

TO-ING AND FRO-ING: STEPHEN GOSS

Talking to COLIN COOPER

STEPHEN GOSS was born in Carmarthenshire, Wales, in 1964. He studied guitar with Michael Lewin and Gilbert Biberian, and composition with Robert Saxton, Edward Gregson, Peter Dickinson and Anthony Payne. His CV shows an extraordinary range of musical activities: visiting professor at the Royal Academy of Music, visiting artist at Trinity College of Music, London, six years as head of academic studies at the Yehudi Menuhin School (where he also coached football), since 1999 Senior Lecturer in Composition - now Reader - at the University of Surrey, where his teaching reflects his interest in pluralism, Post-Modernism, electronic music, film music, improvisation, performance studies and the late music of Beethoven. He reviews for the 19th Century Music Review, and is on the editorial board of Guitar Forum. In 1999 he was made an Honorary Associate of the Royal Academy of Music.

In addition to this, he is a prolific composer. Recent commissions have come from flautist William Bennett, pianist Graham Caskie, The Gemini Ensemble, soprano Jane Manning, and the Delta Saxophone Quartet. *Frozen Music*, for guitar and strings, was commissioned by The Yehudi Menuhin School with funds provided by Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones. Other pieces for the guitar have been written for Xuefei Yang, Jonathan Leathwood, the Hand-Dupré Duo, Michael Partington, Craig Ogden, Allan Neave and, still in progress at the time of writing, David Russell.

As a professional guitarist himself - he is a member of the Tetra Guitar Quartet - it might be said that Stephen Goss writes for the guitar with particular insight, though so fertile is his creative mind that it scarcely seems to matter what instrument or instruments he is writing for: the result is invariably compelling. That ability to hold the attention was never more apparent than in *Oxen of the Sun*, in which Jonathan Leathwood played both a ten-string and a six-string guitar, simultaneously. This feat required a great deal of collaboration, and I wondered if it had been as stimulating, profitable and enjoyable as the evidence suggested.

Stephen Goss: I suppose my number one priority is to write a piece that's exactly what the performers commissioning it want. It should fit their need. So the more specific they can be about what they want, the better. The collaborative process with Jonathan Leathwood involved a great deal of going back and forth with ideas and notions, both of us contributing.



Stephen Goss and David Russell.

A lot of the process was about discovering how you can play two guitars together. *Oxen*'s an extraordinary piece, only because Jonathan does extraordinary things. When he suggested to me that he'd like me to write a piece for 10-string and 6-string guitar to be played simultaneously by one person, my initial thought was, well, after Jonathan's played it, who else is going to play it? Often, with a commission, you've got half a mind on future performances and possibilities. For example, if someone says 'I want a piano piece', you know there'll always be a call for a piano piece. You never get asked 'What have you got for 10-string and 6-string guitar to be played by one person?'

Paradoxically, since the recording's been out and it's been performed a lot, many people have contacted my publisher (Cadenza Music) to get hold of the music and have a go at learning it. However, I'm still waiting to hear of another guitarist who has actually performed the piece.

Jonathan is an exceptional musician; he does many remarkable things in *Oxen*. There's a compendium of techniques we developed between us over a period of time, a really interesting process. Because Jonathan was a beginner, if you like, on the 16-string instrument when we started.

Jonathan played the piece a lot. 18 months after the first performance, I wrote a whole different finale, mainly because his playing of the two instruments together had developed so

"Improvised music is on its way back"

much. There were now so many more things he could do that it seemed sensible to try to exploit them into another piece.

There were all sorts of sonorities I imagined and wrote down, and asked Jonathan to try. He'd come back and say, 'No, this is impossible.' Then I'd get another email saying 'Well, maybe it is just about possible.'

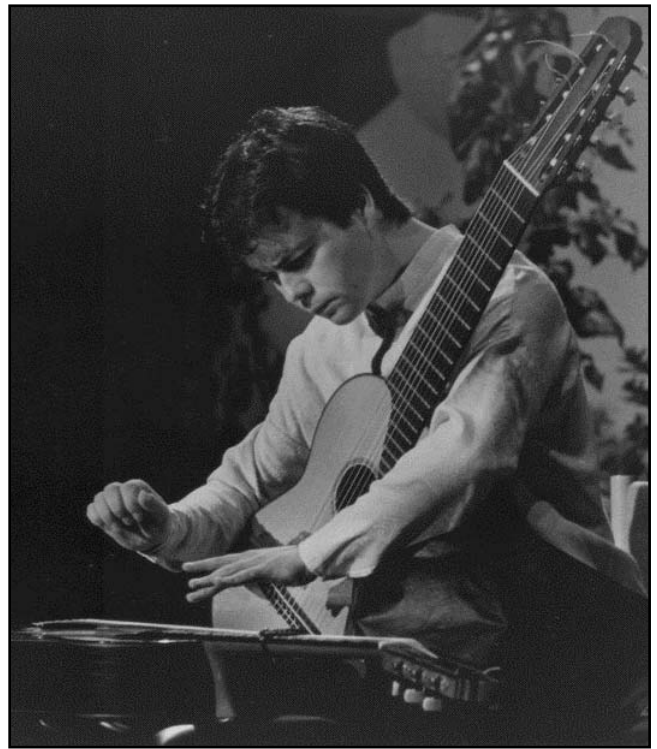
Probably the most interesting thing about the collaboration with Jonathan was that there's no 'original' or 'urtext' version of *Oxen*: the ideas I put in front of him, drafts of movements, he would use as a starting point, and say 'This isn't physically possible at that tempo. But if I take it slower....' So there was a lot of changing of the material from my original idea. That piece, more than any other, is the result of collaborative work.

