

An abstract painting with a vibrant red background. On the left, there is a white, textured shape resembling a flower or a bird's head, with a black, brushy stem extending downwards. To the right, a large, dark black rectangular area is positioned at the top, with a dark, circular shape below it. The overall composition is bold and expressive, with visible brushstrokes and a rich color palette.

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Cover image: Margaret Mellis, Red Flower (detail), 1958, oil on board, 39.4 × 39.1 cm. Collection of Museums Sheffield (VIS.4951).. Digital image courtesy of the estate of Margaret Mellis. Photo courtesy of Museums Sheffield (All rights reserved).

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# Contents

Delia Derbyshire: The Myths and the Legendary Tapes, Caroline Catz

# Delia Derbyshire: The Myths and the Legendary Tapes

Caroline Catz

## Authors

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Caroline Catz, "Delia Derbyshire: The Myths and the Legendary Tapes", *British Art Studies*, Issue 12, <https://dx.doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-12/ccatz>

Caroline Catz is an actor, director, and writer. Her short film *Delia Derbyshire: The Myths and the Legendary Tapes* (2018) was selected for the BFI London Film Festival and the London Short Film Festival, and is now published here permanently in *British Art Studies*. In the interview that follows, she speaks with *BAS* editor Baillie Card about Derbyshire's groundbreaking electronic music compositions, the creative affinities between Derbyshire and Taiwanese-British artist Li Yuan-chia, and the ethics of biography. A discussion of Derbyshire's time at the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, and of the years after her departure in 1973, can be found in David Butler's article in this issue, "Whatever Happened to Delia Derbyshire?". For an exploration of Li Yuan-chia's LYC Museum & Art Gallery, read Hammad Nasar's article "Cumbrian Cosmopolitanisms", also in this issue.

[View this illustration online](#)

### **Figure 1.**

Delia Derbyshire: The Myths and the Legendary Tapes, Digital image courtesy of Rook Films.

## **Interview**

### ***BAS: When did you first encounter Delia Derbyshire's work?***

Caroline: The first time I encountered Delia was as a child in the 1970s, being terrified by her *Doctor Who* theme tune. I was always intrigued by the idea that so many people shared a similar memory; how could we all have known to take refuge behind the sofa after hearing the first few bars? Later on, as an adult, I imagined—was there a hidden frequency, something that tuned us into a very primal sound, terrifying perhaps, that Delia might have experienced herself?

### ***BAS: When did you start to be aware of Derbyshire herself, as a composer and musician?***

Caroline: The Dr Who soundtrack was credited to the Radiophonic Workshop, and I didn't know that Delia Derbyshire wrote the music until much later. It wasn't until the 1990s, when I heard another incredible composition by Delia from 1968 called *Blue Veils and Golden Sands*, that I became fascinated by her and wanted to discover more. Perhaps I heard it on somebody's bootleg tape or from a library record? It's a haunting piece, beautiful and melodic—a manifestation of something profound and unknowable. I was amazed when I learned about Delia's process, and that I was listening to a hand-crafted piece, like a tapestry of sound, created note by note on magnetic tape, cut and pasted together in segments. It seemed incredible that such a complex

and rich piece was made with the most basic technology. In that pre-synthesiser era, making electronic music was time-consuming and very precise. That's when I became a real fan of Delia's work.

***BAS: The sense of her technical mastery has an almost mythic quality now, doesn't it? There are photos and film clips from the BBC's archives of her demonstrating the Workshop's intricate recording equipment.***

Caroline: Absolutely. I'm fascinated by the mythology surrounding Delia, and there is something very romantic about those images. I have often wondered why they are so powerful. It's unusual to see photographs of women in that era absorbed in their work. It's also hard to describe without sounding critical, which I'm not, but in the years directly after her death in 2001, it seemed to me that the available information about Delia came predominantly from a male perspective. Those photographs are both wonderful images of a professional at work, and pictures of a glamorous woman using technology. I would love to know what Delia thought about them and who took the photographs.

