

Barrie Gavin interviews Colin Matthews November 2009

Transcribed from film

BG: Let's start with composing, which seems to be as good a way of starting as any. Do you have a routine – are you a person who starts at a certain time and works for a certain number of hours every day?

CM: No, I wish I did. It's very variable, and I suppose depends mostly on the state of the piece I'm working on. At the beginning I might spend 2 - 3 hours, of which only 10 minutes is productive. And I have a habit of working better in the late afternoon and early evening, when most people are at their most sluggish. I'm not very good in the mornings, I can only ever work a sort of routine day if a piece is well under way. But I need to know exactly what I'm going to do, otherwise I have to spend hours thinking about it before I can even look at the manuscript paper.

BG: There kind of seem to be two extremes of composition. There are those who seem to be unable to stop composing like what someone said about Darius Milhaud, that he produces music like an apple tree produces apples.

CM: Or as Strauss said, like a cow giving milk.

BG: Yes, and there are other composers who are kind of hypnotised and rendered almost catatonic by a blank sheet of paper. I guess obviously you are somewhere between those two.

CM: Yes, but I know the feeling of catatonicism, or whatever you call it, catatonia. The blank sheet is a horror, because I always feel I'm beginning again.

BG: Do you have the feeling with the next piece, I may reveal myself to be completely inept - in other words that the next piece is going to be a calamity?

CM: No, it's usually the last piece! No, I always feel quite the opposite, that at last I might write quite a good piece. I've got a blank sheet of paper, and finally I might get a piece out that doesn't have any faults.

BG: Do you remember what Toru Takemitsu said about it, he said to his wife 'this piece is a completely new piece', and she would say – 'no, same old pieces every time!'

Obviously you compose, not entirely, but a lot of the time to commission. Does the commission, apart from the impulse to write the piece as you've been commissioned to write it, does that somehow get your imagination going?

CM: Sometimes a commission can get something going. I suppose the answer is yes, in the sense that it might be something I hadn't thought of, and suddenly the commission sparks off a direction that I might not have known I was going to go in. But I do try to take on commissions that are things that I would want to do anyway. The BBC are particularly good at asking you what you want to do rather than saying 'we want you to try to do this'. And that's a tradition that still continues even now.

BG: And that response, does it mean that if you have no commission that somehow there isn't an impetus to write a piece – do you write pieces on spec as it were?

CM: Well, sometimes. And I think I would do if the commissions dried up. But at the moment I'm a bit flooded. Partly because I wasn't expecting two commissions I have next year, so it's rather thrown me. There are some things I'd still want to do, things that are my own plans that I might do even without waiting for a commission to come along. One of those things is a possible opera, which if it happens I want to have got some way with it before I start to look around where it might be performed. And that's an ideal situation in some ways - if it isn't shooting yourself in the foot and ending up with no performance at all. Which in the case of an opera would be a bit silly!

BG: It has been known.

CM: It has been known!

BG: When you are composing, what do you need, do you need a piano?

CM: I would hate to be without one. I wish I could be better without one. The odd thing is that as I get older I seem to need it more rather than less. I used to compose a lot without the piano in the 70s and early 80s and somehow seem to rely on it more now. I'm not sure, last week I took quite a lot of manuscript paper with me to Amsterdam but actually I only wrote words on it.

BG: Significant words?

CM: I hope they're significant, yes!

BG: Do you sometimes therefore kind of describe a piece? I remember George Benjamin saying once that when he was really working he would sometimes just write words down which were telling him what he was going to write later, does that happen to you?

CM: I have done. I do it less now, partly because I think I'm trying to be gradually more intuitive. But I would often have notebooks, I mean I've still got them, where I would write down extensive ideas, not even plans, I mean not grand plans, architecture – just concepts that might translate into music. But I seem to do that less and less, and even my sketches, my actual musical pre-compositional sketches, can be pretty vestigial these days.

BG: When you're writing a piece, I'm noticing from your memoir that certain pieces have had an enormously long gestation, and they've altered in the course of that time from one thing to another before they reach their final form. I'm thinking of *Continuum* for example - which is indeed not very continuous in its composition. Does that happen a lot?

CM: It does. The next piece is for the London Sinfonietta and it's actually now, I think, getting near to being 5 years overdue for various reasons. And during that time it's undergone a lot of transformation in concept. But the sketches I've put down, the musical sketches I've put down, I will probably throw away when I come to it. But there's quite a lot of material which has been in the process of gestation which hasn't got anywhere and I think there are reasons for that, so I'm almost going to start afresh.

BG: Do you throw away, or do you think hang on, that might come in handy another time?

CM: I very rarely physically throw away, but then I don't actually often look at old sketches or rejected sketches. I found one not so long ago, a big sketch from the mid 80s that I had completely forgotten about, and certainly wouldn't want to revisit now.

BG: When you're writing, from what you were describing, it isn't obviously a regular thing, it sort of comes in spurts. Are there times when you find yourself being blocked?

CM: Yes, almost invariably at the beginning of the piece. With a piece like *Turning Point*, it has a history of being blocked at the various stages of turning points within the piece, so that was almost the description of the process, because I got completely stuck several times. That was again a long gestation piece, possibly engendered by the fact that the Concertgebouw had been very generous in saying 'just tell us when you think it's going to be ready and we'll programme it', and this went on to the extent where they said 'you need to tell us for sure'. That actually was the process by which the final block was removed. I made a big opening section, got stuck, then I got the next section done, then got stuck again. And I think it was their saying 'we really do need you to commit' that got rid of the block.

BG: We're talking about getting blocked. It's difficult to ask you how you get unblocked. Is it a bit like when you lose the keys to something – and the more you look for something the less likely you are to find it, a kind of hysteria overcomes you? Whereas if you don't look for things there they are, they turn up. Does that happen to you?

CM: I do think that's a process that goes on, that there's something going on subconsciously. Often sleeping on a thing will make it work. I think I've got used to just stopping when I get blocked rather than fighting against it. And sometimes the reason is that the music is going in the wrong direction in any case – sometimes a block means you should throw it away and start again, or go in a different direction. It's a difficult thing to do, but it does make you feel good when you find that that's what the problem was.

BG: And that moment when you wake up, and what seemed insoluble last night has solved itself. It appears to you in the night. Do you ever get dreams that give you pieces of music?

