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ORDINARY AND AVANT-GARDE SOUND IN BRITISH RADIO'S EARLY YEARS

Louis Niebur

Radio had since its inception struggled with both realistic representations of sound and more abstract, experimental sound techniques. This was especially true in the realm of British radio. This chapter will trace the history of British sound techniques in radio from its inception until the mid-1950s, as electronic techniques for sound production began overtaking more traditional methods of sound production.

The robustness of sonic experimentation in British radio (as opposed to other nations) can be partially attributed there to a continual support from the theatrical establishment. Some producers have also seen the strength in experimentation as originating in the monopoly power of the BBC; not having to satisfy advertisers led to greater freedom to push sonic boundaries. Radio pioneer Tyrone Guthrie noted that:

Radio offered a more promising field than the cinema, because, in Great Britain at all events, it is free from the anxieties of commercial competition. As a result of this the BBC has subordinated the question of Popular Appeal to Principle of Moral Philosophy; but has, none the less, been moderately adventurous and quite encouraging to technical experiment.

(Guthrie 1931: 7)

The influence of the theater was very much felt in the first examples of radio drama broadcast by the BBC in the early 1920s, with the majority of productions derived from works that had initially been successful there, what Productions Director R.E. Jeffrey called a “bastard cultivation from the stage” (Jeffrey nd: 12). These early broadcasts tended to be unexceptional, and consisted mostly of traditional thrillers, adaptations of Shakespeare and light comedies, with little conception of the special problems of radio. Sound effects for early productions faced the reality that what worked on the stage didn't necessarily work over primitive microphones. The need for specially written plays that could cater to radio's unique qualities was acknowledged in 1926 by John Reith, the head of the BBC, in a memo to Station Directors, where he stated that “It seems to me that in many of our productions there is too much striving for theater effect and too little attempt at discovering the actual radio effect when the play is received in distant homes” (Briggs 1961: 282). Experimentation had in fact begun a few years earlier, when

in October 1924, the BBC dedicated £50 “for experimental purposes in connection with the production of sound effects,” and the next month allowed the additional services of an “effects man” (Briggs 1961: 201).

Radio comedy in the 1930s frequently took advantage of the humorous possibilities of sound, instead of simply broadcasting straight performances of music hall routines which had proved successful up to that point. For example, *Bandwaggon*, which debuted in 1938, and starred the duo Arthur Askey and Dickie Murdoch, was notorious for putting characters in situations that would have been impossible to realize in any medium outside of radio, and the luxury of sound effects. In one sketch, Askey is heard to emerge from a theater floor playing the cinema organ. The organ doesn't stop rising, but instead continues on until it breaks through the ceiling, with a resounding crash. Once producers and writers realized the potential of radio for creating a boundary-free environment for their characters to inhabit, the possibilities were limited only by the imagination of the listener and the ingenuity of the sound engineer.

It was a piece of equipment, the Dramatic-control Panel, employed first in 1928, and redesigned in art deco fashion by the modernist architect Wells Coates for the BBC's Broadcasting House, that was to have the greatest impact on early sonic experimentation in radio. The Dramatic-control Panel enabled producers to separate and control different groups of actors and sounds and was ostensibly created to help give producers greater control over certain balance problems apparent when crowd noises were required in combination with smaller groups of actors. Unlike production methods in America and on the Continent, with the Dramatic-control Panel, the crowds and principal actors could be linked to separate microphones in different studios, enabling the producer to adjust individual microphone volume levels. It soon became apparent to a couple of open-minded producers that it could be used more creatively, however, and that in fact the Dramatic-control Panel could allow vast and varied configurations of performers in a seemingly unlimited spectrum of performance spaces and situations. Among the most influential producers who took advantage of this opportunity were Mary Hope Allen, Archie Harding, and Lance Sieveking.