***BAS: Was an awareness of that gender disparity in perspectives on Derbyshire why you wanted to make a film about her?***

Caroline: It was, but I was fascinated by her anyway—by the fact that she turned organic, everyday material into some of the earliest modern British electronic compositions. Her work plays in a majority of homes, and yet during her career she never became a household name. Around 2006, several years after she had died, I had already made two films that were music documentaries, and wanted to make something different, a fictionalisation but not a straightforward biopic. I found that the Screen Studies department at Manchester University had acquired Delia's archive, which had been given by Delia's colleague and friend Mark Ayres. It was really on visiting the archive that the idea for the film emerged.

***BAS: What was your experience of doing research in the archive?***

Caroline: I'd never been to an archive before. I'm not from an academic background, so I had no idea what to expect. I imagined something that was very formal, and was surprised when I was taken to a cupboard, inside of which were boxes: cereal boxes, baked bean boxes, really old tatty boxes ... basically, the contents of her attic.

And of course, what's inside are amazing amounts of personal effects and ephemera, including masses of quarter-inch tape, which David Butler had begun to digitise. There were make-up tapes for theme tunes and all her compositions for the BBC, amongst others that were private; things that no

one would have heard. Some tapes are the beginnings of pieces of music, and some are the elements. These tapestries of sound I mentioned were made by recording a single note, and then that single note would have been manipulated electronically using all kinds of mad, inventive techniques, war-time oscillators, and other improvised ways of twisting and forming new sounds. The whole ethos at the Workshop, and for Delia especially, was that they thought of a sound, and then found a way to make it.

***BAS: A lot of this is recent enough history—were you able to interview Derbyshire’s colleagues from the Workshop?***

Caroline: Yes, after David Butler, who was looking after Delia’s archives, I interviewed Mark Ayres, who was running the Workshop when it closed in the 1990s and had been a close friend of Delia’s. He had rescued and digitised the Workshop archives, which have massive cultural importance; now they are a part of the BBC archive, but initially they had decided to throw it all away. He’s now custodian of Delia’s estate, and is incredibly knowledgeable about her work. I also met Brian Hodgson, Delia’s close collaborator and friend at the Workshop as well as on many freelance projects. They made an avant-garde album in 1969 called *An Electric Storm* with David Vorhaus (under the collective name of White Noise), and Brian’s perspective shined a light on her many creative collaborations.

***BAS: What sort of creative culture existed at the Workshop? Did they each have quite unique practices, or were things done more as a collective?***

Caroline: They were basically staff at the BBC, on a payroll, and not credited for their individual work until the late 1960s. At that time, all over Europe—in Germany, France—there were state-funded places where people could compose and experiment with electronic music. Yet the only place that existed in Britain was the Radiophonic Workshop, which had been created and set up by a woman, Daphne Oran, back in 1958. There had initially been a great deal of resistance to her idea, and a sentiment that the BBC had enough musicians already, but she fought hard and they agreed to found a Workshop that would service drama, and experiment with providing soundtracks and avant-garde sound beds, initially for radio, and then television. But its employees were not allowed to refer to themselves as musicians.

Within that context, I think each member of the Workshop was very unique, and worked very individually. But Delia in particular, approached her work from the position of creating electronic compositions. There were also plenty of creative collaborations outside of their BBC work—Delia worked with other musicians on albums, and with visual artists, for example, on an installation at the first Brighton Festival in 1967 involving kinetic sculpture and light

shows. Delia, Brian Hodgson, and Peter Zinovieff had an electronic music collective called Unit Delta Plus. So, together they explored work difficult to do at the BBC.

***BAS: Your film is closely focused on Derbyshire herself—she’s the only character on screen, and it really privileges her own perspective. How was her voice accessible to you, as the person playing her?***

Caroline: Back in 2007/2008, when I started thinking about this project, it was difficult to find sound or video clips of Delia. Instead, I found her voice both in her written notes and in tape recordings played to me by David Butler at the archive. Delia’s notes about compositions are extensive, and you can imagine her having ten pieces of paper on a desk, doing calculations here, making notes there, using log books. You get a picture of each composition being alive and the paperwork being one stage of transmitting the sound out from her imagination.

