

Kate Hutchinson: This is Studio Radicals, a new podcast series that celebrates the musical pioneers who are breaking new ground in their field. I'm your host Kate Hutchinson – join me and dCS Audio as we meet with some of music's most innovative minds. Today I'm in Yorkshire in the north of England with Hannah Peel, who dreams up stirring and thought-provoking film and TV soundtracks from her countryside home studio. She's an artist, producer, composer and broadcaster on BBC Radio 3 and is known for being a bit of a synth wizard, but overall perhaps, Hannah is increasingly interested in what makes us tick.

Hannah Peel: There's this sense in the world at the moment, this feeling of being really disjointed from what's happening. All the things that are going on around us... there's even a more of a draw, to want to find out who we are as humans, and how do we present that in music and sound?

Kate Hutchinson: Hannah's soundtracks are Emmy-nominated and Ivor Novello-winning – in 2023, she became the first woman to win Best Television Score for British sci-fi series *The Midwich Cuckoos*. She was praised for her combination of analogue synths, tape manipulations and mystical woodwind. But she's also a forward-thinking solo artist: she's released several albums with ambitious concepts, including a meditation on neuroscience inspired by her grandmother's dementia, a seven-movement space odyssey written for synthesisers and a 29-piece brass band, and the Mercury-nominated, ecology-focused *Fir Wave*. And she's collaborated with the Parasocial Orchestra, Paul Weller, and more recently, the Chinese percussionist Beibei Wang.

Hannah Peel: The work that I've been doing for TV and film is very solitary. And to kind of balance that out doing albums and collaborating with other artists is the best thing. Because it just gives you that buzz again, like when you're a child.

Kate Hutchinson: Across all Hannah's projects, there is a deep underlying sense of exploration. In this episode of Studio Radicals, she takes us through her unconventional journey in sound and how that's made her the composer she is today.

Hannah Peel: I want people to hear the things that are unusual and weird. And question, how is that made? I find that so exciting ... that thing of like, where does that sound come from? What is that? What is making me feel like that?

Kate Hutchinson: Hannah's studio is located on the top floor of an old stone-walled farmhouse in Yorkshire, the place her family relocated to from Northern Ireland when she was young. It's a cosy space with dark green walls lined with racks of machines and the many instruments she's collected over the years. Over there, there's a wind-up music box, and over there a waterphone, a crown of metal tongs, essentially, that creates otherworldly vibrations...

Hannah Peel: The ones that I have in here and I've chosen are here for their specific sound for a certain reason, because I found something interesting about them that resonates with the life that I'm leading, or the life that I'm witnessing, or stories I'm reading, or the news. But naturally if

I'm ever working on anything I've got this trio of Moogs here, which is really gorgeous to work on, and I get a lot of ideas from that. But always, no matter what, the piano. It always comes back to the piano. I think it's because it's instantaneous. You're not having to plug in, it's something that's there, the different tones and the harmonics that come off it, kind of spark off other ideas and you don't get that as much from electronic music, I find.

Kate Hutchinson: Hannah, when you walk in this door, where do you go first?

Hannah Peel: The first things I do actually, are come in, turn on the computer and get some music playing out the speakers. Almost a kind of a warm-up for your ears and a warm-up for the space. Sometimes it's a reminder of where things are placed. Because you know if you're getting up in the morning and you're wandering about, you've got these sounds in the house that are quite high-end. You know, like the fridge opening, or the clatter of plates or cutlery. Just stuff in the house. There's nothing that tunes you in. And I think that the essence of coming into a studio and feeling where the bass is set, where the synths are, where a vocal is and how they're all placed, it just zones you in to a different world.

When I grew up in Northern Ireland, even on my sixth birthday I remember bombs going off in Belfast. We were in to go to a toy shop and a bomb went off, next to us. And my dad picked us up and we all ran, and then the TV cameras were there. And you were constantly going through army checkpoints. There was this constant sound that was always circulating where you've got the army helicopters around, or you were hearing of shootings and things like that. And as a child, you kind of just think, that's normal. Because you've grown up with it. But then when we moved to South Yorkshire, it was also very much the mining recession, still. And people were still in that place. And where we lived, overlooked a huge kind of hill that went right across the landscape, which was a slag heap. So it was just black. And then the old mine was there and we used to go up there and play among the carts and things. So the sound of different places was so unique. One of the things that my mum really kind of focused on was getting us music lessons. So we were instantly given brass – like cornets, and I started playing that in a brass band, and went on to trombone later. And then violin. So I was playing a lot of fiddle music. So yeah, that way of communicating was always through sound

Kate Hutchinson: Being in a brass band, what kind of impact did that have on your approach to music or your experience of music?