Roger Eckersley, director of programming through the 1930s, described at the time the typical tour he would give to visitors of the complex of studios surrounding the Dramatic-control Panel at Broadcasting House:

The room is small, but what I believe is called functional – that is a hundred per cent designed and utilized for its own special purpose. In the center of it stands the instrument itself with a steel-framed chair or two drawn up to it. ... In brief, the producer sits here, controlling remotely the activities of his cast, his music, his effects.

He has perhaps his leading actors in one studio, his supporting cast in another, his music in another, and his effects in the effects room. Telephone lines connect each studio with the panel, and he is listening on ear-phones. Let us suppose in the course of a play a dance is going on. The hero and heroine are in the ballroom. The butler summons them to say their taxi is waiting.

Dance music is coming from studio A at a steady level – Enter butler, from Studio B, superimposed over the music from Studio A. Sound of door shutting from effects room as they leave the ballroom.

The producer quickly switches off his dance music with a turn of his Studio A knob, and when the front door is opened brings in and up the noise of a taxi ticking outside from effects room. In the meantime the conversation between our hero and heroine is kept up at a constant level from Studio C.

To watch the producer in a complicated piece of work is rather like watching a virtuoso at the organ.

(Eckersley 1946: 110–113)

One can feel the invigorating sense of novelty in Eckersley's description of these production techniques, as well as an effusion of technological wonder. The future of dramatic production Eckersley sees is one of machine-age, factory efficiency, but one that is ultimately musical as well, the role of the producer equated with that of the virtuosic organist.

Sieveking's legendary productions have not survived in recorded form, but in his surviving scripts, and his book, *The Stuff of Radio*, he detailed his production methods, providing a unique insight into the earliest thinking about radio sound as art. His "scores" (as he called his scripts) indicate the dexterity required by the player of the Dramatic-control Panel. In sound, Sieveking anticipated by at least one year some of the types of visual effects explored by Soviet filmmakers, such as cross-fades, montage, and wipes, as recent scholar David Hendy has observed (Hendy 2012). In particular, Sieveking noted a similarity between his ideas and those of Svevolod Pudovkin, who had written about the effectiveness of slowing down motion in a film for emphasis, concentrating on specific images. Pudovkin wrote in 1931 that:

When a director shoots a scene he varies the position of the camera, bringing it closer to or pulling it back from the actor depending on whether he wants to draw the audience's attention to the overall pattern of the movement of to the individual's face. In this way he controls the spatial construction of the scene. Why should he not do the same with time as well? Why not give momentary prominence to some detail of the movement by slowing it down on screen and thus letting it be seen particularly vividly and incredibly clearly?

(Pudovkin 2006: 187–188)

Sieveking shifted this emphasis onto the word, sometimes to give added significance to the meaning of these words, and sometimes to focus attention onto the sounds produced by the words themselves.

Intimate Snapshots, originally produced in 1929 was the first radio drama to explore this idea in depth. In this play, Sieveking combined slow-motioned sounds with mechanically altered musical elements to produce a *musique concrète*-like texture. Taking advantage of the intimacy of microphone technology, he has his character speak very close and quiet as he fades up a slowed-down percussive jazz band on top of the voice. The play concludes this way, with the formal shape of the sounds defining the character and the musical nature of the sounds. He notes that "actually, the music was made by playing a piece of contemporary 'hot syncopation' very, very slowly indeed on an electric-pick-up gramophone. When amplified, its hesitating, long-drawn-out thuds had an almost terrifying significance" (Sieveking 1934: 35–37).

Sieveking identified several different primary genres of sound effect in use in early radio, of which this demonstrated the *Symbolic, Evocative Effect*, defined by him as "a record of abstract rhythm of a churning and insistent nature, definitely not classifiable under the usual heading of 'music,' used to express confusion in a character's mind." This became one of the principle and earliest uses for *musique concrète* in radio drama in the late 1950s. In its non-electronic form, it will be prominent in the works immediately preceding the first concrete works, such as in Giles Cooper's *Mathry Beacon* from 1956. In this play, Cooper gives the stage direction that, "The sound made by the Deflector is a high, rhythmic humming. While musical in its effect it must

not appear to be instrumental in origin” (Cooper 1966: 14). Another, equally important genre was the *Impressionistic Effect*, defined as

a quick and comic fanfare used to mark the exits and entrances of a character in a dream; or the use of artificial echo or a voice, to indicate that the speaker is dead; or choral shouting of repeated phrases to startle the listener and mark in his mind the crisis in the character’s mind.

