

Robin Carmody, 2001

Resounding echoes: the Radiophonic Workshop's influence today

(thoughts on Plone, Boards of Canada, David Inglesfield, Pram, Piano Magic and Broadcast)

I started this site in December 1999 already very enthusiastic about the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, but having heard comparatively little of their music and still more of a thrusting aspirational student of their territory, than someone with great knowledge of it. Two of the original articles on this site - <http://www.elidor.freemove.co.uk/plone.htm> and <http://www.elidor.freemove.co.uk/inglesfield.htm> - refer explicitly to an influence of the Workshop's music, and it's interesting to go back and see how my knowledge and perspective on the territory has evolved subsequently, and perhaps affected my view of the new music I'm listening to (thanks to Tom Ewing by the way for suggesting the idea of this piece to me).

The Plone album *For Beginner Piano* I like less unequivocally now than I did then, and while my writing about it at the time seemed like a definitive break towards a more mature style, it now seems quite clunky, even corny and clichéd. And I think I must have had a far sweeter tooth in 1999 than now. I'm not ashamed to say that I cringe now when listening to the vocoder vocals of "Plock"; what once sounded like the sweetest distillation of childhood memories of Radiophonic music now sounds lachrymose and plodding. The rhythmic construction of "Plock" is still ace, though, but I think they overegged the pudding; as an instrumental it would be near-perfect, but I still can't get over the sentimentality added by the vocals. "Marbles", meanwhile, a straight Roger Limb pastiche, now sounds quite yukky in its squelchy production; it's as if you've drowned in a huge pool of playdoh and are struggling to fight your way out of it. It's not bad, but it's as though they're just leaving their source material where they found it, rather than taking it somewhere else as Boards of Canada do on similar tracks like "Iced Cooly". Plone are clearly at their best on the slower, more melancholic tracks (which I recall initially liking least); the wonderfully ambivalently-titled "Busy Working" is easily comparable to Paddy Kingsland at his slowest-burning and most anticipatory, "The Greek Alphabet" is soaring "sea-and-sky" music Kingsland would have been proud of, and the deep, reverberent bass of "Top And Low Rent" is as cool as I can imagine such intensely bedroom-bound music being anymore. I used to be rather bored by these tracks while relishing the sentimental drivel of "Bibi Plone", but now my feelings have reversed; my attitude towards the music that came out of the Workshop during the analog synth era of 1972-1980 or so (Plone's main source) has become much less

imbued with the conventional dewy-eyed nostalgia for some notional shared past, and much more knowledgeable and critical.

Ah yes, Boards of Canada. I discovered them only in January this year (thanks to Simon Reynolds for the recommendation), but I've come to love them with only a few hesitations. Certainly when BoC are compared to Plone - something which seems to happen a lot, doubtless in a recognition of their shared debt to the Kingsland / Limb / Peter Howell era of the RW - I'd go with BoC every time, out of recognition for their sheer diversity and range of output. Plone, by comparison, are perpetually playing the same game, one-trick ponies of synthery. My moments of doubt about Boards of Canada come when they overdo the chillout thing (4 Later, the background of (Blue) Jam, you know the litany to avoid), and certainly their 1998 album *Music Has The Right To Children* has been ever so slightly overrated by some; tracks like "An Eagle In Your Mind" end up just fitting totally into the background, and some of the shorter tracks like "Kaini Industries" sound weirdly pointless on repeated listens (though transcendent the first time). It hits its highest levels of inspiration when it jumps out of the sound lab and gets funky, or at least tries - "Sixtyten" is slowly elevated from background to intoxicating foreground by the physical presence of its beats.

And the more you listen, the more sounds there are (it's an album of textures rather than instantly appealing sounds, and therefore runs the risk of sounding like it has one foot permanently trapped in the research unit, but generally gets away with it); the only emotion to feel on hearing "Rogybiv" is sheer euphoria, and the rolling synth lines of "Rue The Whirl" encapsulate all the elation that Kingsland achieved at his best.

This music sends me somewhere I can't describe; it turns what might otherwise be a boring stoned nostalgia trip into a starting point for a whole new way of living, a new universe, a perfection that is no less enticing for its obvious roots in something narrow and restrictive, if not its falseness.