Hannah Peel: Firstly, you're working as a team. A lot of people forget when they're listening to brass bands that the breathing is so important and so specific. So you're not allowed to take breaths in certain places, you have to phrase as a group. And there's this feeling of in and out all the time. I went from cornet and then moved to trombone because I got braces on my teeth and I couldn't play the cornet anymore. I remember crying my eyes out because I loved it so much. But when I went to trombone, I thought it was the best thing ever. It was absolutely brilliant. And the reason I loved it so much was sitting in the lower end of that brass band was so powerful, like feeling the spread of sound.... I was always sat in second position, so there was always trombones around, you've got the tubers, and you've got euphoniums and horns, and it's

just a melting pot of gorgeous richness. And that's when you start to get that motion of when everybody's breathing at the same time. When you get a tingle down your back and your front where you just go: Ah, that's working. That's the rise and the fall of music. So it taught me a lot about how music can make you feel. And what I try to input into my compositions today. I always look for that tingles, the buzz.

The first track I ever heard that affected me like that was my neighbour gave me a record of The Carpenters and I heard 'Why do birds suddenly appear' and as soon as she started singing, I was sat with headphones on in the living room. I can remember the smells, it was a Sunday roast dinner that was being cooked, the sun was coming through, I can remember it so perfectly. And that was when I got that feeling of like, ah, that's what music can do to you.

When my grandmother was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, that's when I started to discover music and was able to trigger memories for her and we were able to tap into things that she'd forgotten. And communicate and connect because she was remembering the songs. And so that's when it really started to come to light of like, Alright, okay, there's some science here. And as a musician, and a composer, I should know this sort of stuff. But yeah, that's where I started to go, OK, this is deeper than just, oh, here's a melody. And here's a song. And it's a bit of fun. It's actually something that we as humans need to survive and communicate with.

Kate Hutchinson: When did your love affair with synthesisers begin?

Hannah Peel: It was around 2011, and it was because I was making my very first album in Shoreditch, and next door was a producer called Bengé that had just the most insane collection of vintage synths. And he was working with John Foxx, who had been in Ultravox. But they were making a record together called *John Foxx and the Maths*. When they finished that record, he knew that I played the violin and he was like, Do you wanna join the band? We need a violinist and we're going to put you through loads of effects and pedals and things. And we also need someone that plays keyboards. And I was like, OK! And I very, very quickly learnt how to programme synths, how to get a sound to match the '70s and '80s records that we were also playing. So what filters, what cut off, everything, I learnt it all in that period of time. And I think that addiction to learning and manipulating sound has just continued through so much of all my work, actually.

Kate Hutchinson: Because you'd come from this world, like you said of playing violin, before that brass bands. How did electronic music help shape a different world view or approach to music?

Hannah Peel: I think that kind of manipulation at your fingertips was what I loved. You can do things a lot on plugins and stuff on the computer. But actually, the synthesisers was the way of manipulating sound like changing, feeling like you can push a sound that didn't feel real, almost. That's what worked with that Mary Casio album was the synthesisers moving like breath, like the brass band. It felt like when I was playing a Moog bassline, it just pushed it along with everything else. So when I'm playing them, I'm always tweaking the cutoff as well as if it is a kind of breathing instrument. And I think that's really important, because I think when you just hit

a note, and this is what sometimes I think the digital side misses, you're hitting a note and you think, oh, it's not moving enough, I'll add a trem[olo] or I'll add an effect. Whereas actually, it just needs some physicality.

Kate Hutchinson: What I find really interesting about your work is how you bring together all these different realms. You've got electronic music, you're working in the digital space as well. And then you're bringing in these very sort of organic sounds into it as well. Maybe some found sounds or things that you've recorded on your phone. How do those elements all work together for you?

Hannah Peel: I guess it's maybe a connection to our lives as we live them. It's not just one emotion that you feel, it's not just one sound you hear. I also feel like there's so much more potential when... Like say I'm doing a lot more acoustic or live instrumentation, like strings and brass, I feel like there's always an extra element you can add to that – a sound that they can't make. And sometimes it's just more like a spark of inspiration. So say for example, like I did an album called *The Unfolding* with the Para Orchestra who are based in Bristol, where I was living in County Down in Northern Ireland, I was on a marina, so when it got windy there was always this incredible rattle of all the masts and the birds, and this howl that was so ghostly. But when you sampled it, and then put it through different effects, it created this different world that was just quite magical in some senses. You could either be really really dark with it and octave it down quite a few times, just loads of manipulation to it, and ended up with one occasion with quite a pulse, and it ended up underneath quite a lot of *The Unfolding*. But it added a different element to the classical instrumentation. And I think it just makes it more interesting for me.

