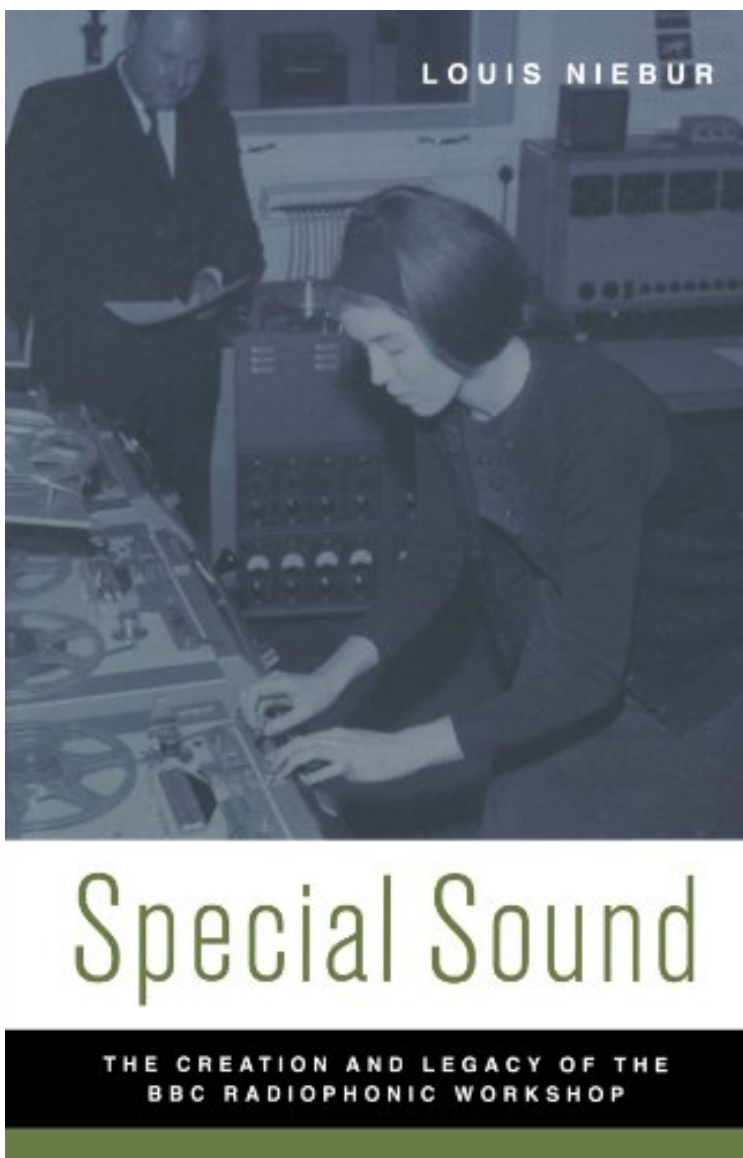


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## Special Sound: The Creation and Legacy of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop (Oxford Music / Media)

*Louis Niebur*

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**Louis Niebur : Special Sound: The Creation and Legacy of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop (Oxford Music / Media)** before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Special Sound: The Creation and Legacy of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop (Oxford Music / Media):