I very much like working collaboratively. A lot of commissions are, to be honest, very much the sort of 'produce the score and parts by a deadline, a bit of rehearsing, and then a concert'. In fact, every piece I've written for more than four players falls into that category; you turn up, the score's complete, the parts are ready, you rehearse it, and that's it. Which is why I think I go more towards writing for soloists, duets and up to quartets.

You can get much, much further with these smaller groups. The preparation for performance is much more collaborative and the rehearsals go into much more detail. For example, working on the piece the Menuhin School commissioned (*Frozen Music*, for violin, viola, cello and guitar) was fantastic, because I had the luxury of being able to go in, have as many rehearsals as I wanted. There was time to experiment, time to get feedback and try different things, time to make amendments - constant to-ing and fro-ing.

My scores don't get finalised in time for the first performance, or even the second or third performance. Often it takes between 20 and 30 performances before I get to a point where I think, 'this piece is beginning to settle down into some kind of fixed shape, and it kind of works'. And I suppose the point at which a piece is finished is the point at which it is recorded and/or published. And you say 'OK, this is it - the piece is finished'. I see the role of the early performances of a piece as contributing to the whole compositional process.

I had an interesting experience last night. I've just written a new piece for Xuefei Yang (*The Chinese Garden*) based on Chinese folk songs; I finished it on Monday, and I went to see her yesterday (Thursday), and of course she'd got it all already. She has fantastic spontaneity as a player; everything is so instinctive. She was able to make musical sense of the piece in a way that when I was composing it, bogged down with



Jonathan Leathwood.

notes, I couldn't necessarily see. She revealed my piece to me in a completely fresh light. It would have been very easy to say 'Well, actually I think you'll find that that's not *forte*, that's not *pianissimo*', but there's this wonderful thing about players, that they can actually make sense of music from a performance point of view, and often capture things that composers completely miss.

You're saying that the player discovers something that was there all the time, but hidden?

There's plenty of that; particularly with longer-term phrase-shapes and ideas of colour. Some performers are very contributing (they say things like 'This section could be longer', or 'How about another movement?') and some are not. Some simply try and replicate what you've provided; they already imagine that what you've provided is some kind of text not to be questioned in any way.

There's a great reverence for notation, which is very much a 20th-century phenomenon. Composition and performance became separate specialisms in the first part of the 20th century. Before that, musicians generally did both. The great 19th-century performer-composer tradition - Paganini, Chopin, Liszt, Rachmaninov, Scriabin etc, - suddenly stops; the great performers of the 20th century are no longer composers. You look at people like Barenboim, Brendel, Heifetz, Segovia - a hundred years earlier they would have also been composers: it was all part of the tradition. A kind of severance took place, around the time of the first world war,

"The guitar has a very healthy relationship with new music"

when composition suddenly got separated off into some kind of much more academic exercise. No longer was it comfortable to be both a performer and a composer; you had to choose one specialism or the other.

The gap between the processes of creating and recreating music became so wide that performers got out of the habit of thinking about music in terms of writing it, improvising it, composing it.

The focus of the study of music also shifted from the sound to the score. The way we're taught analysis and about looking at relationships - it's all to do with notation. It's as if the kind of systems and workings behind the music are much more important than the actual sound of the piece - the musical surface. As composition theory became more complex it got to the point where performers no longer understood the process of composition, no longer had a relationship with how the notes came into being. And as a result, all they had to work on was a score. So they began to treat the score - I'm talking in hopelessly general terms here - with obsessive attention to detail without necessarily understanding how the music functions or works.

One thing you can't see in a score is the composer's approach. The composer might have a constructivist approach, might be working with magic squares, note rows, rhythm patterns and so on. That's one kind of composer. Another kind of composer is working much more spontaneously, essentially writing down improvisations. Of course, nearly every composer works at some point on a continuum between these two extremes.