Kate Hutchinson: So this interest in sort of creating this otherworldly feel. Where did that come from?

Hannah Peel: It's very hard to get other musicians on board with stuff, because I've always felt like I needed to pay them. And I didn't have any money. So there was a lot of elements of me walking around London, basically, especially in Hackney, there was constant building work going on, picking up things like the cement mixers. Or there was just this massive banging going on that you reverberated around the other buildings in Old Street. And so it was quite easy to pick up different sounds and use them as a snare or as a kick or something. It always goes back to-what we're talking about how music is a tool for communicating and how, as children, we communicate through sound and toy and play. It is just one of those really intrinsic parts. But also, I think, for me, it was about the fact that moving countries and environments I guess from a post war to post-recession, it was always about storytelling and narrative. And I guess no matter what sound I'm using, or what elements I'm putting into it, it is to tell a story.

Kate Hutchinson: You've also made your own instruments. Can you talk a little bit about that and what kind of instruments you make?

Hannah Peel: It's gone from recording things on my Voice Notes to then recording and making digital instruments using contact or the Logic sampler is really good. And there's a couple of

things out there that you can then you know, record a singing bowl, and then play on the MIDI keyboard in any note that you need. And those sorts of things have become essential for when I'm creating scores. They're what I find keeps my music unique to me, and allows me to experiment at speed. Making instruments and finding my own unique sounds is the thing that keeps my brain active and keeps me going, 'Ooh, this is interesting.' I've got a Korean gong over there and a water phone, and I've made my own instruments out of those. Or I'll go to the studio with Beibei Wang and record her doing a load of things and make instruments out of that. Just stuff to keep you going, 'That's my own. That's mine. That makes it stand out.'

Kate Hutchinson: When you're making music for yourself, for your own pleasure, how much do you have other people in mind?

Hannah Peel: Yeah, I mean, it's always there. But I've found that it just doesn't matter anymore. Like when I made *Fir Wave*, it was because it was... It started off life as a library record. It wasn't supposed to be heard by anybody. And I think that was the most freeing experience that I made this album that wasn't for an audience.

Kate Hutchinson: When you say it started off as a library record that wasn't meant to be heard, what do you mean?

Hannah Peel: So KPM, they've been going for years and years, they release library records. They approached me and said, here's *Electrosonic*, which is a 1970s record with Delia Derbyshire, and two other members of the Radiophonic workshop. We have the rights to this, do you want to take this and make your own version of it? Now that original record is more like a sound library, it's these incredible tracks that sound like you're in some kind of Soviet Union science laboratory. But I took samples from that, I changed them and made my own instruments out of the sounds that Delia and everyone had made off tape. And then kind of forgot about the record, but made this album that really was just for film editors, TV editors, to pick out tracks. But when I delivered it, they were like, this would make a really great record. Do you fancy releasing it? And so when it got to lockdown, a year later, I was like, maybe I'll relook at that as an album. And so worked with a great mixing engineer and producer called Tim Allen. I said, Look, I can't see the wood for the trees on this album. Will you help take the tracks, mix them again, and help co-produce a couple of these ones that were the beats. Always the beats, where the beats are not quite what I want them to do and, and it became *Fir Wave*.

Kate Hutchinson: I'm glad you mentioned Delia Derbyshire because she's an interesting character, electronic music pioneer, part of the BBC Radiophonic workshop, composed the *Doctor Who* theme tune. What she said before in interviews is that her interest in the power of sound and maybe even electronic music went back to when she was hearing the air raid sirens in World War Two and what you were saying about the bombs going off and hearing these noises of Northern Ireland and growing up there at the time, those two things linked together somehow, in my mind. Do you see links between yourself and Delia, or have you?