CM: Not really. I don't have many musical dreams, unlike my brother, who certainly does. I've occasionally had musical dreams, but they are never related to the piece I'm working at. It might be something that might give me a push in another direction but it doesn't really happen that way. One of the times I do get good ideas is, oddly enough, when I'm at a concert. Something will spark off something that I need, and I don't know even know what it is. It could be something completely irrelevant to the piece I'm working on or the piece I'm thinking about but it's often a good productive place to find things happening.

BG: How about walking, or doing something routine, do ideas sneak up in that kind of situation?

CM: Not musical. Structural ideas yes – I will go for walks when I'm trying to solve a structural problem. But I'm not somebody – you read of Schoenberg saying he wrote *Verklärte Nacht* by going out for long walks and then coming back and writing it all down. That doesn't happen to me. Britten said the same. That he would go off walking on the marshes, composing in his head and come back and do it. I wish I could, but it doesn't happen.

BG: Do you think they really did that? I'm not suggesting they lied, but I'm wondering whether that's what they thought they did.

CM: Well, I've always been a little sceptical of that, and I do have an anecdote from when Britten was writing the third quartet which seems to go against that, because I remember him saying, when I was staying up there, it was towards the end of the second movement and he said 'I know exactly what I will do when I get up tomorrow, I've got another 25 bars to write before I get to the end'. When he actually produced it he'd written about 10 bars and that was it, so I'm puzzled that whatever process he thought was going on in his head had been disrupted by what he put down on paper.

BG: I think I empathise with that certainly, because when I'm making a film sometimes I think it's going to be an hour long, or whatever, and it isn't, it's 46 minutes or something, which is of course a very bad length when you are making television films. Everything has to be an hour or half an hour.

As you probably know, Takemitsu could barely start a piece until he had a title. Does this happen to you at all?

CM: No. it doesn't. I have a great sympathy with that, because I do struggle with titles, and sometimes pieces have got almost to the end before I have got the title, which is a very frustrating thing. I do prefer to have a working title. Particularly for a piece which is relatively an abstract piece, it's an important part of it. *Turning Point* being a case where I didn't know what the title was going to be until I came to the turning point. Other pieces have presented the same sort of problems. It's a nice thing to have a title and almost to write the piece around the title. It doesn't happen that often.

BG: And the structure of a piece, is that something that evolves, or do you have a very clear idea of it, or at least do you think you have an idea of it?

CM: Well I think I have a very clear idea, but it's not dissimilar to what I read novelists saying when they say the characters take over the plot - which I have no concept or understanding of because I would have thought that, with a novel, you must have a very clear idea of the plot and the direction. I find that a very disconcerting thing, that it can change direction. With music, it's a different matter because the music is evolving all the time and you can't pin it down in the same way, changes are inevitable. I set out often with firm ideas of structure, and more often than not they get disrupted by the music. And all the better for it.

BG: Yes, I mean, make a plan in order that you can destroy it, or at least change it.

CM: Yes, *Broken Symmetry* for instance actually set out with the idea – I think I had the title and I set up a symmetrical scheme knowing that I was going to break it. What would be the point of the title otherwise? So at a certain point it starts running backwards and in all sorts of directions and corrupting itself. And the strange thing about that is that I often find out that it turns out to be the golden section point where something like that has happened. It happens in *Broken Symmetry* – what I thought was the centre point was actually at the golden section point. And even as early as the *Fourth Sonata* I found that had fallen into the golden section without any pre-planning. That's the one thing I wouldn't try to do, not to follow the sort of Bartok/Debussy formula.

BG: While you were talking about how the characters take over – I did an interview many many years ago with the American abstract painter Robert Motherwell, who was somebody who could speak very well about painting. And he described how he was making these enormous abstract canvasses. They were as much as 10 or 12 feet long. He said that up to a certain point I'm telling the painting what it is, but at a certain point it starts to tell me what it is. Is that something you can respond to?

CM: Yes that does ring a bell with the way the processes happen.

BG: Tell me about the means of making music - using computers, for instance.

CM: I was I think the first Faber composer to start using a computer to typeset. But although there are ways of using it that can save time or cut corners, I've only really ever used it for the fair copy. There

are ways in which it can be extremely useful. For example when I've done a draft score, I now tend to computerise it so I can then set it at the top of an empty full score. So rather than consult from the music to one side and look at it while you are doing the draft score I've actually got it right up running along the top, and that's a very handy thing, a great use. I occasionally use midi, but find the shortcomings of playback disconcerting - although sometimes I will use it to play through things if I'm concerned about structure : sometimes you can't get that sense of timing in your head, and I don't like playing through what I've written at the piano. Partly because I'm a bad pianist, but mainly because the sketches are in no form in which I, or any pianist, could realistically play them.

BG: I'm also thinking about not just the means by which you can get your music onto paper, but the apparatus which is available. We now live in an age where there has been 35 years or more of IRCAM and the notion that certain kinds of mechanical apparatus can expand or change the nature of music. Has that ever attracted you?

CM: I've thought about it. Certainly with *Continuum* it was my intention to try to get into electronics more than I have done in the past, which wouldn't have been difficult as it's been very little. In the event it didn't happen : all that I used in *Continuum* is playback of an earlier section. And I've thought of trying to learn and I would actually like to get a sampler and try to work on ways of using it in an instrumental context, but to be honest, 35 years of IRCAM has not produced many masterpieces.

BG: 35 years of composing hasn't produced many masterpieces!

CM: That's true, but I think you could probably name the real pieces that have emerged from IRCAM on one hand.

BG: Yes, I was thinking that maybe the problem might be that if you were going to use those means, they have to be in a way integral to your composition, not just something which you add.

CM: Well you have to be an absolute master of the medium I think. One of the problems with IRCAM is that it has always been run by technicians, so that you sit at the foot of a technician rather than a technician sitting at your feet. It's a bit like composers and librettists in a way.

BG: Tell me about what you think the besetting sin of English music is. I'll give you a clue, I'm thinking of that sort of pallid, pastoralism. I don't associate your music with that at all.

CM: I don't have any feeling for it. Sometimes I can be moved by moments of Delius or Vaughan Williams. But there's a whole other area - Finzi, Bax - the Arnold Bax society I think sums up what is worst about the English musical scene. Assuming there is an Arnold Bax society!

BG: There will be. So that notion of a kind of lyrical and somewhat pallid response to either nature or poetry is something that doesn't attract you at all?