12 of 16 people found the following review helpful. Great subject, but falls short  
By Kyle A. Wright  
The BBC Radiophonic Workshop was established in the late 1950s to create "special sound" for BBC radio (and later TV) productions. Initially working with tape and primitive electronics, the workshop created some of the earliest electronic sound effects and music, all for various BBC productions (most famously "Dr. Who"). They continued in this for 40 years, often pioneering the way with synthesizers and MIDI systems. Most likely due to the fact that they were not part of the academic music establishment at the time, the workshop's history has rarely been written about - the only real exception (to my knowledge) being Desmond Briscoe's impossible-to-find history of the workshop's first 25 years. Louis Niebur therefore sets out here to provide an account of the workshop's founding, the work they did, and their legacy. The text itself clocks in at just over 200 pages and reads very much like a thesis with lots of end-notes and phrases like "In the next section I will present..." There's also a lot of repetition (re-introducing people and pieces) and overload (including exhaustive accounts of newspaper reviews), particularly in the first half of the book. Some content would have been better served as an appendix. Niebur devotes a large portion of the book to discussions of the sociological cultural issues surrounding the creation of the workshop and interactions within it, lengthy note-by-note dissections of pieces, analysis of pieces to their radio/tv contexts in terms of film theory, and lots of guesswork as to the composers' motives behind their compositions and choice of sound. These can get really tedious, and you have to wonder if he's just trying to fill up pages. That said, the book does have some very interesting and well-written material on the studio's move from tape to synthesizers to MIDI, the work done for various BBC projects, and electronic music's gradual acceptance within the BBC. The publisher also provides a companion website which has audio and video examples referenced in the book. But I feel that there's a lot left out. At most there's only minimal discussion of the actual construction of the tape works (and the techniques involved). The coverage of the pre-synthesizer equipment and electronics used in the studio was severely lacking too - the author keeps bringing up this amazing "glowpot mixer" but never actually says what it was or did. Additionally, there is very little in the way of context outside of the workshop (what was going on at other electronic music studios? where were other electronic radio/tv/film scores being composed?). I think this sort of content would help the book tremendously, making it more readable and interesting to a wider group of readers. As an academic document, or for those interested in the history and theory of film music, I imagine that this would be an excellent book. But for those interested in what the workshop composers and engineers did - and how they did it - the book sadly falls short.

Special Sound traces the fascinating creation and legacy of the BBC's electronic music studio, the Radiophonic Workshop, in the context of other studios in Europe and America. The BBC built a studio to provide its own avant-garde dramatic productions with experimental sounds "neither music nor sound effect." Quickly, however, a popular kind of electronic music emerged in the form of quirky jingles, signature tunes such as Doctor Who, and incidental music for hundreds of programs. These influential sounds and styles, heard by millions of listeners over decades of operation on television and radio, have served as a primary inspiration for the use of electronic instruments in popular music. Using in-depth research in the studio's archives and papers, this book tells the history of the many engineers, composers, directors, and producers behind the studio to trace the shifting perception towards electronic music in Britain. Combining historical discussion of the people and instruments in the workshop with analysis of specific works, Louis Niebur creates a new model for understanding how the Radiophonic Workshop fits into the larger history of electronic music.

"Louis Niebur has accomplished a feat of virtuoso research that places in a wholly original context the extraordinary accomplishments of such pioneers as Maddalena Fagandini, Daphne Oram, and the fabulous Delia Derbyshire. Special Sound: The Creation and Legacy of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop is elegantly organized and incisively written, a musicological 'page-turner' that elucidates a crucial period in the evolution of British technology and aesthetics. This volume should be required reading for anyone interested in British culture, music, and technical innovation during the mid-twentieth century." -Byron Adams, Professor of Music, University of California, Riverside  
"This stunning and thorough book exploring the BBC Radiophonic Workshop investigates not only broadcasting and programme-making, but also the rise of electronic music in the UK. Dr. Niebur's passion for sounds of radio and television invigorates engaging and often entertaining writing. Moreover, it is transporting to hear such unique sounds, while reading about them." -Jenny Doctor, Senior Lecturer, University of York  
"Niebur's research into this early history of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop is wickedly illuminating." --Times Higher Education  
"With Special Sound, Louis Niebur achieves a remarkable feat in subtly allying the private concept and design of a bygone BBC Radiophonic Workshop--- from its inception, the Workshop implemented a largely closed-door policy to outside composers--with active political, social and academic debates. Niebur presents a gentle, nostalgic veneer to Special Sound's theorising, making the work both accessible for the general reader and analytical enough for the specialist...Special Sound is a trip down memory lane for the BBC enthusiast; a unified lucid investigation for the scholar; and a museum of materials, data and analyses for all who applaud a living legacy. The Workshop is dead. Long live the workshop." --MAKE

Magazine About the Author Louis Niebur is Assistant Professor of Musicology at the University of Nevada, Reno.