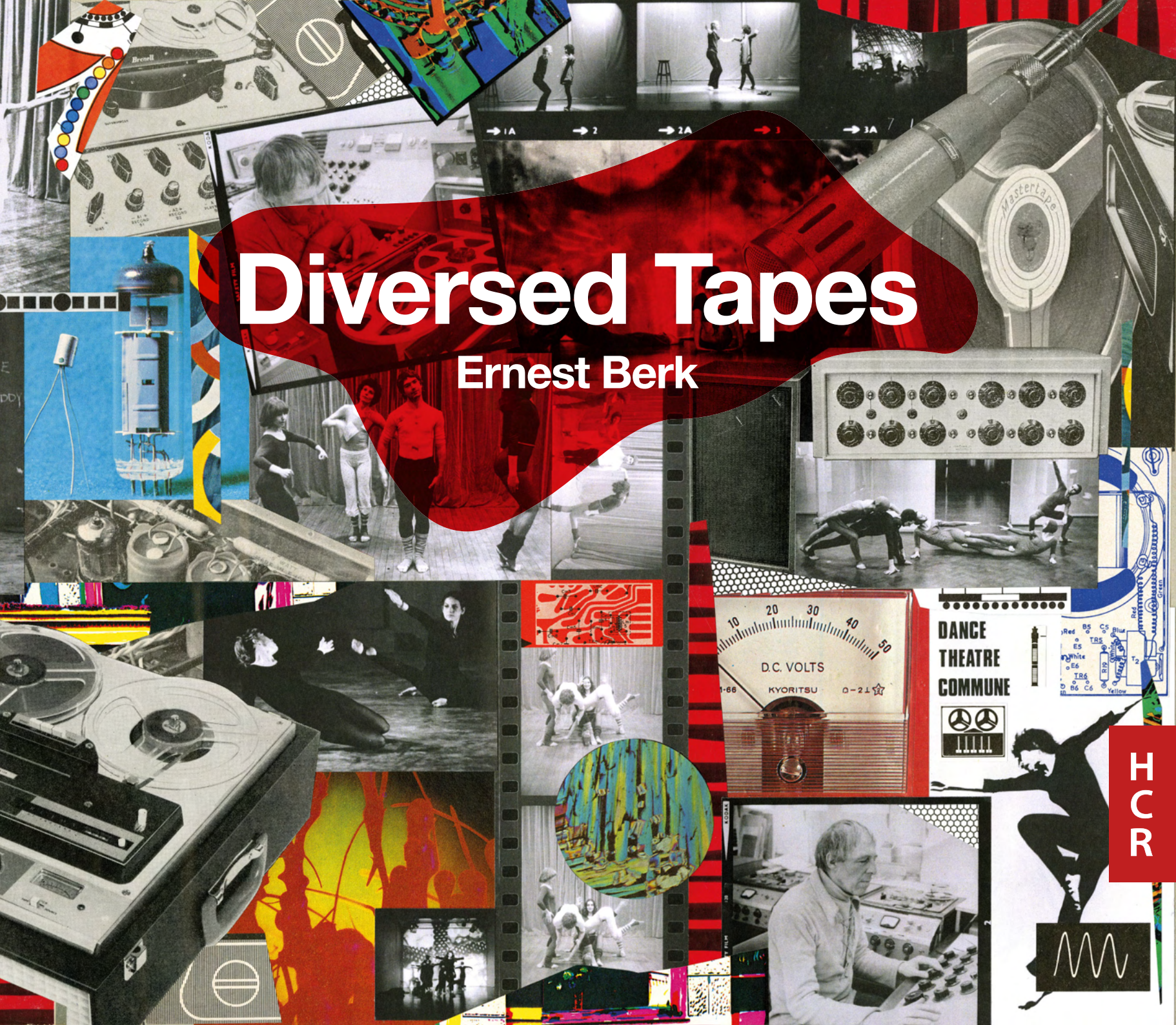


Ernest Berk

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Ernest Berk was one of the most prolific composers of electronic music in England and yet his work has remained almost completely unknown to the wider public. With only a few pieces ever made commercially available in limited circulation, much of his vast output has languished in obscurity. Berk was a true polymath, working throughout his life as a composer, percussionist, dancer, choreographer, teacher, actor, and mime artist, often assuming many of these roles in the same project. He composed over 228 works of electronic music between 1957 and 1984, many of considerable length and often used to accompany his own expressionist contemporary dance productions. His music is at once radical and yet incredibly listenable, rooted in a deep appreciation for melody and rhythm. This compilation is still just a small selection of the music Berk wrote during his lifetime, but it is an attempt to illustrate the diverse range of expressive approaches he embraced across his catalogue.

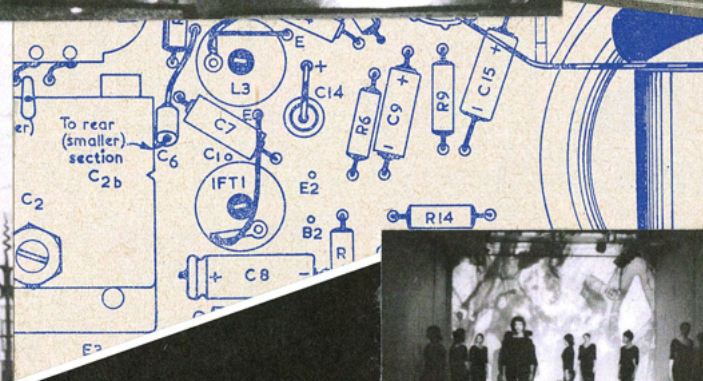
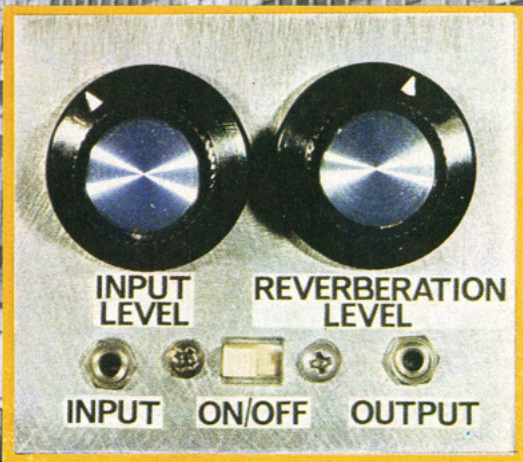
Ernest Berk was born in 1909 in Cologne, Germany. While a student at the influential Mary Wigman dance school in Cologne he began to produce his own ballets, and in 1933 he formed his own company and married fellow student Lotte Heymansohn. As the 1930s progressed, conditions in Germany became increasingly dangerous and untenable for the young couple – Lotte was Jewish, and under the Nazi regime both were forbidden to teach. They left the country in 1935 and, by way of Berk's British passport, they sought refuge and a new life in London, eventually settling in Shepherd's Bush.

After establishing his studio in Camden, North London, Berk continued to teach his freely expressive dance method, and for practical purposes began using a tape recorder, initially to record instrumental accompaniment for playback during rehearsals. Berk started his experiments with tape and electronics in the 1950s, contemporary to other early electronic music pioneers in England, such as Tristram Cary, Roberto Gerhard, and Daphne Oram. His first tape composition, *End of the World (or: where do we go from here)*, written in 1957, is featured on this collection and from the outset we can hear the seeds of the sonic experimentation that would develop throughout Berk's creative practice. A relatively linear piece, Berk's fascination with rhythm is evident throughout. A ticking clock grounds the work, providing a stable background for the superimposition of other percussive fragments and cymbal crashes. All of this combines to craft a progressive development of pace and intensity across the four-minute duration.

