

TO-ING AND FRO-ING: STEPHEN GOSS

Talking to COLIN COOPER

Part 2



Tetra Guitar Quartet.

PART 1 ended on the topic of improvisation. It led to a discussion of the performer's precise role in performance - as an interpreter of the composer's notes, as a creator in his own right, as a mixture of the two? Just how should a modern performer interpret his role?

CC: *I believe there used to be a convention that a soloist in a concerto improvised his own cadenzas.*

SG: Yes, the performer's role used to be significantly more creative. Most modern performers seem afraid of contributing to a score. And also the whole notion that you can change the score significantly. Bream was an interesting exception. I interviewed Richard Rodney Bennett last year and he spoke about the concerto. There's one section where Bream inserted a rasgueado. Bennett thought it was odd; he didn't remember writing it. But Bream managed to convince him that it worked rather well.

I think it helps the composer considerably if some of the responsibility of ownership of a piece is taken away from him. The whole notion of the composer as someone isolated in a garret who produces finished, perfect masterpieces is a very recent one. It grew up in the 19th century and lasted into the early 20th century - it doesn't really reflect music before that, or much later 20th century music. Even now, people often worry about the way performers interfere with scores, as if they were sacred texts.

A certain kind of composer might object to interference from a performer.

Well, yes, they might. But they are in the minority these days. I certainly relish the performer's input. When I wrote *El Llanto de los Sueños* (2007) for David Russell and sent him the first movement, he recorded it on video and sent it back with loads of comments. This was a great way to work. On a recording you can hear the piece at arm's length, clearly and in its entirety. You can listen to the juxtapositions and transitions, the relative length of sections and the overall effect of the piece. This is invaluable feedback. David made some radical suggestions - 'maybe this fast section could be longer... I don't think these harmonics will work in performance... aren't these three chords a little cheesy...'. He came up with dozens of ideas and I went along with some of them and then defended my corner with some of the others. I also wanted to make changes of my own after hearing David play the piece. This to-ing and fro-ing went on several times until we got to a point where we decided that the piece was ready to perform and record. For me, it's a really important process, getting detailed feedback from the performer.

Are there limits beyond which you don't think the performer should go? What would upset you?

The only thing that really upsets me is when my music is under-rehearsed and the performance

lacks detail, commitment and character. That is very frustrating. I like to work with performers who'll spend as much time rehearsing a new piece as they do rehearsing their Bach, Beethoven or Brahms.

I am very fortunate to have built up some excellent working relationships with musicians over the years. Take pianist Graham Caskie, for example – I wrote *An ideal insomnia* (2001) for him, which involved the usual process of to-ing and fro-ing. He played it phenomenally well; he gave many performances of it and made a fantastic recording. When you're working with someone like that, you're both striving for the best possible end result, and you're not going to settle for second best. The idea of a piece growing and developing through multiple performances is very much part of my collaborative process.

One of the things that contemporary music really suffers from is that most of the performances you hear are first, second or third performances of the pieces. And those early performances are never good. We used to find in the [Tetra Guitar] Quartet that once we'd played something 20 times it began to settle and feel comfortable.

The first time I worked with Xuefei Yang [*Raise the Red Lantern* (2004)], our rehearsals were pretty much me giving her lessons on how to play the piece. Then, she performed the piece dozens of times and inevitably the piece changed; it developed and grew. And now it is a much better piece than the one I had in mind, simply because through so many performances, trying things out, experimenting, it's got to the point where she has transformed it into something magical.

Now we're working on a new piece, [*The Chinese Garden* (2007)] and she knows that she can contribute and negotiate. If I write 'crescendo to fortissimo', she might say 'Well, actually, I prefer diminuendo to pianissimo'. She'll then play it fantastically, and it convinces me.

Often the thing that's great about performers is not the accuracy in representing what's on the page, but the fact that they get to the bottom of what the music's about. They understand the gestures, the longer-term shapes, and the character.

A good example is Richard Hand, who I've worked with on many pieces over the years. He can often see through my notation to the essence of a piece. His quite brilliant suggestions can make the music speak more clearly, directly and dramatically. For instance, in the last movement of *Park of Idols* [for cello and guitar (2005)] he transformed my draft version into something far more spectacular through the use of some extraordinary strumming passages.

People approach me because they have a particular need for a piece. Normally it's very specific. Recently, I had another commission from

Graham Caskie, to write a piece based on Debussy's *First Book of Preludes* for piano. Graham collaborated with the artist Brian Duncanson, who painted twelve huge canvases, each based on one of Debussy's preludes. What Graham wanted was a half-hour piano work, in some way based on both Debussy's music and the paintings. He wanted to intersperse the Preludes with the 'Interludes' I was going to write.