(*Sieveking 1934: 66*)

This genre, which appears straightforward (albeit ubiquitously) in comic programs like *ITMA* (It’s That Man Again), will be amplified and distorted, perfected, many would say, to absurd effect in the *The Goon Show* by the late 1950s. Sieveking presaged all of these later uses, however, in Tyrone Guthrie’s dramatization of Aldous Huxley’s *Antic Hay*, when he used a recording of the Charleston played at gradually increasing speed by having the turntable manually sped up using a finger on the record, a technique used extensively by later *musique concrète* composers.

Sieveking repeated his “slowing down” technique, which he labeled a “sound time close up” in a 1934 play, *The Wings of the Morning*. To produce it, Sieveking used nine studios; three for the cast, one effects, one gramophone, and four echo rooms. The excerpt starts with a fascinating example of what film sound theorist Michel Chion calls in film “synchresis”; a synchronization between sound and image (Chion 1990). Here, a clock’s accelerated ticking symbolically transforms into the running footsteps of our protagonist, representing his panic. This panic is again transformed into a slow-motion sequence where the action returns to the clock. This second scenario is familiar to any viewer of action films, a slowing down of action before the resolution of a countdown. However, here, the sound time close-up transfers us almost to another dimension, where Sieveking uses acoustic perspective to disorient his listeners “as if you were either going under, or coming to from an anaesthetic” (Sieveking 1934: 210):

OGILVIE: (*counting*): Six, seven, eight, nine, ten.

(*The clock begins to tick faster and faster and faster. It gradually becomes HOLLAND’s running footsteps. Suddenly they stop. There is a pause filled with nameless apprehension. The acoustic changes. You have left OGILVIE’s rooms and are outside the Headley Museum.*)...

(*HOLLAND is heard running. His footsteps gradually become a clock ticking very fast indeed. It gradually gets slower and slower and slower. From a great distance off, you hear OGILVIE’s voice counting, counting, backwards.*)

OGILVIE (*growing slower with the clock*): Seventeen, sixteen, fifteen, fourteen, thirteen, twelve, eleven, ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one and

SOUND-TIME— now — (*very slow indeed*) how — do — you —

CLOSE-UP feel? Did — you — get — it?

Creating this sense of disorientation was a specialty of Sieveking’s, and is most prominent in his two *Kaleidoscopes*, where he would have been responsible for controlling the output of all eight available studios and mixing them live. His virtuosic combinations of forces embody a kind of jazz-age modernity, a *bricolage*, similar in style to contemporary Hollywood’s representation of

“city life” in such films as *This Modern World*, and *42nd Street*, or Eisenstein's collage technique, a perfect example of what Andreas Huyssen called “an invasion of the very fabric of the art object by technology” (Huyssen 1986: 9). More than representing the rough and tumble of urban life, the intentional use of music, sound effects, and dialog together inextricably combined creates the effect of defamiliarization; by combining jazz with Beethoven, the Wedding March with machine guns, each of these things takes on a new significance, becomes symbolic. Sieveking observed that “what astonishingly illuminating and beautiful results can be made by using odd unlabeled sounds very much in the same way as Swinburne used to evoke beauty by using words as so much sound rather than as so much sense” (Sieveking 1934: 61).

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, in acknowledging the newness of their art form and its unique qualities, and borrowing heavily from film (the techniques of juxtaposition, fades and swells, superimposition, montage, and distance), the more experimental radio producers began pushing the limits of what audiences accepted, and in the process discovered new ways to tell stories; indeed, new kinds of stories to tell. As Rudolf Arnheim, a German writing about his own country's radio innovators, noted at the time:

Here there is really something quite individual. With the expressive means of pure sound: acoustic relationship between expression of speech and music, annihilation of softer sounds by louder ones, translation of mood and character into dynamics of sound—by such means spiritual experiences are embodied in a new material taken from it and yet possessing its own laws; but the laws of the sound-world only becomes effective and recognizable when one is aware of this sound-world quite alone, without any recollection of the “missing” corporeal world.