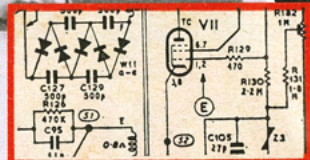
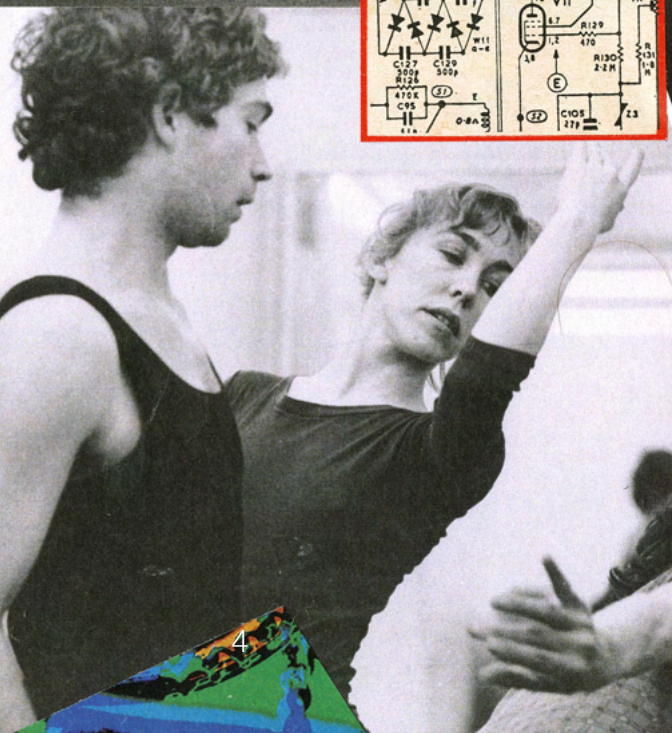
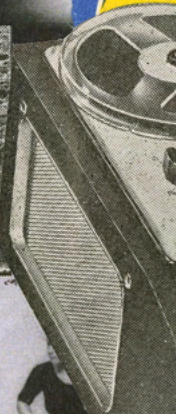
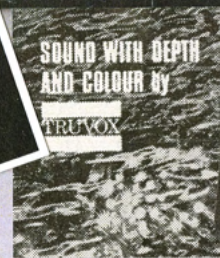
In his Camden studio Berk set up tape recorders, tone generators, filters, and modulators, exploring both microphone-orientated musique concrète and oscillator-based electronic music – techniques which still represented an ideological divide in France and Germany during the 1950s and early 1960s. Drumming was central to Berk's approach. He had studied non-Western music in Germany and had amassed a significant collection of traditional percussion instruments from around the world. In a March 1963 letter to the British Institute of Recorded Sound, Berk invited a representative of the organisation to his studio for a special evening programme comprising his recent compositions. "You might be interested in the experimental work I am carrying out in the field of musique concrète and electronic sound," he wrote. "I am particularly concerned with the creation and combination of totally new sounds, especially those which can be used in conjunction with the spoken word, to evoke images and emotions."