Hannah Peel: Yeah. It's funny when you mention her growing up in Coventry and those sounds and I didn't know that until later. But I already had discovered her and had an adoration of her music. But yeah, when I found that out, I was like, 'Oh, maybe that's where this background of exploration and trying to get a feeling into something with a different world of instruments comes from.' I guess it's the industrial or the metallic or something else that's quite indescribable that's around us, and putting that into music. What I really respect about her was her stubbornness to continue. And I think that is definitely something I have this focus that I'm almost like, I care what people think but I almost *don't*. There's this, I'm just doing that and you either like it or you don't, but that's what I'm doing. And I'll do it to the best I possibly can. And that love of doing things with dancers or doing things in theater or doing things to visuals, that's what she would do all the time. You know, when they discovered her whole back catalogue that was hidden in her attic, it was all that kind of music – experimental, but also the most amazing melodies. And there were elements of that where, I've heard certain tracks of hers that sound like dance music before we had dance music – electronic dance music. So I find that I kind of resonate with her path a little bit more. And I feel like I have this opportunity in the world we're in to explore and have that music heard, and be able to talk about it, which she wasn't able to. She was kind of sidelined and not given credit for things. And I feel like, in this day and age I've been given an opportunity to do that, and I should make a stand for it.

Kate Hutchinson: What sparked your interest in composing for film?

Hannah Peel: When I was at university in Liverpool, I went to a concert in Manchester, at the Bridgewater Hall. And went to see The Cinematic Orchestra play *Man With a Movie Camera*. And seeing them play it live with the black and white dada film behind them was just life - changing in some senses. In that I was like, I want to do that. During my studies there's a composer called Gary Carpenter, who is known more for his classical compositions. But he was the MD on *The Wickerman*, the original. And as part of his lessons he would bring in films for us to score and I had this... d'you remember the old Macs that were like coloured?

Kate Hutchinson: I desperately wanted one of those Macs when I was younger, yeah. They were so cool.

Hannah Peel: They were so good. I had one of these. And I could play the film very slowly, very badly, on it, but I could write to the visuals. And I remember he gave us a film about Virginia Woolf that starred Nicole Kidman. Called *The Hours*. And I think Philip Glass had done the music. But he'd managed to get the footage of just the voice and the sound effects and the visual without the music. And we were all sent away to score it. And I remember just feeling, weirdly, like the world was just complete. Like that was what I was supposed to be doing. And then when I graduated, I went to apply to a couple of places, but one was to do a master's in film scoring and I didn't get in.

Kate Hutchinson: That is an absolute travesty.

Hannah Peel: And they were like, you've come from a pop college and because it was a classical college at the time, they were just like, 'No, you haven't got the right skills to be part of this course.' So I was like, right. OK, well, what do you do then if you can't get into that world via that, what are the opportunities are there?

Kate Hutchinson: Does something like that spur you on? Or do you carry it with you?

Hannah Peel: Yeah, you feel like the underdog. And I felt like I'd made the wrong choices somewhere that this was what I wanted to do. But why wasn't I allowed to do that? My scores were great. I got a first class honours degree, like, why wouldn't I be let in to a classical college? And I think it just literally was this kind of clique, or barrier. I came from a working class background where I didn't have any equipment. I didn't have this stuff. I just had this passion. So when I left that interview, and I didn't get in, a younger composer who was on the panel did ring and said, Look, you're obviously really passionate about this. Just find your own voice, and just do it that way.

Kate Hutchinson: And so she did. While writing some music for a theatre production, Hannah found a small programmable music box in a joke shop. Little did she know that this would be her key to breaking through...

Hannah Peel: I just kind of stumbled across it. I was writing some music for theatre and I found the music box and I started using it. I made a little '80s remix EP called *Rebox*. And that's when I just kind of was like, Oh, I'll just do 'Tainted Love'. And sent it to a few people. And then that got picked up for adverts for electricity, then it got onto *American Horror Story*. And then it was with *Dancing with the Stars* in America. And it just went everywhere. So that was my door in.

Kate Hutchinson: So for every TV or film score that you're doing, or for most of them, you're creating a sort of sound world, you're creating a palette from scratch. How often do you get to go on set and record stuff when you're there?

Hannah Peel: Oh, so little! I wish it was more. The last time I was able to go on set was one of the first TV shows that I did, which was called *The Deceived* for Channel 5. And they were filming most of that in this one house and it was a creaky old house in Northern Ireland. And I was able to go with one of the kind of boom recordists and pick up loads of things that were in that house like old fires, they had this amazing iron bathtub and we used some hydrophones to record the water inside of that. Creaking stairs. They had even had this door that was so huge, but when you shut it, it sounded like this like guttural pig noise. So yeah, there was a lot of sounds from that that I was able to pick up and use. But I wish I could go on set more. It's a really special thing. Seeing it all on screen is great. But to be there is it's something else

Kate Hutchinson: You've done so many film and TV scores now. How do you find new ways to challenge yourself?