I thought this was fantastic, because a performer was identifying the need for the piece by putting it in a very particular performance context. If I write a piece for Graham Caskie or David Russell or Xuefei Yang, it has to fit both the way that they play and the show that they take on the road. The music has to be tailor-made, both stylistically and idiomatically.

There's a lot of style prejudice in new music, there is an unspoken law that states that atonality and complexity equal sophistication, and that tonality and simplicity equal 'simplisticness'. There's an important distinction between simple and simplistic.

You get labels attached to your music, like 'unexpected juxtapositions'. How do you feel about them?

My music draws on influences from many different places, styles and times. It has been described as 'post-modern'. However, I've been teaching a course on post-modernism for many years, and I've no idea what the term means when applied to music.

It's very clear to see what post-modernism is in terms of architecture – the mixing of styles that you get in the Sony building in Manhattan or the playful double-coding of James Stirling's addition to the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart. But in music, there's a kind of wonderful eclecticism that's happening now. It's been creeping up since the late sixties. High modernism has finally reached its high-water mark and is beginning to subside, loosening its grip on new music and, more pertinently, the teaching of composition. Don't get me wrong; I love the music of high modernism – Boulez, Berio, Xenakis, Stockhausen, Messiaen, et al. But it's a style of music that's now completely out of date. As Robert Fink said, 'it is hopeless to insist that music reflect, not the *heterotopia* in which we live, but some one of the many utopias in which we no longer believe.' It seems very odd to me that the musical aesthetic of the 1960s and 70s has carried on being taught in universities, both in Europe and America.

There's certainly a style of music being written that Americans term 'university music', which is the sort of music you have to write if you want to get grants and tenured teaching positions. It's highly complex, highly modernist, easy to write about in an academic way but deeply unpopular with audiences.

- And a generation behind, by the sound of it.
Very much so.

Has it always been like that?

Composition is a comparatively new discipline in universities, particularly at masters and doctoral level. A culture has developed where composers have to intellectualise and theoretise their music in order to defend it and justify it to a board of examiners or a peer review panel. It is much easier to do this with highly systematised music than with more intuitive approaches to composition.

Frank Zappa, a wonderful polymath, gave a brave and keynote address to the American Society of University Composers, where he exposed the university composition scene as a self-perpetuating sham.

If we were in 1807 instead of 2007, we'd have the middle period symphonies of Beethoven, we'd be on the cusp of Romanticism - Schubert, Schumann just around the corner. The music of the 1770s would be JC and CPE Bach, and would seem horribly out of date. And thinking back further, to the 1740s and 1750s, JS Bach and Handel were a world away from Beethoven. Whereas now, although we're in a climate of much faster change, a large number of composers are still working in (and teaching) a style that is 50 or 60 years out of date.

Things are changing. There are a number of very exciting younger generation composers who are breaking the mould. Mark-Anthony Turnage, for example, is doing a lot of work with enterprising musicians such as John Scofield, Pete Erskine, Christian Lindberg and Ensemble Modern. And Thomas Adès; his work is incredibly exciting - virtuosic in terms of his ear and his musicianship. And he's coming from the performer-composer way of thinking, somebody who can sit down at the piano and really play.

The titles of your pieces are very arresting. At what point in the process do they come along? Not before you begin to compose?

Sometimes they do. Sometimes they come at the very end. The title is the most important thing about a piece of music, as it draws people to it in the first place.

I've met people who listen to the Moonlight Sonata and the Pathétique Sonata, but nothing else by Beethoven.

Most of Beethoven's titles were added by publishers who were interested in selling copies. A title has to be evocative. For example, a piece like *The Garden of Cosmic Speculation*, [for violin, cello, piano and bass clarinet (2005)] is based on Charles Jencks's extraordinary garden in

Scotland. It is full of landscape sculptures that relate to recent ideas in theoretical physics - cosmogenesis, black holes, quarks, string theory etc. The title came first in writing that piece. With *Frozen Music*, the piece about architecture, again the title came very early on, because the piece was going to be about different buildings. With the *Sonata* [for solo guitar (2006)] it was Michael Partington, the dedicatee, who suggested the title right at the start of the collaborative process.

In contrast, the title for David Russell's piece came at the end of the process - *El Llanto de los Sueños*, (*The Weeping of Dreams*). It's a piece about Lorca, based on various images from a wide range of different poems. The title comes from a line in the poem *Riddle of the guitar*. The

titles of the individual movements came as I was writing them: *Cantiga*, because I wanted to do something about Galicia, Lorca's connection with Galicia, and David's connections with Galicia. *Madrugada*, the second movement, was the first one I wrote: it's a wonderfully evocative Spanish word with no equivalent in English,

and means 'just before the dawn'. When there's light in the sky but the sun isn't up, a magical time. And the last one, *Alborada*, is the dawn-dance after the darkness.