David Butler very generously found me every bit of Delia’s voice that he could unearth on the leader tape. She’s usually just saying “this is the beginning of the tape, da da da da da” but now and again, she would say something when a recording didn’t go well and laugh. It was so endearing, and she felt present, as if she was in the room with me. I got to know her initially that way.

And then I found an interview from Radio Scotland by a brilliant journalist called John Cavanagh, done in 1997. It’s a very touching interview because they have such a rapport—you feel that she was relaxed in his company even though it was over the phone. Fragments of their interview are in the film.

***BAS: You mentioned earlier not wanting to make a straightforward biopic, but there is still extensive research behind the film. Virginia Woolf described biography as “the perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow”—what relationship did you want to exist between your portrayal of Derbyshire and those archival records of her words and thoughts?***

Caroline: Going through the archival material, I kept asking myself about the ethics of telling somebody else’s life story. For one thing, looking through the archive felt slightly like prying. Going through her notes, I still wonder “does she mind? Is this alright? Did she want people to know these details?” But Delia left behind so much sound—263 tapes for a start, with maybe over 200 compositions—many of which are unique, particular, beautiful pieces.



Hearing them, I realised that it was the music: that's what Delia wants us to know. That's her legacy. That became the starting point for me to approach her story in my own subjective way.

***BAS: How does that subjectivity come through in the form of your film?***

Caroline: The film is a hybrid, a portrait of Delia made through a mix of observation and imagination. It explores the idea that no single perspective would be sufficient to gain a true understanding of her. I like the idea of the film being a myth, adding to the myths already out there, and reflecting on who designs the myths and how much control you have once you're dead over how people interpret your artefacts and fragments. So, some of the dialogue in the film is taken from interviews with Delia, who had a very unique way of phrasing things, and some of it isn't.

And to be clear, when speaking about the research aspect of this project: it really wasn't supposed to be anything other than an experiment to see if a long-form film would work. Because I kept saying, I don't want it to be a docu-drama, or a biopic, but instead to bring together a vast array of resonant fragments and my feeling about the spaces between. The aim of this short was to begin a conversation with Delia, which is ongoing and I suspect will continue until we finish the long-form film! That's where it started to emerge—a fantasy of me meeting Delia somewhere between eras in an abandoned space. But we needed the short film as an experiment to see, would the imagery work? Will it sustain? For how long? Does it work in one space?

***BAS: When you describe the film that way, I envision almost an architect's model. Something in smaller scale that articulates the form you imagine, partly to work through it and partly to bring other people on board and help them understand what it is you're trying to talk about concretely.***

Caroline: Exactly, or a sketch book.

***BAS: But I also love that the germ of the film was an imagined conversation between you and Derbyshire. The feeling I had overwhelmingly—watching as the film plays out within this single and relatively bare space—was that the set is a space of the mind. It's fascinating to think of that being the embodied space of your mind, and the space of hers too, within a subjective realm where her music and your film meet.***

Caroline: Yes, exactly. I was trying to replace that solidity of biography with something that is perhaps a bit more lyrical. I also wanted to question how experience lives in the body, and how that experience impels a person to generate art or music which then offers that experience to the collective. There is something deep and primal about her sound, alongside its compositional complexity, and I wanted to bring a sense of that literal and figurative space where ideas play and emerge. Her own interest in psychoacoustics also pushed my thinking in this direction, towards a mental and physical space of creativity.

***BAS: You've scored the film with Derbyshire's song Great Zoos of the World. Why that one?***

Caroline: It connects to the film's mythic or legendary elements. The animal sounds in the piece are so authentic, and I read somewhere that Delia had brought real animals into the studio to record them. I can't imagine that she did; she definitely didn't, and I suppose she might have gone to a zoo and recorded something, but I loved the notion that people actually believed she got elephants and giraffes and exotic birds into the studio, because it certainly sounds like that's what happened, as if she were surrounded by them. It was that idea that I wanted to build into the film, because on some level they *would* have existed in the studio with her. I imagine they would have been in her mind all the time; she may have been analysing those sounds and finding ways to either record them live or to create them herself.