CM: Well I think you put your finger on it - it's pallid. I think that's the problem. It's got no real guts. And the thing is that my own background, for what it is, or my roots, are not there at all. I never came through that route. If I've got roots, they're in the Vienna of 1900 - 1910. And not just Vienna, the whole ferment of what was going on. Which I don't think we've got anywhere near to the roots of yet, and there's still a lot of material there that can still be developed.

BG: And that was a particular period which as far as English music was concerned, the English music scene was concerned, of effectively unknown or disregarded. There's that terrible phrase attributed to Vaughan-Williams, sadly, that Mahler was a poor imitation of a composer.

CM: Indeed yes. And I can't remember which critic said that 'we just don't want Mahler here'.

BG: This is a difficult thing. But if you were asked to define yourself as a composer, which must be very difficult to do, could you make any attempt at that?

CM: Not really. Oddly enough we are at the moment trying at NMC to devise a music map which tries to place people in contexts. Historical, stylistic - who they relate to. And not only is it fiendishly difficult to do, but I can't place myself on that map. I don't think anyway it's my role, I wouldn't presume to - I think someone else should tell me where I go.

BG: One of the things which comes up a great deal in people talking about music and to a certain extent putting music on is a kind of mantra of accessibility. What is your attitude towards that?

CM: I really find the word makes my flesh creep a little. I know what it means. I think in some cases it can be well meaning. But when you hear the results of accessibility, it reminds me rather of minimalism which was a great idea in its time, but you persist with it and it remains ideas which can be written down on the back of a postage stamp. And I think the same goes for accessibility, it's

actually an excuse for not thinking properly. It's so easy to write accessible music. It's a soft option. I don't think we need it. If you want accessible music, go back to the past. It's not what we're about. I don't want music necessarily to be demanding, or that we should go back to an ivory tower position. But I don't see any point in writing music that is just easy on the ear. It serves no purpose. As Stravinsky said 'who needs it?'. And I think that's a mantra that should be above every composer's desk.

BG: I was thinking that there is a certain tendency towards an anti-modernist stance which has grown over the last few years. But at the same time as saying that accessibility is as you say a kind of nasty little buzzword really, you have to still be a communicator, you are making contact with your audience. But presumably not on the most easy level necessarily.

CM: Yes. I think it's Percy Grainger there's a good quote from. 'The composer who sets out to please the audience ends up by pleasing neither the audience nor himself'. There's a lot of truth in that. If you set out with that specific aim, you're not going to get anywhere. Although I would never dream of saying, you should write without regard for the audience, you can't put the audience first. There's no point in writing music if that's your aim, because we're at the end of a huge historical process – well, I hope we're not at the end of it, but somewhere near the end of it - now that music of every kind is so widely available, then what's the point of adding music when there's plenty of 'easy' music from the past. We don't need it to be written now. I'd like people to use their ears – like the Ives thing – 'stand up and use your ears like a man'. Just as people actually don't realise how difficult late Beethoven still is – they don't often listen to it with the attention it demands. If the sort of approach that is needed for that music could be applied to new music I think we'd be much better off. And there is an audience too for that. I do find people always saying there is no audience there, but you do get this tremendous enthusiasm from people. Very moving comments from people who relate to new music.

BG: One of the problems I guess for a composer is precisely what you were describing. Music now both geographically and chronologically is hugely available on disc, download, whatever. And this presumably could make finding your own voice more difficult rather than less difficult.

CM: Well I think it's a big problem, and I find that to some extent with the younger generation, who have masses of technique - the sort of thing that I could only dream of when I was their age. But probably because of the stylistic problem you describe, it's against the background of so much music and the availability of so much music, they don't really know what to do with it. I don't think it's a lack of imagination, but it is such a huge field. And I hate sounding like an old fogey, but I think there was a benefit in having to fight to find music. I mean, the fact that when I was growing up I couldn't hear the music I wanted to hear : a very archaic thing – David and I actually made a piano score of Mahler 3 because we didn't know whether we would be able to hear it. It wasn't on record. (I was actually at the first public performance of Mahler 3 in this country, almost unbelievably.) Scores of Schoenberg – you could find the scores but you couldn't hear the music. *Pelleas und Melisande*, I remember trying desperately to get hold of a score, which I eventually got through an inter-library loan. And then desperately wanting to hear it. Now you can go out and find, what, 30 CDs of what was a terribly obscure work 40 years ago.

BG: So that process of discovery which a lot of people remember with great affection and excitement from their youth can be in a way blunted by mass availability.

CM: Yes, it's so easy to get hold of anything now.

BG: There are people who are still excited and discover things. I'm thinking of Olly Knussen for example, who never stops discovering pieces of music, and the most surprising pieces of music at that.

CM: Yes, we went through a mad Miaskovsky phase earlier this year.

BG: I saw the score of his Fifth Symphony out there, yes. I had written down 'the purpose of your music' – but the purpose of your music is to make music it seems to me – you can't really go much further than that. Do you have a sense of how your music relates to an audience? I mean obviously some people will speak to you from your audience, but the relationship of a composer to what he writes is rather a complicated and ambiguous one. There are composers who seem to be exactly like their music to an outsider anyway. There are other people where the music and the person seem to be extraordinarily different. Without being personal to you, I was thinking of someone like Brian Elias, who is a quiet, perhaps rather muted person, who produces this exuberant and very powerful music.

CM: Well I would certainly put myself in that category because I don't recognise myself in my music in some ways. I don't know what's coming out. I'm always trying to tell myself I'm going to write a sort of happy exuberant piece and somehow the blackness always takes over.

BG: Is it a blackness?

CM: Well, not blackness, a sort of darkness, perhaps an over-seriousness. I thought that to some extent I had got out of that rut with my recent violin concerto, but a lot of people seemed to find it quite a disturbing work. The first moment no, but the second movement people seemed to find disturbing. That surprised me. And then I start looking at it and think well, perhaps it's another dark piece. And I have written rather a lot of dark pieces.

BG: And you don't really know why you have written a lot of dark pieces, other than that you have written a lot of dark pieces.

CM: Exactly!

BG: I was thinking of a particular period when I was hearing pieces like *Cortège*, *Memorial* – pieces like that which are very dark and very powerful. And very moving if I may say so. And they seem to represent a dark view of life. I don't know what your view of the world is...

CM: Well, it isn't a dark one. I should probably have faced up to this issue but I don't know the answer. You mentioned *Cortège* – one of the interesting things about that is that it was written exactly in parallel with *Hidden Variables*, I was writing the two pieces at the same time, and they are two absolutely different sides of a coin. But there is actually something they share, that they are both in one tempo and one time signature throughout, the only time I've ever done that. So there's a strange symbiotic relationship between them but a complete disparity of mood.