But still sometimes during *Music Has The Right To Children* I get restless, start waiting for something more exciting and less identifiable to any source material to start happening. Much of BoC *Maxima*, which I would suggest is their best album simply through being their most varied and most continually surprising, provides me with those qualities. I love the precise beat science of "Chinook", "June 9th", "Red Moss", "Nlogax" and the slower, climactic "Whitewater" ("science" is exactly the right word for these tracks; it's a funkiness - and they are very funky - that has more to do with the kind of funk that would have been created if science labs were living creatures than it has with anything ever played by anyone who thought "jamming" was a good idea; in short, they are what would have been recorded had Afrika Bambaataa produced *Scientific Eye*, and two utterly oppositional ideas of "the 80s" had

met each other at the time rather than still being speculatively merged in retrospect by people like BoC). I also cherish the genuine freakiness of "Nova Scotia Robots", and the creepiness of "Skimming Stones" (at the dead of night, I suspect).

And then there's the mournful echo of "Concourse" (might this one be cold and vandalised, and BoC are walking through it, wondering what went wrong?) and the stock-still calm of "M9", two pieces whose very titles are surely inviting a Martin Parr comparison (<http://www.elidor.freeseerve.co.uk/parr.htm>) but which go beyond that; they're entirely above the mundanity of the masses of imperfect, dull, provincial people walking around in those postcards, evoking an entirely post-human and ordered and frozen existence, where the idiosyncracies and aggressive counter-reactions built into human nature have been phased out. Real life has, quite simply, never been this good (people do have to move about and have feelings and think for themselves and express their opinions, after all). My preference for most of BoC Maxima over most of their other, less ambiguous, more obviously and straightforwardly 70s / 80s-evoking music, would seem to confirm my feeling that the Radiophonic Workshop's influence is at its most positive when it takes you into another universe - a still more complex and stimulating one, and one fully reflecting the moment in which you're recording - from where you started.

I remember being very pleased with my piece on David Inglesfield's still-unreleased CD (<http://www.elidor.freeseerve.co.uk/inglesfield.htm>) because it was the first time I'd taken phraseology I'd initially used in the casual, informal medium of private emails, and used it in a full piece, back when I still found writing such things very difficult and forced and stressful. I still like my writing, but ideologically my early take on the relationship between this music and the Workshop now looks completely fucked up from this end. Now that I cling to the deep-rooted historicism of so much of Paddy Kingsland's music, and also Malcolm Clarke's awesome "Hurdy Gurdy", I wonder what I could possibly have been thinking when I wrote of Inglesfield's music, on 12th June last year, that it was a kind of "ruralist Radiophonic Workshop, something that would have been utterly alien to the RW's intent, of course" (<http://www.elidor.freeseerve.co.uk/oldthoughts1.htm>).

It was to some extent comparative ignorance of the Workshop's achievements - I hadn't seen The Changes yet and had barely heard any of Kingsland's work - but more deeply it was my simplistic and somewhat over-romantic association of Radiophonic music with the whole Wilson-era "reinvention" of Britain, where anything with strong echoes of the distant past and not suggestive of a bright, instant, present / future was considered valueless and disposable (itself contrived on my part by my loathing for "heritage culture"). I'd played up to that rather obvious association, and seriously exaggerated it.

Anyway, the whole concept of that sentence is a complete red herring; the Workshop's "intent" was quite simply to make music suitable for whichever programme they were writing for, which may have been pure white-heat-of-technology or quiet reflection depending on the style and tone of the programme; if I've learned one thing subsequently, it is that the RW was first and foremost writing to order, therefore it can be a mistake to expect particularly intense awareness of the political and cultural scene outside seeping through into their music, because it would have been denigratory to their purpose to allow such criteria to dominate. I also look back in embarrassment at my somewhat confused initial clutching at straws for specific comparisons from the RW oeuvre - my original likening of Inglesfield's work with the bright-and-bouncy, modernity-at-all- costs signature pieces of John Baker was way wide of the mark.

No, the link is with Kingsland (there are squelchy, bouncy effects on a few tracks that seem more redolent of Limb or Howell, but it was only Kingsland who mastered this mood), and it's probably the only music I've heard that really takes hold where he left off and might just have continued (the plasticisation of the spiritual and the spiritualisation of the plastic) had he not sadly concentrated (and, in my view, wasted) his energies and talents on the blandishments of corporate / programme music. I really don't feel I have anything to say about it that I didn't say before, except that David recalls watching *The Changes* when it was broadcast, though it took me to bring forth that recollection; he never mentioned Kingsland's soundtrack at all as even a possible influence, yet it appears to me as a very strong and obvious influence. For those like myself who believe that pop music is at least as much a process of reanimation-of-memories-you-don't-know-you- have (of which the Radiophonic Workshop, as a whole, are possibly the prime example in the UK) as it is a process of reanimation-of-memories-you-know-you-have (like the Beatles or Abba or the Sex Pistols), facts like this are in themselves powerful objects in strengthening our arguments.