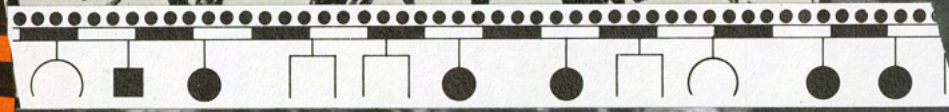
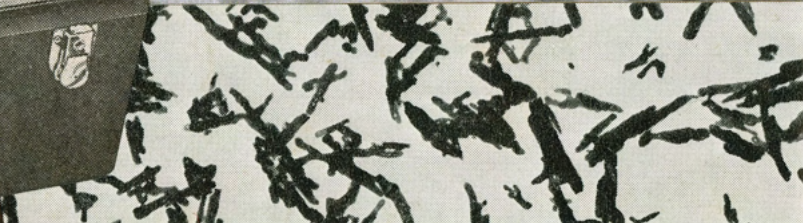
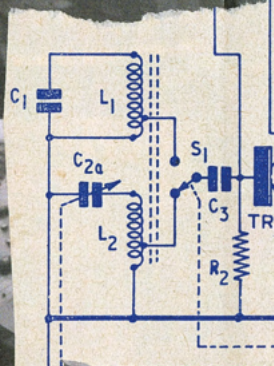
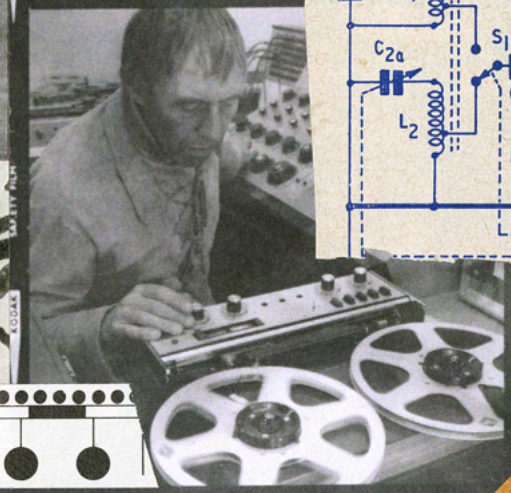
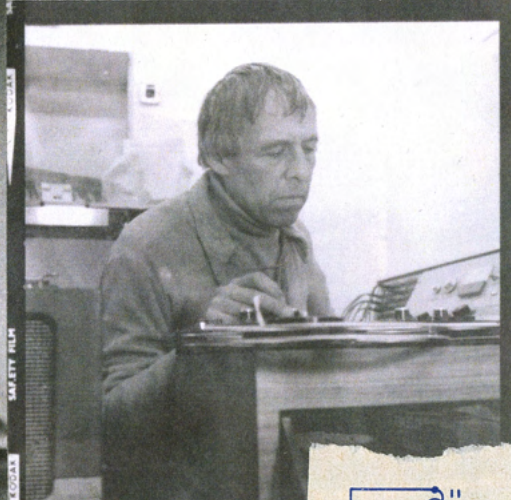
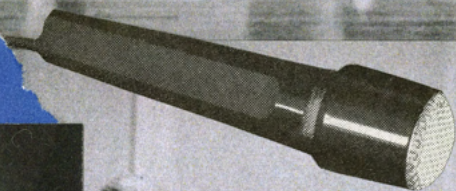
Two works that exemplify Berk's fascination with the new possibilities that electronic music could offer are *Kali Yuga* and *Wings Over the Valley of Death*. Completed in 1962, *Kali Yuga* was created by Berk with the additional assistance of electronic equipment provided by Desmond Leslie. A melody is paired with the deep pedal of a harmonium and (occasionally reversed) drumbeats, gongs, bells, and bellows to create a dark and brooding atmosphere. In *Wings Over the Valley of Death* Berk's virtuosic handling of the magnetic tape medium itself is foregrounded. Sounds and gestures are sped up, slowed down, edited, and reversed in such a way, and with such frequency, that the magnetic tape becomes an instrument against a rich backing track of percussion, chirps, mouth sounds and electronic noises.

Berk married dancer Ailsa Park in 1965. That year, he composed and choreographed a dance for Ailsa drawn from the Edith Sitwell cycle *Three Poems of the Atomic Age*. The original poem, *Dirge for The New Sunrise*, dissects the horrific power of nuclear war, connecting the warmth of a sunrise and its historical and symbolic connection to Christ's love, with the apocalyptic rise of the new sun of the atomic blast and its radiating warmth bringing death. Berk's musical adaptation of this work (slightly retitled to *Dirge for a New Sunrise*) comprises three parts, the first a lullaby-like opening performed on glockenspiel, then a restless series of musique concrète fragments which create a sense of gradual detachment in the material. Perhaps this is an allusion to Sitwell's line "I saw the little Ant-men as they ran." Finally, there is a sharp transition first to a cymbal crash – the same recording used in his first composition *End of the World* – and a deliberate, deathly silence sparsely punctuated with a thin, wavering melody.