BG: Did you know that Verdi wrote *Trovatore* and *La Traviata* at the same time? He had the two scores on his desk side by side. It is extraordinary, because they really are very different.

When you look back, can you see a coherent development in your music, or is it as somebody once said to me describing a particular view of history, 'one damn thing after another'? Do you sense a way in which your music has developed and changed?

CM: Well I can see certain things, I could point to certain things that have developed and changed, but the thing that links them is the fact that they are by me. And I don't know whether ... I'm aware that I'm sometimes accused as being a bit of a chameleon and not having a personality, and I'm aware of a disparity between works. We've just talked of *Cortège* and *Hidden Variables*. I don't think anyone would think that they were actually written in parallel. Or would even think that they could be by the same composer.

BG: I would disagree. I think for me I have absolutely no doubt when I hear a Colin Matthews piece, I know how it's by. You could say well of course, you've read the programme, but there is a particular thing – I would find it very difficult to define that, but I know it, and it's one of the reasons that I find it very striking.

CM: Well thank you, but I don't know whether I can point to what it is, I'm not the best guide.

BG: But you don't need to, do you?

CM: Well, it's not my job. It's like the whole way that composers are having to do all the education work. I think that should be done by educators, and composers should be confined to composing.

BG: You have done some pieces which at least involve for example children and people. That is a way presumably of not doing education exactly, but making it reach out. And if I may say so, the two pieces I'm thinking of are very exuberant pieces. They're not dark.

CM: Well I like to think they have a good sense of fun about them, but also that they are written seriously. I don't like the idea of writing down. One of the pieces I'm sure you are talking about is *Machines and Dreams*. And I have been accused by some people of 'why didn't you let the kids improvise, why did you have to make them do what you wanted to do?'. And of course the answer is that they got much more a kick out of having music that they could play in front of an orchestra. That was the excitement for them, of being part of an orchestra, so it had to be controlled by me in that respect. And it is a very light-hearted piece, although there's a serious intent behind it.

BG: I'm thinking of *Alphabicycle Order*. It's very rare that you come across a piece which makes you laugh out loud, which it certainly does on occasions. Not only because of the words, which are brilliant, but the way that you actually responded to them.

CM: Well I don't think I've ever enjoyed writing a piece so much. It was partly the fact that it was so easy to define. It was clearly going to be in 26 movements. And it was almost like sitting down and writing down one a day. Well, some were written in a day. And it was a wonderful project to have, to be able to link up and know that I would be going from one to another, and there would be some fun ahead. And it was a wonderful collaboration because Christopher Reid was very happy to write new poems where the originals couldn't quite fit. It's in 5 movements, and the momentum had to keep going. I needed a movement to be a Scherzo, where one of the existing poems didn't really and he never hesitated in saying 'fine, I'll do you another one'.

BG: You were saying that *Alphabicycle Order* was 26 tiny movements really. Is it somewhat daunting when you get to number 3 and you know you've got another 23 to do? Is there a moment when it looks like an eternal road?

CM: Much less so than when I've got to bar 50 and I know I've got to get to 500 or whatever more bars, and I have no idea where they are coming from. When I've got 23 more texts to set it's fine. I wish I could find more texts that I want to set : if it weren't for the fact that the struggle to find the right text for me is sometimes nearly impossible I would write a lot more text-based music. Possibly because it's easier, it sets out the path; while there's nothing more daunting than getting to a certain stage in a piece and knowing you are possibly only a third of the way through, and almost getting to the state ... I start sometimes timing a piece, I've got 5 minutes now - and, oh god, I've got to do another 10.

BG: You know what Schoenberg said about words, he said they are a method for the composer to set off on his journey.

You've tackled certain forms, like concerto for example. There are, what, 3, 4 concertos? And string quartets. But there's never been a symphony.

CM: I feel there's something that doesn't work for me. I don't want ... it may be a reaction to David, I don't know, that that's his path and mine is something different. But I've got so far now without having written one that I certainly won't write one now. Or if I wrote something that was in essence a symphony I wouldn't call it that. It's a bit late to start. But it's not a form that I think of in orchestral terms. I'm quite happy writing a relatively conventional string quartet shape. Even concertos have found me going more into set movements. But I do like the free form that orchestral music brings with it for me.

BG: I know one concerto that feels very much like a free form concerto but clearly isn't free form, and that's the horn concerto, which feels like a typical Matthews orchestral piece with a huge horn obligato, and it goes on a wonderfully mysterious journey. The only thing I have against it is that it is over too soon, I want it to go on longer.

CM: But of the concertos I've written it's the only one that actually is in a single movement.

Although it's in 5 clearly defined sections which I think of almost as movements. I always intended that to be a piece that was in a single movement. But goodness, that was another tough one that was very difficult to get started, and I've got masses of projected sketches for that.

BG: And you don't think that's something you could go back to and you might find something?

CM: I might look again, just because there are so many. But I think they were going in the wrong direction for that piece. Whether they would be ... I find it very difficult to go back. When I look at old pieces I just want to rewrite them. The thought of going back to sketches and trying to rework those is not something I'd like to do. Even recently, a disconcerting experience was with the Violin Concerto that I'd finished in draft 6 months before I started orchestrating it, because Leila Josefowicz was going to play it by heart, so she asked if she could have the piece a year early. It was very disconcerting to go back and orchestrate it. Although I didn't want to alter the substance, it was partly the fact that, normally, writing an orchestral score is so much a part of the whole process that comes at the end, that to have a 6 month gap and then come back to it was very disconcerting. I kept on thinking, well what on earth did he mean here.

BG: So actually you were orchestrating...

CM: I was orchestrating it. I was literally orchestrating rather than it being part of the process. And I have a strange sort of superstitious phobia that I don't like to write any instrumentation down on my sketches at all.

BG: I'm very surprised by that because the music always appears, or sounds, to me as if it has been rigidly and immediately imagined into orchestral terms.

CM: Well it has, because that's the way I think of it when I'm composing it. But I know what the sound world is. It's become one of those silly superstitions, that once I started doing that I now find it something I almost have to stop myself from doing unless there's something, a very specific sound that I've got. But then I might go away and actually score it rather than elaborate it from a sketch. I might go straight into the full score of a section because I want to pin down the sound.