(Arnheim 1936: 194)

This ethereal sound-world could be as abstract as the internal thoughts of its protagonist required, and in this next step of storytelling, sound-dramatists were dealing with the same conceptual issues contemporary British composers were facing, and would continue to face a generation later when confronted with the question of musical storytelling without the benefit of tonality. Since radio drama was no longer forced to be primarily concerned with recreating “corporeal” worlds, techniques evolved that made it possible to represent a more abstract world. Despite this, there were those at the BBC, particularly manager Val Gielgud, who objected to this more imaginative use of sound effects. Although Gielgud was hardly an “enemy” of progressive radio, he nevertheless positioned himself firmly against the use of sound effects in all but the most obvious situations. Gielgud believed that sound effect's “significance to the radio play is little greater than that of the thunder sheet or the coconut shell to the stage play” (Gielgud 1957: 90). Radio sound effects in the 1920s and 1930s for radio were mostly of the kind first standardized on the stage, and were essentially literal. Filson Young wrote that:

They [effects and sounds other than the human voice] have been used most successfully hitherto in connection with narratives and dramatized readings, and in descriptive monologues, as illustrations and images in mental retrospect.... But their use in drama pure and simple has never yet, I think, been successfully related to the more subtle form of art.

(Young 1933: 145–146)

Experimental productions by Sieveking and fellow producers thrived on an environment that was conducive to risk-taking. The Research Section, founded in 1928 on encouragement from

Val Goldsmith, the Director General's assistant, consisted of Sieveking, Harding, Allen, and E.J. King-Bull, each of whom was committed to making radio that defied categorization, that moved it as an art further from its stage roots, and closer to something they referred to as "pure radio." Lauded critically as an inspiration for radio stations elsewhere in the world, it facilitated creative production as no other internal organization would, and whose broadcasts inspired Filson Young to write:

It is obvious that the first direction in which we should look for development in the art of the microphone is in the field of what are called "Productions" – *i.e.* radio-dramatic activities ... we have heard some very queer experiments of this kind; some have contained thrills, and others may have seemed merely eccentric extravagance. The point is that they were experiments, and that they were and are leading somewhere.

(Young 1933: 5–6)

During its brief existence, the Research Section faced constant attacks from within the BBC for its apparent mandate to think, rather than to do. Colleagues perceived and resented their being somehow above the everyday pressures of ordinary producers, while at the same time entitled to the use of "public" equipment. The primary problem seems to have been that the Research Section was an experimental studio without a studio, an "untidy" situation, as Gielgud put it. They were also responsible for producing plays that were less popular than more traditional plays. These plays often had little or no plot and required the audience to accept techniques considered radical at the time, with their modernist Joycean stream of consciousness narratives. Although the BBC was not obliged to base all its decisions on audience figures, it was a concern nevertheless that their broadcasts were appealing to an elitist "highbrow" audience. Gielgud himself was not sympathetic to the kind of work they were doing and cynically observed that, "A play labeled 'experimental' might as well have been labeled 'poison'" (Gielgud 1957: 68). A combination of unpopularity within the BBC, low ratings, and a lack of equipment for its exclusive use led to its dissolution upon the retirement of its coordinating head, R.E. Jeffrey, in the early 1930s. The administration told Gielgud in confidence that he had to "take the Research Section under [his] wing, or it must be disbanded" (Gielgud 1965: 67–68). Gielgud's solution, an ingenious one, was to create a completely new department, outside of Drama, and responsible for creating programs that didn't fit into that category; those programs that had arisen because of the kind of innovations brought about by the Research Section. He created an experimental department with a regular stream of commissions, and with all the bureaucratic and administrative backing the higher echelons of the BBC had felt were necessary but absent in the Research Section. This new department, "Features," continued the experimentation started under the Research Section. Defined technically as "a story without a plot," features became integral to the war effort, developing a kind of propaganda that depicted the British Government's perspective without the more overt devices of drama or melodrama. D.G. Bridson's *March of the '45*, first broadcast in 1936, exemplified the continuation of Sieveking's multi-studio methods within the new, more focused Features Section. The outrageous, decadent productions of the 1920s, which seemed to revel in their excess, stand in contrast to the socialist depression-era features of the 1930s, although nothing but the subject matter had changed; inventive and innovative sound design formed the core of these productions.

