*, which she labels “*musique concrète renforcée*.” To realize this, Cleverdon used his knowledge and experience of *musique concrète*, now increasingly known in Britain as “radiophonic techniques,” to collaborate with composer Donald Swann to create “some examples... based on comb and paper, Marjorie Westbury’s zip fastener, etc.”<sup>34</sup> This very “Third” kind of humor counts at the very least on the audience’s familiarity with the ideas behind *musique concrète*, an example of its growing presence on the Third, the techniques being used for the first time in comedy there. The influence of *The Goon Show* is clear, albeit in a more high-brow context, with undeniably lowbrow results.

### *All That Fall*

Of all the early productions to take advantage of these new techniques, Samuel Beckett’s *All That Fall* was the first to incorporate them wholeheartedly as a fundamental component of the drama. More than anything before it, Beckett’s first English-language radio play, which premiered on January 17, 1957, on the Third Programme, brought the potential for tape effects in drama to the attention of the wider public. In the relatively experienced hands of Donald McWhinnie as producer, it also proved to the BBC’s administration the importance of setting up their own facilities for the production of such effects.

Beckett’s original radio work continued the trajectory of his earlier plays, such as *Waiting for Godot* (1952), which had explored issues of isolation and existential angst against a backdrop of a world in half-focus. *All That Fall* forced him to come to terms with the supposed limitations of the medium and deal with a central tradition in radio drama: the primacy of language. One of the foundational tenets of Absurdist theater is the devaluation of language, and in this play Beckett returns self-consciously to the subject of language and speech. The central character, Mrs. Rooney, repeatedly draws attention to her own use of language:

*Mrs. Rooney:* Do you find anything...bizarre about my way of speaking? (*Pause.*) I do not mean the voice. (*Pause.*) No, I mean the words. (*Pause. More to herself.*) I use none but the simplest words, I hope, and yet I sometimes find my way of speaking very...bizarre.

could combine sounds in unique ways. (5) Using “montage,” an orchestra of any size could be created. (6) Elaborate cross-rhythms became possible outside real time. (7) Timbre could be altered using manipulation of sound.

32. Because of concerns that he would be seen as taking jobs from unemployed musicians, he was credited as “deviser of Special Effects” rather than composer.

33. Humphrey Searle, *Quadrille with a Raven: Memoirs by Humphrey Searle*. Available at [www.musicweb.uk.net/searle/break.htm](http://www.musicweb.uk.net/searle/break.htm) (accessed December 1, 2008).

34. Carpenter, *Envy of the World*, 159.

35. Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd*, 406.

36. *Ibid.*, 343.

37. Donald McWhinnie, “A Season of New Radio Plays,” *Radio Times*, March 26, 1954, 8.

38. Clas Zilliacus, *Beckett and Broadcasting* (Abo, Finland: Abo Akademi, 1976), and Martin Esslin, “Samuel Beckett and the Art of Broadcasting,” *Encounter* (September 1975): 38–46.

39. Donald McWhinnie, “Writing for Radio (I),” *Ariel 2* (July 1957): 7.

40. McWhinnie, *Art of Radio*, 133.

41. Zilliacus, *Beckett*, 73.

42. McWhinnie, *Art of Radio*, 82.

43. Samuel Beckett, *All That Fall* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 26.

44. McWhinnie, *Art of Radio*, 146–47.

45. Desmond Briscoe and Roy Curtis-Bramwell, *The BBC Radiophonic Workshop: The First 25 Years* (London: BBC, 1983), 18.

46. Unless otherwise noted, all unfootnoted quotations are from my own interviews. See the bibliography for a complete list.

47. The term is, again, Chion’s.

48. McWhinnie, *Art of Radio*, 37.

49. *Manchester Guardian*, January 15, 1957.

50. Philip Hope Wallace, *Time and Tide*, January 19, 1957.

51. Paul Ferris, *Observer*, January 20, 1957.

52. Harold Hobson, *Times* (London), January 20, 1957.

53. Giles Cooper, *The Disagreeable Oyster*, in *Giles Cooper: Six Plays for Radio*. (Letchworth, Hertfordshire: BBC Books, 1966).

54. Timothy Taylor, *Strange Sounds* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

55. *Ibid.*, 89.

56. Briscoe, *BBC Radiophonic Workshop*, 19.

57. Mollie Greenhalgh to Barbara Bray, memo, August 31, 1956, WAC RCont 1—Cooper, Giles, Scriptwriter, file 2b, 1955–56.

58. Cooper to Bray, memo, August 25, 1956, WAC RCont 1—Cooper, Giles, Scriptwriter, file 2b, 1955–56.

59. Barbara Bray to Giles Cooper, December 19, 1956, WAC RCont 1—Cooper, Giles, Scriptwriter, file 2b, 1955–56.

60. Donald McWhinnie to M. F. C. Standing, memo, November 20, 1956, WAC RCont 1—Cooper, Giles, Scriptwriter, file 2b, 1955–56.

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