BG: Did you want to change things when you came to orchestrating the Violin Concerto?

CM: Not really, no, I didn't. The violin part I was happy with in any case. And I did make some changes, yes. But it was more a question that I'd lost that continuity that's part of the process. That normally I would go straight into the score and know what to do, and it isn't a problem. But this time it was a problem, because I couldn't remember in some cases quite what I had intended.

BG: From my own experience I never look at something without thinking – and I can't revise, films are not very easy to revise, nobody is going to pay you to do that. Not even going to pay you for making it the first time! But you think – oh god, I want to change that. But you're not an obsessive reviser are you? There are composers who are.

CM: No, well I try to get the revisions done as immediately as I can. But I will, if I go back to pieces, there are things I want to change. I did change the end of one of my ensemble pieces *Contraflow* recently, but just changed the last page or two. There's another piece I want to make a change to the ending of as well. And I would willingly go back and change others, except I'd rather get on to the next piece. I would probably lost the thread, I wouldn't want to do the sort of recomposing that say Hindemith would do with *Marienleben*, that sort of complete recomposition. Which gives you two different works in that case, both of which have a validity.

BG: Yes, the first one tends to have more validity than the second. This is something that I'm thinking of, certainly composers who, almost like painters, they have a particular set of subjects, or objects I should say. Like Cezanne, where you have endless versions of Mont Saint Victoire or bowls of fruit or whatever. I'm thinking of people like Boulez for example, who seems to have written half a dozen pieces which they spend their entire lives rewriting and re-elaborating. As if it's a sort of eternal revisiting of a particular thing. I find it quite strange.

CM: With Boulez I don't quite understand what it is. Sometimes pieces come out, like the Maderna piece - *Rituel* - which stands apart from the rest of the output and was written spontaneously. But you look at the endless re-workings of for example *Répons*, which has gone through goodness knows how many versions, although it was fine to begin with. And then the elaborations of pieces that have started out small and gradually grow and grow. Particularly with the *Notations*, which come from tiny seeds and you'd have thought, why even start from there? - except that he obviously needs something. But there is clearly something of a problem for him now, that he can so rarely come up with anything new, and I don't think he ever will now. It's only going to be more *Notations*. Although he can write, presumably, like the piece that started out as just a little tribute to Stravinsky, *Explosante-Fixe*. That's a prime example, I suppose he could probably work that way again, starting with something tiny and then gradually elaborating it until it becomes a big piece. But starting from scratch now seems to be impossible for him.

BG: It's fascinating if you go to the Sacher Foundation into the archive, and they have got everything there, and there are a great many pieces that are quite elaborate but which never went anywhere. And one or two pieces where he wrote more than he's ever allowed to have performed, *Éclat-Multiples*, for example, has another 250 bars of material there which for some reason he has not released. It's very strange. But I suspect that you belong more to the school of people who say right, whatever the problem, I think I'll start a new piece. And certainly won't wind you into loops like [?Laocoon] or one of those characters.

CM: But I do find myself occasionally going into the sort of loop mode. In recent years I've been reworking ... it probably wouldn't be that noticeable to anyone who didn't try to analyse it closely but for the past 6 or 7 years there's particular material which I've been in a sense recycling. Starting with *Continuum*, there were some elements of that which I thought had a lot of potential that I've been using which carry on through *Turning Point*, and that's still in the Violin Concerto. I think I've come

to the end of that particular phase, I sense I may be moving in a slightly different direction.

BG: What is your attitude towards your own pieces? When you hear them for the first time, presumably there is a mixture of pleasure and also maybe doubt. Do you get a sense that when a piece is further away in time it's somehow more settled in your consciousness?

CM: If it's moved a long way away. What tends to happen is a cycle of a sort of immediate excitement that the piece has come off more or less as I hoped it would - or possibly depression if it hasn't. But within quite a short period I then become dissatisfied and I don't want to hear it. That happens quite often. For one thing I'm sort of exhausted with it. I've been through it and I don't want to revisit it, so it's quite good to be able to put pieces to one side. And coming back to them shortly after they've been written is often a depressing experience. I need that amount of distance. I'm too aware of what I intended when I started and what I didn't get to. And that's the thing that emerges shortly after the piece has been done for the first time.

BG: The pieces from a long time ago must feel sometimes as though they've been written by somebody else. Do they feel like that, do you ever look at pieces and think, well, obviously with early pieces you probably want to withdraw them or keep them hidden anyway, even though you've done quite a lot to reveal someone else's early pieces! Does it feel, when you look at a piece, let us say from 1970 or early 70s and think 'oh, that's quite interesting, I rather like that', or even 'good lord, I don't think I could do that now'. Does that ever happen to you?

CM: To some extent. The thing is, quite a lot of the pieces from the 70s have to some extent disappeared, probably for good reason, and I remain quite familiar, I mean the *Fourth Sonata* is a case in point, of a piece which I've sort of lived with through that process because it's kept coming back. It seems to go in cycles of being performed, of having a 10 year gap and then it comes back again. And I don't really recognise the composer but I'm so familiar with it as a piece that I can't remain detached from it. I know where it's coming from. But I can be completely dispassionate about it, and I can be its own best critic I think.

BG: Yes, can you enjoy it?

CM: Just about, yes. I don't want to go round listening to my own music anyway, I'd rather listen to other people's. Some pieces I do get a positive feeling from, but for quite a lot, they're out there, and if people want to do them fine, but don't involve me! They have to live their own life.

BG: Tell me about the very first pieces. How did, what impulse produced early pieces and what kind of pieces were they. I'm talking now about things you would have written when you were 20 years old.

CM: I went through various phases at around that period. Being about 20, that would be when I was trying to find a language from within the Serialism of that period. I was very impressed and remain impressed by some of the things that Max was doing in those days, I mean *Worldes Blis*, *Second Taverner Fantasia*, *St Thomas Wake* and some of the pieces for the Fires of London. And that was a model that I tried to follow but I don't think I had the technical expertise or perhaps not really the feeling for, I don't think it was really me. And I was lucky at that time that when I decided that composing was what I would definitely do, as opposed to doing my best and dabbling in it with no real reason why I should be, I was lucky that I was part of an analysis course. I was allowed to do an M.Phil in composition at the same time that I was at Nottingham when they were running an MA in analysis and that helped hugely. But it pushed me in rather strange directions. In the first place I went to study with Nicholas Maw. Partly because I admired, as we were talking earlier, I felt that he had really got something out of that 1910, 1900 period. And actually managed to make a harmonic language of his own from it. Particularly *Scenes and Arias*, which was a piece that stood out so much at that time. But I don't think I necessarily wanted to write music like that and I think it pushed me in directions that weren't very helpful. Because the weird thing that happened was discovering minimalism, and finding that pushed me sideways temporarily. But it helped me create something that was actually my own. It was a very weird fusion of 3 or 4 different styles. I remember, when the *Fourth Sonata* was first performed, a review which said it sounded like a mixture of Sibelius, Ligeti and Steve Reich, re-orchestrated by Leonard Bernstein. I think the critic thought he was being rather rude, but I was absolutely delighted because it's precisely what I felt I was trying to do.