With the start of World War Two, the continuing innovation that had marked the previous 20 years came to a near standstill, mostly because the addition of the Services Radio Programme consumed a hefty portion of the yearly budget. Austerity was the watchword of the day and experiments like the Research Section's had gone out of fashion during the depression of the

1930s. Add to this the onset of war and such extravagance became impossible. Finally, with the decamping of the Drama and Features Departments out of Broadcasting House in London (for fear of bombing) to Manchester and other points North, producers lost the stability of fully equipped studios, and even reliable broadcasting equipment. Gielgud remembers that during the war, the Dramatic-control Panel, “with all the opportunities for misuse afforded by that fascinating invention – were replaced by non-compensating mixing units working under conditions only to be comprehensively categorized as ‘lash-up’” (Gielgud 1957: 84).

This doesn't mean that during the later 1930s and into the war years, radio was exclusively the domain of light music and news. In 1937, the original radio piece found a new home on the “Experimental Hour.” This was modeled after the Theatre Workshop at the Columbia Broadcast Service in the United States. The program ended with the war, but because of Features Department's involvement with the war effort, and the development of new mobile recording equipment (though in England, not yet tape recording), dialog, sound, and music could be combined as never before. Other successful Feature's productions included Edward Sackville-West's poetical narrative *The Rescue* with music by Benjamin Britten, which challenged listeners' conceptions of how music, sound effects, spoken word, and music *as sound effect* can interact in a radio broadcast.

The development of the radio drama and feature into unique and successful genres was to have profound effect on the way post-war radio broadcasting took shape. With the split into three distinct “programmes” (or “networks”) there was more room in the schedules for the kind of programming considered too high-brow in earlier years. Comedy series adapted many of the sound effects developed for radio drama, first in wartime favorites like *ITMA*, and after the war, *The Goon Show*. But radio drama in the 1950s would also find inspiration from continental studios, particularly France's RTF, and the work of musical pioneers Pierre Schaeffer, André Almuro, and Pierre Henry, who had developed techniques for manipulating sound on tape and disc.

For example, in the mid-1950s the BBC pioneered the use of unusual sound in its own productions of continental avant-garde “Theatre of the Absurd” works, as exemplified by Jean Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, Jean Anouilh, and others. This fundamentally different and original drama was united in the representation of “a world deprived of a generally accepted integrating principle, which has become disjointed, purposeless – absurd” (Esslin 1980: 399). With roots in 19th-century nonsense poetry, music hall traditions, and early 20th-century surrealism, these authors' works represent the disjointed senselessness and irrationality of the universe through narrative and structural distortions. Sonically, this off-kilter world was represented through the adoption of *musique concrète* techniques and the use of electronic sounds for the first time in Britain. This led, by the end of the 1950s, to the creation of the BBC's own electronic music studio, the Radiophonic Workshop, primarily for the implementation of these techniques in radio drama.