The piece tries to conjure up that time in the twenties and early thirties in Spain, when Manuel de Falla and Lorca revitalised flamenco and local Andalusian culture. It was just before the Spanish Civil War and the tragic death of Lorca in that war. That whole period is a magnet for anyone interested in the guitar.

I had avoided anything remotely Spanish in my guitar music up until this piece. Then I got a commission from someone living in Spain - in fact, a Celt living in Spain, and in a Celtic part of Spain - and I thought, well, now there's a chance to address the Spanish heritage of the guitar.

Falla was a master at integrating the colour and flavour of flamenco into his concert music. If Sor made the guitar sound like a miniature orchestra, then Falla made the orchestra resonate like a guitar. My idea was to write a piece that was in sepia, one that was set in that time and that culture. I wanted to exploit the harmonic vocabulary that Debussy and Ravel used in their Spanish music - a potent cocktail of Andalusian folk music, early jazz harmonies, 19th-century Romanticism and French Impressionism.

My music moves freely from style to style in the way that Mozart or Haydn's music moves from key to key. The central tenet of the Classical style was the conflict and resolution of keys and characters. In the kind of music I'm writing, a similar argument goes on, but between different styles of music.

**"High modernism
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In many ways, these either sudden or gradual shifts of style are what help people to follow my music while listening to it. The listener is not quite sure what might come next or how things might turn. They are engaged with these changes the whole time.

Do you see yourself as part of a new movement? Or as an individual working along your own path?

That's an interesting question. I have two very different hats. One is academic, teaching people about composition; studying styles, repertoires, traditions and histories. It's the way that education works, organising these things into different groups and giving them labels. The reality is a fantastically complex continuum with everything floating around in it, but, to make sense of it, we impose a grid-like cage and we classify everything. The other hat I wear is as a practising musician, doing my own thing and chasing deadlines – never really thinking about traditions or artistic movements.

The artificial clustering of composers into groups is very disconcerting. Minimalism is a clumsy category. It means that you end up with people like Louis Andriessen, Michael Nyman and Steve Reich grouped together in some way, which is ludicrous. And even when you have subdivisions of minimalism, for instance the so-called holy or mystic minimalists, people like Arvo Pärt, Górecki and Tavener: you introduce these three composers as if they're some kind of group, who meet in a room and have coffee together - like the Second Viennese School! The reality is that they all work in different countries and in very different ways.

As a result of mass communications and the way that society is changing, each composer is just doing his or her own thing now. There's no sense of a grand narrative or stylistic cohesion. If I was living in Hannover in 1770, I'd be influenced by a teacher and a few other composers working in that town; there'd be very little coming in from the outside at all. It would be a self-contained musical world and there would be considerable stylistic homogeneity. Whereas now, the range of music you get from students at Surrey University, for example, is extraordinary – from rock songs, to electronic music, to film music, music for games, TV, and advertising, through to modern concert music in every style imaginable.

I think composers can now be more adaptable and plural. There's no longer this feeling that your serious work has to be kept in a bubble. The 19th and 20th century idea was that you discovered your own original style through experimentation; you worked towards discovering your personal voice, and when you found it, you developed it and refined it. Whereas now composers are free to jump all over the place and do different things.

Take someone like Joby Talbot, who was Classic FM's first composer-in-residence. He's collaborated with the pop group The Divine Comedy, he's written TV theme tunes, he's written concert music. Richard Rodney Bennett is someone who plays jazz in a club and writes songs in that idiom, but has also written Oscar-winning film scores, and concert music in a range of styles from serial (like the Impromptus and the Sonata for guitar) to overtly tonal (like the Partita for Orchestra). It was Auden who said that a poet ought to be able to do anything, from a birthday card verse to a villanelle to a sonnet. They ought to have a sign on their gate that simply says 'POET'.

In the book world, if a serious novelist turns and writes a detective story, his publisher tells him he's got to use another name. If you wrote a pop song tomorrow, would anyone care if it was by the same composer who wrote Oxen of the Sun? No, I don't think they would. Writing in different styles is becoming the norm. Artistic integrity has little to do with style any more. The barriers between so-called high-art and popular culture are gradually being eroded. What matters is the quality of the work, not its stylistic label.

Didn't you once put a whole Scarlatti sonata into one of your pieces?

I did put a whole Scarlatti sonata into a piece. I'm interested in the grey areas between composition, arrangement, transcription and interpretation.

I love performers like Glenn Gould who interpret things in unusual ways. My Scarlatti movement was based on Mikhail Pletnev's Scarlatti recordings for Virgin Classics.

He did all the things that upset the authenticists. Like using the piano's sustaining pedal.

Absolutely! Sometimes it sounds like Schumann in Kinderszenen. It's amazing playing, really inventive. For someone to come along and show us a very familiar object in an entirely new light is invigorating and inspiring.