BG: Yes, you got it right in fact. But was the problem in those early days trying to work out a

coherent argument? There is a notion when you have an idea of something, whether it be a painting or a film or whatever, that it's sort of there, how wonderful, but then the process of actually having to work it out, the finding of a coherent argument ... is that something that happens?

CM: Well, not in the sense that I had problems in finding forms I wanted to work in, or structures I wanted to create. What really got me was my lack of technical ability. I just wasn't experienced enough. And it was something I was acquiring, I mean obviously working on Mahler 10 was a huge boost, but it only gave me certain technical skills, particularly orchestration and understanding of structure, but it didn't give me the ability to fill out those frameworks that I envisaged, and that was a technical lack.

BG: Were there also problems of confidence therefore in your early years, because you didn't think you knew quite how to do it?

CM: There was a great lack of self confidence. Except that the weird thing was that I seemed to find that I could do it for no good reason. The Mahler was a case in point : one of the most extraordinary experiences of my life was opening up the programme book for the first performance in the proms in 1964 and finding that alongside Berthold Goldschmidt's mine was the only other name acknowledged. And I thought my goodness, why haven't there been hundreds of people getting involved in this. And that was a remarkable boost of confidence for someone who was only 18, and felt a complete outsider to the professional musical world.

BG: How much did working on the Mahler sketches and the performing version of them, how much did that in a way push you inside music? I will throw out a theory that in some respects, for somebody who really looks at music, and especially someone who orchestrates a lot of music not necessarily by themselves, it is a way of getting inside and finding out how a piece works.

CM: Well certainly with Mahler 10 it was an incomparable experience of getting inside a composer's mind and understanding a structure. Much more productive than ordinary analysis would be. And it's been one of the motives for wanting to work with other people's music, that I find it a terrific way in. Working on the Debussy *Preludes* has been wonderful, to find a perception and understanding of Debussy's mind that I really didn't have before. And it influenced me in unexpected ways. I mean you don't expect in your 60s to have that sort of influence coming in, the sort of thing you pick up in your teens. Because everything is so exciting and new. But to find that happening much later on was very fascinating.

BG: You're a composer who is very busy in many fields, not just in composition. A lot of composers support themselves by teaching. You did say in your memoir that you don't have any aptitude for teaching but in fact you do run a composers course don't you, in Snape. Do you think that composition can be in some senses taught?

CM: I have mixed feelings about it. I think composers are born. You can help them. You can't really teach them. I do find it really stimulating to find that there is a generation that still has exactly the same sort of feelings, even in a blatantly commercial age, that they just want to tuck themselves away doing something that's not needed. It's such a difficult thing to do. And I say I don't have an aptitude for it ... I enjoy working with them, and as well as that course I've been working with composers with the LSO over the last 5 years where there must have been about 40 composers coming through, writing either workshop pieces or small scale pieces for the LSO. And I do a bit of small scale teaching at the Royal College and I've got a few private people, some of whom are a real pleasure to work with. It's good to do that sort of thing on the side. From my observation of composers who are in full time academic posts I think it's a very tough thing to do, and I've no idea how they actually then come out of it with the energy to write their own music.

BG: In fact you run a company, you are a recording producer, you are in a very real sense a very busy man, so in fact your composition is part of a generally active musical life.

CM: Well I think if I was given the time to do nothing but compose I would probably be staring at the paper all the time. I do like the things that spark off each other, and perhaps fighting for the time to compose. I have to desperately set aside, if I'm lucky, a 10 day period where I'm not going to be distracted by other things. It works, it does seem to work that way. Certainly when I've given myself a sort of sabbatical I've often found it counter-productive. And I enjoy to a certain extent some of the administrative things that I do, particularly because it is also giving back to music. To have been part

of the Holst Foundation and given away quite a few millions of pounds gives a sense of satisfaction.

BG: Well you've caused a lot of music to be heard which we are grateful for. Through that, and through NMC there are a whole lot of things we discover.

CM: But again, going back to Mahler 10 in 1964, I can't understand why more people haven't wanted to do this sort of thing. Some people have asked 'why did you found NMC?', and the answer is that no one else was doing it, and NMC now, it's great to see this catalogue - but when we started there was a complete void, there was so little that was done for living composers. It's the thing I'm most proud of.

BG: Can we talk about Mahler and particularly Mahler 10. You have had influential people in your life. Donald Mitchell for one, but Deryck Cooke, tell me about Deryck Cooke.

CM: Deryck was an extraordinary person. I think one of the most broad-minded and open minded people I've ever known. To accept a 17 year old schoolboy writing to him and telling him he'd made mistakes in transcribing Mahler 10 and not saying, 'go away', but 'can we meet? : nobody has said this to me before' - was remarkable. And it was as if I was inducted into a musical world. I was brought up by the BBC, I listened to the Third Programme all the time. I knew Deryck as one of the figures who was very much part of that, and through him I met Hans Keller. And to have that sort of introduction to the musical world was wonderful. But Deryck was very very special. He was one of my musical father figures. He was a good composer who stopped because he felt out of tune with the times. His music was exclusively tonal. Not unadventurous. It now all sits in the Red House library I'm glad to say. But he had a composer's understanding, that's why he was able to do the Mahler, because it was never a musicological process, and musicologists who have looked at it have always rejected it. And still do - the number of conductors who won't go beyond the Adagio; and play the Adagio in an edition which has been edited by an idiot musicologist, full of mistakes...

BG: It is very strange, because there was a lot of fuss, particularly in the early times of the performances, that we shouldn't do this. It seems to be absolute nonsense.

CM: There's a quote that I've used in several essays, from Adorno, saying that people who really understand this music would rather that it was privately filed away for the exclusive use of musicologists. I can't think of anything more revolting.