since
theatre
community





By the late 1960s the artistic and cultural landscape in Britain was changing fast. Although still not wholly accepted by critics or much of the public, some serious electronic music compositions from Europe, such as those by Karlheinz Stockhausen, were recognised and receiving performances. Many British tape composers during this period were self-taught home studio experimenters or academy trained music graduates, and this mix of mavericks, hobbyists, and professionals tended to be taken less seriously than their continental counterparts. In response to this, a landmark concert of British electronic music was programmed in London in 1968 at the Queen Elizabeth Hall. The concert featured works by Delia Derbyshire, Ernest Berk, Tristram Cary, Peter Zinovieff, Daphne Oram and Ivor Walsworth, George Newson, Jacob Meyerowitz, and Alan Suttcliffe.

Berk's *Diversed Mind* was selected for this concert. The composition is in five sections, each one abstractly related to a state of mind, growing from "deep depression to erratic, high, nervous tension." The piece fuses the sounds of tone oscillators with manipulations of recorded percussion and physical objects and uses extreme pitch shifting to bring otherwise inaudible sound and timbres into the audible frequency range.

The Queen Elizabeth Hall concert was a landmark event in the history of British electronic music. With an increasing interest and awareness amongst the public towards electronic music, but with few opportunities to properly hear professionally staged concerts, the performance was ideally timed and sold out. Cary himself describes the circumstances surrounding the event as: "It was quite a successful concert [...] we had completely ruthless publicity stunts like [...] 5,000 stickers which we [...] stuck on people's cars [...] every lamp post in Putney must have had one of these stickers, and all over the West End. We handed them out to school kids [...] and we had a bulging house [...] People were turned away."

For Berk, 1970 was a pivotal year. It included a move to a new studio on Dorset Street in London, and the establishment of the Dance Theatre Commune. Throughout the 1970s Ernest and Ailsa Berk worked together on a large number of dance pieces. The Dance Theatre Commune, which toured nationally and internationally, became a prominent centre for dance, mixed media performance, and electronic music. One example of Berk's work from this period is *Vibram*.

Described as a “continuous uncut improvisation”, *Vibram* was composed during a marked period of interest in improvisation by Berk, having started the improvisation ensemble *Lyra Ventura* with Guildhall colleague Alfred Neiman a few months before. This work demonstrates the sophistication Berk managed to achieve in electronic sound using relatively modest resources. The modular synthesis-like sonorities come from Berk’s manipulation of tone oscillators, ring modulators, and filters. Berk rejected the commercially driven cycle of discarding and replacing still useful equipment, and so many of his compositions from the 1970s onwards were made with supposedly obsolete devices. His persistence with the same equipment over time results in a remarkable level of consistency throughout his catalogue.

From 1980 the Dance Theatre Commune and Berk’s composition of electronic music began to wind down. By 1985, at the age of 76, Berk returned to Germany, moving to Berlin where he continued to teach, choreograph, and act. He composed no new electronic music after 1984.

Over time the emerging narratives around electronic music history have tended to concentrate on the existence of novel electronic instruments or institutional centres of composition and their figureheads. This comes at the expense of individuals who were not part of these touchstones, eclipsing the great wealth of experimental electronic compositions created by hundreds of composers in the 1950s and 1960s, much of which remains forgotten or lost completely. Ernest Berk is one such individual and, until now, very little of his electronic music has been accessible. After Berk’s death, his master tapes, his papers, and a tape recorder were bequeathed to the Historischen Archivs der Stadt Köln (Historical Archives of the City of Cologne). Tragically, the archive building collapsed in March 2009, but not before the majority of Berk’s master tapes were successfully digitised by PhD candidate Martin Köhler. As a result, it has been possible to compile this representative selection of his output across three decades, newly remastered by Richard Scott and Jos Smolders, and finally shine a light on this important body of work.

- Ian Helliwell, Sam Gillies, Monty Adkins
February 2024