Pram kickstarted the whole Birmingham scene from which Plone and Broadcast have subsequently sprung, and have reached a kind of veteran status within the UK avant-pop scene (they are actually still making very good records, but they tend to get lost in the crowd). Their absorption of RW influences is arguably much less instantly obvious, and certainly less traceable to a particular era or a particular source than either of the above progeny, but it is there; their sound often makes me think of the Maida Vale studios on a far tighter budget (yes, it is possible!). At their best - 1994's *Helium* is still one of my favourite British records of the mid-90s - they have a wonderfully small-scale, "home-studio" feel which makes them genuinely endearing and likeable; I instantly imagine them as people going about their work rather messily, while I can be tempted to imagine Boards of Canada as distant, high-

flown, invisible sprites (though I obviously try very hard not to). Helium is a little masterpiece of lost moments and forbidden fantasies, which fits perfectly between Delia Derbyshire's minimalism and John Baker's cut-and-piece optimism, and there does seem to be a real purpose (the suggestion of a down-at-heel, dusty way of life which modern synths, by their very contemporaneity, cannot easily evoke) behind its deliberate use of outmoded technology, rather than just dead-end purism.

Although Piano Magic's scope is far wider than their RW influence in itself gives them - indeed, they arguably went too far into relatively straightforward song structures and the heavy use of guitars on their last album, the overrated-by-Elidor-and- Freaky Trigger (<http://www.elidor.freeseve.co.uk/pianomag.htm>) Artists' Rifles - they deserve to be mentioned here, if only for the remarkable, uncanny "Soft Magnets", five minutes of displaced John Baker, what happened when it was no longer written to order and was let off into the harsh world outside, allowed to continue for whatever length its creator wanted, set around its own structure, evoking whatever came to mind rather than the purpose its creator was set on. It has to be heard.

I'm honestly not sure whether I want to write that much about Broadcast here. It's not that I don't like them (I planned once to review their last album *The Noise Made By People* on this site, and regret never getting round to it), it's just that I agree passionately with Tom Ewing's recent comments in NYLPM (<http://www.netcomuk.co.uk/~tewing/singlesb.html>) that many popcrits have in fact overstated their sense of the past and their debt to the Workshop's early years (basically: Delia Derbyshire, Madalena Fagandini, Desmond Briscoe and Phil Young; developments in the RW after about 1964 do not really figure in their litany). I see them as a band who have suffered a lot (possibly even at my hands!) from historically- weighted comparisons and invocations of big words like sorrow and mystery and strange and cold; what really moves me about them now is the pop sense and the residual modernism. So the understated Motown of "Come On Let's Go" is a more treasurable element of the song to me than any Meekish production twitches, and the glorious, startling echoes of the productions of The RZA in "Tower Of Our Tuning" and "Dead The Long Year" (I sometimes wonder what Timbaland might do with some of these sounds; then we'd see it all seeping back into truly modernist pop) are more striking, and last with me longer, than the use of effects that recall Derbyshire / Fagandini '62. At their best, they have truly reanimated their source material in the best sense of that much-abused word; by their reclusiveness, they have let a mythology creep up around their music which actually works to their denigration, for it detracts from their beating heart, their astute modernist instincts.

My attitude to the more purist Broadcast fans - and, indeed, the starting point for this whole piece as they would view it - is ambivalent, because simply

replicating the sound and style of a particular period in the RW's history should surely not be seen as something inherently worth praising, or as something in the inherently questing, forward-thinking spirit of the Workshop at its peak. There is much of value to build on that came out of Maida Vale between 1958 and the mid-late 70s, and its echoes might just as easily be there in the productions of Timbaland, Swizz Beats, The RZA, 1991-vintage Liam Howlett or even the incredibly broadminded cratedigging of peak-era DJ Premier as in any of the obvious names to drop (for more on this, see the 23rd December 2000 entry at [http:// www.elidor.freeseve.co.uk/oldthoughts3.htm](http://www.elidor.freeseve.co.uk/oldthoughts3.htm)). There are still avenues unexplored; when you find yourself rather tired by Plone's carefully-arranged, immaculately-presented analog synth preservation society, remember that the Radiophonic Workshop's influence certainly doesn't end there, and it may in fact be strongest when you don't instantly recognise it.

Robin Carmody, 18th May 2001

<http://www.elidor.freeseve.co.uk/radiophonic.htm>