***BAS: The narrative of the film follows Derbyshire as she joins the Workshop, and then leaves in 1973 to live and work at the LYC Museum in Cumbria. The shots of the open countryside, and its birdsong, are such a contrast to the closed interior sets used before. Why did you choose that particular narrative arc?***

Caroline: I was fascinated by the mystery of why Delia left the Workshop. Partly, it connects to the history of electronic music—there was an uncomfortable but interesting two-year period when tape and synthesisers crossed over, and I think that is where difficulties arose for Delia. One of the reasons she had joined the workshop in 1962 was to experiment with tape and its manipulation, which was relatively new then. But soon after, sequencers and early synthesisers came along. Actually, it was her collaborator Peter Zinovieff, who had also been part of the Unit Delta Plus project, who created the first British synthesiser called the VCS3, which produced a lot of the otherworldly sounds used by Hawkwind, Pink Floyd, and Roxy Music. Delia loved those sounds, but would only use the VCS3 as a tool. She would generate a sound on it and record that onto magnetic tape. When those technologies progressed, synthesisers—some with keyboards attached and preset ranges of sounds—were brought into the Workshop to speed up the composing and recording process. As the laboratory environment of the

workshop gave way to becoming a service provider, Delia made a decision to eventually leave the BBC, a move which she described later in the 1990s as “self preservation”. To my mind, her time at the LYC was about seeking a sense of freedom and not wanting to sacrifice her process.

***BAS: What do you think were some of the affinities between Derbyshire and Li Yuan-chia?***

Caroline: Well, her work at his museum was as a kind of gallery assistant, helping when children came to visit and working the printing press that produced Li’s exhibition catalogues. But I think the spirit of the place was essential—it was exhibiting internationally renowned artists, whilst providing a community art space. It was a unique place opened up by this incredibly open-minded and brave, intrepid travelling artist who had come all the way from Taiwan. You sense the spirit of people wanting to create something, and then doing it because that’s what they needed to do—whether or not there’s a precedent for it. And that’s apparent in Delia’s work as well: there’s perhaps no precedent for it, but it was what she needed to do. Their projects make you look at the climate for creativity now, and wonder if it’s still possible to make something just for the sake of wanting it to happen, and experiment? I worry about that a lot.

Li was fascinated by the idea of exploring the beginning of all things and what he termed “the cosmic point”, which was expressed visually through symbolic images of the universe in his work. So, I ended the short film wondering if Delia left London in pursuit of her own particular version of the cosmic point.

***BAS: There’s a strong sense of the mystical and philosophical around the LYC, through Li’s own use of that language and his interest in Zen Buddhism.***

Caroline: Yes, and the longer film that I am making now about Delia, also with Rook Films, touches more on this aspect of her own practice. At the core of Delia’s creativity, I believe, was the idea of her sounds being the manifestation of invisible and unknowable things.

***BAS: What else will the longer version include?***

Caroline: It will start with events earlier in her life, then the Workshop, the LYC, and events that happened in the future. I also want to give more attention to her legacy. It will have more characters, the important people in Delia’s life, but aesthetically it will very much have the feel of the short.

***BAS: In both films, it feels significant to frame her time at the LYC as a beginning of sorts, rather than an end, and to extend the narrative of her life's work into her legacy and longer influence. David Butler's essay in this issue challenges that prevailing myth, that Derbyshire's creative life stopped after she left the Workshop.***

Caroline: Yes, that myth is a familiar story—that Delia fell into depression, she suffered with addictions and alcohol and created nothing, and was this tragic figure. It is far from the truth, and there is much more to Delia's time at the LYC and beyond, but with woman artists, those elements of personal difficulty are most often the headline, rather than their work. Whether or not her friendship/relationship with Li was successful—nobody really knows the extent of what it was, and it wasn't long lasting—I would argue that their creative affinities were in the same world, in the same place; both very rooted in the importance of freedom and potential, and perhaps both slightly out of time.

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