Hannah Peel: It's always to do with sound. What's the next thing that you can bring to something that's different, that also helps tell the story? It's interesting, because the more that I'm doing, the bigger budgets and the bigger stars that are in it, the less experimentation I'm allowed to do. And so I have to find ways to sneak it in and do my own thing. And really push that in a way that makes it work for everybody.

Kate Hutchinson: So you're always trying to find a way to make it sneakily subversive?

Hannah Peel: Yeah, and I think that's what makes an interesting score. The scores that I do like are always where you listen and you go, 'What is that? What is that sound? Is it the sound of that monster? Or alien? How did they make that?' Those are the questions I like to answer.

Kate Hutchinson: So as the budget goes up, how do you hold onto that sense of subversion and the things that make you you?

Hannah Peel: Yeah, you have more to play with at your fingertips. I've got more of an opportunity to go and ask that instrumentalist to come and play on a record than I ever did before. My emphasis is less on found sound and more on, wouldn't it be amazing to go here and record here? And I feel really lucky to have got to this point in my career where I *can* do that, and still find inspiration. But I think it is in the detail of how something is recorded. And more and more as the budget goes up, more and more I'm feeling it has to be in a controlled environment, because I need the chance to manipulate and change things and I need the sound to be as good as quality as possible.

Kate Hutchinson: What role does listening play in your creative process? How much do you listen back, zone into the sound, fine-tune, refine things?

Hannah Peel: I refine things constantly. I am constantly listening back and playing things over and over and over and over again. In fact, to the point where three or four hours can pass and I have no idea of what the time is or where it has gone. And it's not until somebody else says, Yeah, I'm sick of hearing that thing that was repeated for three hours that you go, Oh, yeah, I did, didn't I? And you were just tweaking it and then tweaking it again. And then you're like, Oh, *there* I got the feeling. OK, yeah. Next bit.

Kate Hutchinson: How do pieces of music start for you? Do they start as individual details that you sew together? Or are you working in broader strokes?

Hannah Peel: The way I work is definitely minute details to begin with. So taking something an essence of something, whether it be a synth that I've just been playing around with, and just created some random things. And then eventually, maybe that synth disappears once you add to it. But always starting with one thing, I think it's really important never to start with a blank page. I think that opening up a Logic session, or starting on a page that is blank is sometimes really daunting. And I think it's a great thing to, when you finish a project that's feeling good, you just start something else and leave it there so that when you open it up, you've got somewhere

to go from. It's a really hard thing to do, because you want to keep going when you think you're doing well. But it's something I've learned to stop when something feels good, I'll walk out of the room and go get a cup of tea. So that when you come back in, you're coming back in with that feeling of positivity, and not the weight of, I am not doing well. Because that's the thing that really cuts any kind of creative for me, just adds to a block when you're not feeling your best.

Kate Hutchinson: How important is it to you as an artist and a composer that people are able to hear those fine details within a piece of work that you put out?

Hannah Peel: I think it's really important that people hear the details that have gone into stuff. There's this sense in the world at the moment, this feeling of being really disjointed from what's happening. Like all the things that are going on around us... there's even a more of a draw, to want to find out who we are as humans, and how do we present that in music and sound? Like I'm not a lyricist. I don't speak how I feel like half the time, it's just more put into the essence of the music. You know, that's why I want to keep releasing records. I want people to hear the things that are unusual and weird. And question, how is that made? Like, I find that so exciting. That thing of, where does that sound come from? What is that? What is making me feel like that?

There's nothing that I've done that isn't about finding some sort of storyline or narrative, but also connection to the human body, and where we have come from and where we are going to. I think every single album, every single sound, everything is back to that. And maybe that's because my childhood was so disconnected between places that I had this perspective of leaving places and going somewhere, and being somewhere else and being the odd person out. There's so many of us that have traveled and moved or been immigrants. And it's important that we tell a story through that.

Outro: This is Studio Radicals with dCS Audio.

Kate Hutchinson: This episode starred Hannah Peel. Thanks for listening, everyone. I hope you're enjoying the series so far. Studio Radicals is co-produced by dCS Audio and me, Kate Hutchinson, with audio production and editing by Holly Fisher. The theme music is by Anna Prior. Coming up next, it's Ramera Abraham. "The biggest reason why I love vocal production is because it's the most complex instrument that's out there. It's completely around the human emotion, and how people express themselves. And that is going to produce the sound of your instrument. It's really an amazing thing to me." Head to [dcsaudio.com/studioradicals](https://dcsaudio.com/studioradicals) and you can listen to playlists featuring all of the music we've talked about in the series and hear more episodes too. Subscribe now and don't miss an episode.