BG: Why don't they put the Mozart *Requiem* away, or indeed *The Art of Fugue*, or a whole lot of unfinished pieces?

CM: Yes, and Adorno went on to say, it's like sketches of great artists, you'd rather keep them for private contemplation than allow them out into the world. And I find this an absolutely abhorrent approach, particularly with music. You can look at sketches or unfinished paintings, you can read unfinished poems and novels, but with music you have to have an intermediary. I was as aware as anybody, probably much more aware than nearly everybody, of the shortcomings of the 10th Symphony, but I would never want it hidden away. And that's why I was so convinced by, and wanted to be involved with Tony Payne's Elgar 3, for exactly the same reasons : it had been rejected for the same reasons, that nobody had significant perception to understand how far Elgar had got with it.

BG: And that was in some respects more problematic.

CM: Well it was rather problematic, but it also actually has more scope because Tony had to compose, whereas to reconstruct the 10th there is no composition to be done because there isn't a missing bar.

BG: But people have recomposed it, haven't they?

CM: Well they have recomposed texture, but nobody has actually added anything to the substance of the work. And that's the problem, that some of those bars shouldn't be there, but you can't really recompose them because that's Mahler's job. With the Elgar there are huge gaps, so it has to be composed, and there is in a sense more freedom, and in some respects that Tony's reconstruction of Elgar is a more authentic Elgarian work than the 10th is authentic Mahler. Because there are some places where you know Mahler is just filling in the gaps in order to get onto the next bit.

BG: And you as a composer would understand about that, though you were not a composer at the time, now you would know about filling on to the next bit.

CM: Yes. Sometimes you are just marking time until you can get where you want to be, you don't want to leave a gap, you know it's something you will go back to.

BG: Do you think Mahler would have done much revision to the 9th Symphony?

CM: I don't think so. Certainly not *The Song of the Earth*, which is as near perfect as it can be, apart from the balance in the first movement which he would have certainly revisited if he had performed it. I think structurally it's a miracle. I think the 9th Symphony - which went through a lot of revision in its draft orchestral score (which is as far as the 10th got) between the draft orchestral score and the fair copies - radical changes happened there which makes you realise how far the 10th is away from completion. But I don't know with the 9th whether there would have been further revisions. I don't think so. The miracle of the first movement is astonishing. A new texture for Mahler. Orchestrally it's a wonder. Form-wise I'm lost in admiration, it's one of the greatest pieces of music.

BG: A composer inevitably lives in society unless he is really in the top of an ivory tower. I get the impression that audiences are less curious than they used to be, or shall we say they are discouraged from curiosity by the way music is set up these days, certainly with how it is reflected in broadcast media. Do you find that?

CM: Yes I do. The Classic FM syndrome obviously of only expecting it to last a few minutes. But with conventional concerts, I wish they could be completely revamped.

BG: Have you got any ideas how they could be?

CM: The clothes for a start. Please stop wearing tails. Have you noticed how many conductors now don't wear tails? Even the staidest of orchestras : you will find with the Vienna Philharmonic somebody will just come on wearing a black jacket and no bow tie. But that's what the orchestras should be doing, and it would communicate something. That's perhaps a minor thing, but it's something that always jars with me, that it's immediately going to put people off. And it's a totally bogus convention – they wear tails because they were originally expected to wear what the audience used to wear.

BG: But there are conventions, rather recurrent conventions that people who have a certain nervousness in going to music, they want to know about it but they are in fact worried that they will do something silly. It seems to be that the concert experience is a lot of the time making you feel that you are standing up in church when you should be kneeling down and vice versa, and all of that.

CM: Yes, and of course there's the clapping between movements. Which has now gone to the opposite extreme where people now often feel they have to clap. So you get something like the Four Last Songs - recently I heard applause after each song, which seems so inappropriate. But for instance, to greet the first movement of Mahler 3 with just coughing is obscene. Applause is almost part of the music - you simply have to applaud something that ends with such exuberance. The trouble is that it's this question of education, because the audience feels uneasy, it doesn't know what it's supposed to be doing, and if they've clapped the first movement feel they have to clap all of them, whether it's appropriate or not.

BG: And how much are our cultural institutions responsible for that, including the broadcasting ones?

CM: Well I think when they've tried to loosen it up they've done it in the wrong way. I don't know. I'm very glad it's an area I'm not involved with, because I don't think there are easy solutions. I'm not sure that anybody is going in quite the right direction. I feel very uneasy with the 'museum' culture of concerts, the hushed atmosphere.

BG: It's very interesting when you look at audiences for concerts, they are so very varied and for certain kinds of music there will be a young enthusiastic and very impassioned audience. When I say young, I mean young in spirit not just age. And it seems as if it's the conventional orchestral set up which is becoming rather dreary, becoming rather sort of dusty. That there's a response to things like the Sinfonietta and BCMG which is very enthusiastic. A thing which you would not find with people going for example to Philharmonia concerts. That does seem rather sad and suggests that the managements involved are not thinking it through.

CM: Well it's pretty short term. They can sustain it for a certain period but I can't believe the standard concert format can last much longer.

BG: Are you hopeful about the future of music – it sounds stupid but of course music has a future, but at the same time that future has all kinds of dangerous things circling around it. I personally am worried by the fact that the so called concert hall classical music gets less and less attention, especially in the broadsheet newspapers. It is really changing – if you look at the Observer now there will be 4 pages on rock and maybe 1 on classical music. Is this something that you've noticed?

CM: I've noticed it hugely – I mean in my own career, when I was young and unknown I would get reviews all over the place. I remember the *Fourth Sonata* got all the broadsheets the next day, which was astonishing. Now I'm lucky if I get one – the Violin Concerto, not even sure what it got, but the Guardian review never got printed, it was only available online. There was a rather sniffy Sunday Times review which I haven't seen. And I think that was it. And it's a weird thing, that now at the stage I've reached, you automatically get far less attention; but it is symptomatic of the way coverage is going. And I suppose I can understand to a certain extent the fact that, whereas the papers were papers of record, they're no longer interested in reviewing something that has been and gone, when nobody is going to benefit from it. It's a different matter with opera reviews which continue to be very widespread because that's something that you can read and go to. Although if you'd read the reviews of the recent ENO *Bluebeard* I don't know what you would have done. I'm still reeling from that production. I found it so disturbing. Partly because perhaps the answer is that's what it really is about, but if so I don't really want to know.