In *Looking Glass Ties*, my first big solo guitar piece, the idea was to have everything on this journey from a transcription right the way through to a free composition. Besides the Scarlatti transcription, there are movements based on pre-existing music and there are original compositions.

Another example – a conductor friend of mine in Mönchengladbach, Graham Jackson, did a production of *Erwartung* [Schoenberg] and paired it with *Dido and Aeneas*. But instead of following *Dido and Aeneas* with *Erwartung*, Graham put *Erwartung* in the middle of *Dido and Aeneas*, just before the Lament. You suddenly see both works in a completely new context. The audience will never think of these two works in the same way again.

I use quotations and references all the time in my music, at different levels. Sometimes the audience will recognise them, sometimes they are hidden a bit deeper. And sometimes they're simply there as a kind of crutch to get me going as a composer. The Scarlatti was a bit extreme. But, you know, I've taken whole movements into other pieces of mine – changing the instrumentation and style but keeping the notes. I suppose Uri Caine's versions of Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner, and Bach are my models for this approach.

And no one notices?

Well, some do. And that's fine. I am always upfront about my sources. In *Raise the Red Lantern*, one of the movements is simply a song from Mahler's *Song of the Earth*, arranged for guitar. In *The Raw and the Cooked* there's a song from *Dichterliebe*.

There are precedents, aren't there? Nicholas Maw's references to Mendelssohn in Music of Memory. And Brouwer's to Beethoven in his Sonata. You ask yourself why.

The 'why' is the interesting thing; quotes are usually there for a reason, and if people dig deep enough they'll find them. This kind of intertextuality is all around us in film, advertising, TV programmes. Sometimes, you *have* to get the reference in order to get the joke. So, for example, in *The Simpsons* or *South Park*, if there's a reference or quotation you laugh because you make the connection. Whereas, in music, you don't always have to get the reference. It's a tool of the composer, using bits from here, there and everywhere. If you do get it, that's fine, but it doesn't mean that you enjoy the piece any less if you don't get it.

Are there any connections here with Dadaism, the early 20th-century movement in art noted for incongruity and irrationality?

What's really interesting about the early part of the 20th century is that there are parallel histories going on – one modernist and one experimental or Dadaist. The modernist history took precedence; until we get to the 1960s when suddenly the alternative histories start to rise to the surface.

You can see it clearly in music. The modernist line of history might include Wagner, Brahms, Schoenberg, Webern, Messiaen, Boulez, Stockhausen. The alternative line, the experimental line, might include Mahler, Satie, Ives, Cage, Reich. Interestingly, the 20th century that's now being taught and thought of as being exciting is the alternative 20th century, the one of the mavericks, the Mahlers, the Iveses, rather than the Schoenbergs and Weberns. In the 1960s there was a huge Mahler and Ives revival, when their music became widely known for the first time. Lots of composers picked up on that, so there was a delayed influence.

What about Bruckner?

Bruckner is much more pure in terms of style. You don't get any overt references to folk tunes or brass bands (except perhaps the odd Landler). It's all very stoic and self-contained – exclusive rather than inclusive.

Do you think of your music as being national in any way?

No, not at all. These days there's a pan-European style, which is uncomfortably homogenous, a sort of European modernism. You can't really distinguish where people are from any more. There was a fantastic diversity of national styles in the early 20th century – Sibelius, Nielsen, Bartók, Kodály, Vaughan-Williams, Debussy, Ravel. However, that began to break down after 1945.

In the modern political climate, I don't actually like the idea of nationalism at all. I find it quite uncomfortable, particularly overt patriotism. I would say that my music is urban and cosmopolitan rather than regional. It's not really tied to a time or a place.

You are accepting a lot of commissions now....

I've got stuff lined up now till the end of 2011. However, being a composer is a bit like being a guitar maker: you can always make room for an important commission if one comes along. I can make space by using commission money to buy myself out of some teaching and spend the time writing.

Would you feel insecure without all these commissions?

I don't know. I have been very fortunate that a lot of people have commissioned me to write music. My university post gives me the luxury of financial security so that I can pick and choose who I write for. There are many commissions that I don't take on. What's nice to know is that I'll be writing music for the foreseeable future, as I often wonder if I would still write music at all if the commissions dried up. For me, composition is not something I can do alone. The best thing about it is working with and learning from top-class musicians: it's very rewarding.

David Russell will give the first performance of El Llanto de los Sueños (the Weeping of Dreams) on 30 October at Kings Place in London. The recording will be released on the Telarc label in early 2009. Stephen Goss's most recent CD, Frozen Music (CACD0711© 2007), is now available through Amazon and iTunes. For a complete discography, list of publications and news of forthcoming performances please visit www.stephengoss.net

Stephen Goss's music is published by Cadenza.