For example, in very constructivist music, like, say, Boulez in the first Piano Sonata, copying the notation as exactly as you can is absolutely what it's all about. Whereas someone who is a much more improvisation-based composer - someone like Roland Dyens - the score just happens to be a particular version of the improvisation which was written out.

What occurred to me the other day, when I heard somebody play a Dyens piece in a competition, is that his music seldom if ever sounds quite right when other people play it.

That's a very good point. It's absolutely right. I've only heard Dyens play once, but it was fantastic. He's brilliant, and you can see that he's a great improviser. And yet, when you hear other people playing his pieces -

The same is true of Chopin, interestingly. His pieces are written-down improvisations. Take something like the Barcarolle; it's an improvised melody over a very simple chord sequence.

There are many different versions of the Barcarolle. Chopin published different versions in different countries at different times. Liszt wrote different things on his scores for his students. If a student had a particular technical skill, he wrote new material to suit it. It's the idea of a score that is constantly changing, evolving, to be adapted according to your needs.

Barrios is another example, I think.

Yes, absolutely - especially the fact that his music wasn't written down by him. The wonderful thing about Barrios, of course, is that we have those recordings. So we actually hear what he did. There's nothing missing from the notation in the recording.

There are big differences in compositional approaches. That sort of composer-performer, improvisation-based school of writing was completely dominant throughout history, and the time during which the composer was a separated

academic being - moving the notes around on paper but not involved in the performance of his composition - was a very recent phenomenon, and one which I think is dying out.

Improvised music is on its way back. Harrison Birtwistle said recently, (in a Private Passions interview on Radio 3), that he felt improvised music was the music of the future. He said as far as notated rhythmic complexity was concerned, the high modernists had split the atom, and had got to the point where things were so complex that you couldn't actually hear whether the rhythms were being played accurately or not. He felt that the way forward for concert music would be to have a simple structure which allowed for the possibility of incredibly complicated and intricate improvisation through it.

Indian music, jazz and electronica exemplify this approach - people like Talvin Singh, Nitin Sawney, Bill Frisell and Aphex Twin.

It simplifies it, doesn't it? The composer doesn't have to search so hard for a performer, and the

"I hate it when my words are taken out of context"



Stephen Goss, Xuefei Yang, Maurice Summerfield, Colin Cooper.

performer doesn't have to look for good new music the whole time.

It would be economical to put them both together.

The guitar has a very healthy relationship with new music: not only do we have the fantastic pieces of modernism that Bream commissioned - he was really pro-active with major composers - but there are also people like Tom Kerstens at Bath, who's gone to high-profile composers and said 'Come on, write for the guitar.' This is great.

Guitar recitals contain much more contemporary music than violin recitals, cello recitals, piano recitals, song recitals, and chamber music recitals. Much much more. I did a little survey for a talk I gave a couple of years ago, and I found that post-1970 repertoire appeared in a high percentage of guitar programmes. There's this real culture of new music that reaches canonic status. Because someone plays the piece at a festival; someone hears it; they want to learn it; someone records it, and it's a kind of process. And suddenly you find that you've got hundreds and hundreds of performances of things. That happens to my guitar music; but it doesn't happen in quite the same way to any of the other music I write.

Is that something to do with the fact that other instruments don't have a wide network of festivals where people can mix together, as the guitar has?

Well, they do up to a point. Another thing is that the classical repertoire, particularly for violin, piano, cello and voice, has become totally calcified within a particular era. You go back as far as Bach and forward as far as Shostakovich, and this is the canon. And the canon has very little added to it in recent years. In particular, the didactic or teaching canon of studies for violin, is pretty much the same as it was a hundred years ago.

I think improvisation is bandied about a lot as a kind of buzz-word. 'Classical musicians need to learn to improvise', we often hear. However, this doesn't mean getting up on stage and making something up - far from it. What it means is understanding that the process of composition comes from improvisation. And the improvisation that's most relevant for classical performers is to sit at home, try things out, play things and then develop ideas over time - rather than feeling that everyone has to get up and play an instantly improvised piece on stage in a concert.

(to be continued)

Xuefei Yang's latest CD for EMI (provisionally titled 'Forty Degrees North' at the time of writing) includes three of the four pieces that comprise Stephen Goss's *The Chinese Garden* (written for Xuefei Yang). The work was premiered by Xuefei Yang in her Wigmore Hall concert on 16 April. Each of the pieces is based on a traditional



Stephen Goss and Max.

Chinese folk theme familiar to Chinese people. The CD contains both Chinese and Spanish music, and the title reflects the fact that the capital cities of both countries lie on a latitude of about 40 degrees north.