But in the immediate post-war years the BBC didn't only encourage the development of avant-garde sounds; Ludwig Koch's radio broadcasts, *Music of the Sea*, and *Paris*, from 1951 and 1952 respectively, were billed as “sound pictures without words” in the *Radio Times* and were carefully, logically, and artistically modeled sound sculptures. They used the latest in outside broadcast technology and recording equipment, including high-tech microphones and newly available tape recorders, and attempted to capture as realistically, evocatively, and authentically as possible the subject or theme of the broadcast. Koch's sound pictures were an intermittent but regular feature of the BBC's radio broadcasts of the 1940s and 1950s, and are the epitome of a certain kind of broadcasting conceived of at radio's inception as one of its most valuable assets: the ability to play “live” sounds from often exotic locations. Koch's programs take this idea to

a new level of sonic “impressionism” and, with few words of explanation and no hint of plot, present a collection of representative sounds which together illustrate his theme. The musicality of such a technique did not go unnoticed in the press, as this 1951 *Radio Times* article illustrates:

In his youth, in his native city of Frankfurt, he enjoyed the acquaintance of Clara Schumann and Brahms, and it was here that he made his first recording—at the tender age of eight—with a novel machine that his father brought back as a present from Leipzig Fair. On a wax cylinder Ludwig recorded a bird singing in a cage. The year was 1889, and the recording still exists—the earliest example of recorded bird-song ... Koch hopes that if people sit and listen quietly, as they would sit and look at a painting, his sounds will stimulate the imagination in the same way as a painter’s colours.

(*Radio Times* 1951)

However effective and new Koch’s sound portraits were as radio, they still were intended to be realistic representations of their subject, so that if their source was obscured in the final broadcast, then the work would have been deemed a failure.

Beginning in the early 1950s, radio audiences began to grow tired of the relentless barrage of “realistic” sound effects in radio drama, and suggested a reduction in the general use of sound effects overall. In his influential guide to the philosophy and production of radio drama, *The Art of Radio*, Donald McWhinnie decried the use of constant “realistic” sound effects for radio, preferring the role that the occasional but well-placed effect can have in furthering a story. He noted that, “in radio, as in poetry we attain definition by concentrated intuitive short cuts, not by a mass of elaboration and detail” (McWhinnie 1959: 51).

The Drama Department script editor observed in 1958 that “we now receive much more essentially radio material than the sort of scripts that are written with no particular medium in mind” (Hardwick 1958: 14–15). Alongside this was a willingness to expand the role of sound effects, letting them act in some respects as music. Following McWhinnie’s idea that sound effect can act as storyteller, these new, more abstract sound effects worked in combination with dialog to forge a rich atmospheric texture. Rayner Heppenstall’s 1952 feature, *Dear Sensibility*, was one of the first productions to demonstrate this attitude. This work, which was an impressionistic sketch based on Laurence Sterne’s autobiographical memoir, *A Sentimental Journey*, concerned itself with the minute details of Sterne’s trip through France and Italy. Heppenstall described his method as:

In fact the “stream of consciousness” or “interior monologue” of Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf—a narrative method which quickly exhausted itself in the novel but which, I would claim, is of the very essence of radio, little as it has been copied so far. It is a method which demands self-abnegation from the rest of the cast, whose lines are so many sound effects. A programme of this kind is essentially a concerto for solo voice and sound effects.

(Heppenstall 1952: 8)

Here the voices, the dialog itself, have been reduced to their sonic components to act as effect and background to the main speaker.

The Third Programme (1946–1970), the BBC’s radio network dedicated to “difficult” and more avant-garde programming was exceedingly confident in its dramatic and poetic broadcasts, and during its first ten years commissioned some of the most important radio plays ever to emerge from that genre, including Dylan Thomas’s *Under Milk Wood* and Samuel Beckett’s

All That Fall. It is from within this system, and the network that would take most seriously the project of high modernism, that the first serious use of electronic sound in Britain took place as part of an effort to incorporate what had been purely musical ideas into established dramatic movements. With the new network, plays that explored more controversial ideas or less accessible storytelling techniques finally had an outlet. Just as the pressure was growing to remove the gratuitous use of realistic sound effects, there was a strong and growing desire for sound effects that were much less literal than had been the vogue in the past. These sounds would find materiality in the output of the BBC's Radiophonic Workshop (1958–1998), and, along with the rise of television, change the ways radio depicted sounds, both natural and avant-garde.

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