BG: Do you think that there is any possible political and social dimension to music?

CM: Yes I do but I think it has to be handled very carefully so that it doesn't become propaganda. I think it's something that needs to be done subtly. Something that I've occasional tried to do, and certainly want to try to do in the future as well.

BG: What kind of attempt did you make?

CM: Well I've written a few Eisler-like songs. I wrote an orchestral work for the London Regional CND. Nothing on a large scale. And I'm wary for instance of something like the big Michael Berkeley/Ian McEwan Oratorio, which is well-intentioned but seems to be preaching to the converted. And that's what I would prefer to try to avoid doing. I'm not sure that it can work unless you just work in the sort of simple Eisler mode.

BG: It seems to me that frequently the most elaborate composers are actually enormously conservative in their political and social attitudes. I'm thinking of Schoenberg for instance. And equally some of the most radical political thinkers produce the most conservative music. Or indeed simple-minded music. I believe you knew Cornelius Cardew didn't you? How did you feel about that sort of thing?

CM: What was most disturbing was the way he thought that his Maoist songs were still avant-garde music. I found that more disturbing than anything. Because I was quite happy to go along with his political idealism, but not to believe in him as still a flag bearer for contemporary music. He couldn't seem to disassociate the two.

BG: Do you feel yourself to be part of a collective? I don't mean in a political sense, but a kind of collective of like-minded musicians and composers?

CM: To a certain extent. I have very good and close composer friends. But there was a time when there was more of a unity than there is now. Possibly it's a little bit of everyone for himself because it's a more commercial world. But I'm thinking of the days when I first met Olly, and when he really had gathered around him a community of people, so that his house was a place where everybody came and went, and Olly almost composed in public. He was teaching a lot of people, they would come and sit at his feet and he would play music to them. There was a lot of unity there I think. It would even embrace some of the complexity people who quite soon - because of the direction they've gone, and the need for self-justification if you're going to take that stance - took a very hostile view of everybody else. Some of those people still have that line which I think is sad. It's one of things we try to do at NMC, to be in that sense completely apolitical and cover the whole range of music.

BG: Skempton and Ferneyhough.

CM: Yes exactly. For our first 3 big releases we simultaneously released Howard Skempton, James Dillon and the Mary Wiegold Songbook (which included everybody from Birtwistle to Michael Nyman). That was a real statement, saying what we are after was stylistic breadth.

BG: I have a very strong sense of that generally happy society, particularly in relationship to the Aldeburgh Festival, because before you took up a more official position you were there every time every year weren't you? And I treasure some of those photographs outside Regent Cottage.

CM: Yes, at some time I want to make a collage of everybody who sat on that wall. It would probably stretch about 100 yards. It would be fun to do. We've got so many photographs. We took advantage of

the shortcomings of Aldeburgh – the fact that there wasn't a restaurant you could eat in, so we would be the focus for performers to come and have their spaghetti after the concert. It was a fun thing to be able to do, and there was a sense of community. But one shouldn't just look at it with rose-tinted glasses, there was also a lot of in-fighting going on at the same time.

BG: Can you define your attitude towards the world in political terms? How would you describe yourself as a political animal?

CM: As a socialist. I'm an old-fashioned socialist. I have never had any feeling of wanting to go to the right at all. Some of my political views are probably quite extreme, but I'm a private person in that sense, so I'm neither propagandising nor do anything else other than vote, which is an extremely difficult thing to do these days. I haven't voted anything but Green for probably the last 10 years. It's the only party that stands for anything I remotely believe in.

BG: Do you get the sense that sometimes a certain conservative attitude, by which I mean with a small c, can percolate from music into an attitude towards the world? I'm thinking in particular of certain kinds of composer who have decided on usually traditional forms, traditional harmonic language, but it is part of their sometimes rejection of the modern world, or their desire to be away from it.

CM: I would think only probably at an extreme end. Because I'm sure that a large number of composers would put me in the conservative wing. And to a certain extent rightly because I don't have an 'aesthetic'. I don't believe in the sort of aesthetic of modernism. I will embrace aspects of it. I don't have a sympathy with, particularly, the European aesthetic of modernism, which I find rather sterile. And that would certainly put me in a conservative fringe, and I know that there are plenty of French and German composers who would consider what I write to be hardly music at all in their terms.

BG: Well you remember that Adorno once said that Sibelius was the worst composer in the entire world.

CM: It takes one to know one!

BG: Yes... How often, how do you deal with publicity? The reason I ask you that question is that at one point, with one particular piece (*Pluto*), you suddenly became a news story. Tell me about that.

CM: That was at the time quite disturbing - to find yourself on the front page of a newspaper. Something I hadn't expected at all, although I suppose I should have anticipated it. It's been a difficult thing - the fact that I've become associated with a lot of other music other than my own. *Pluto* was perhaps the most extreme example, because it got a lot of publicity, never so much as when *Pluto* was demoted from being a planet. I came back from a week's holiday to find my answer machine absolutely full of people wanting interviews (mostly from the USA). Whereas I'd been at pains when I wrote my original programme note to say that I knew it probably wasn't a planet... I accepted that commission with some reluctance. It was very much Kent Nagano's idea and he also wanted me to preface the planets with Earth, which I resisted.

BG: Get a Martian to do that...

CM: I almost resisted doing *Pluto*, but it got to the stage where I knew that if I did say no he would probably ask someone else. And I thought, actually, if someone's going to do it, I'd rather it were me. And I'm quite proud of it as a piece of music. I find that it almost works. I can quite sympathise with people who don't want to hear it. (Although not quite with the two people who got up and walked out from the seat in front of me at the Proms. Knowing that I was sitting behind them. They looked smugly at each other and walked out as soon as *Neptune* ended.)

BG: What is very surprising about the piece is that having got to that stage in *The Planets*, with *Neptune* which is as far away and as static as you can imagine, then suddenly in breezes this really universal scherzo.

CM: Well it was a product of a lot of thought because I didn't think that you could get more remote than *Neptune*, short of moving the orchestra off stage to join the chorus. So it seemed to me to be the only answer, to introduce something which had a lot of life to it. But in the end it's as if *Neptune* had been there all along so it still ends the same way.

BG: Yes, because you come back into it don't you.

You've written music for films, or rather you've scored music for films, haven't you?

CM: Yes, I've done one film score which was, in the grand tradition, thrown out.

BG: Well, I think that was a particular sinking ship you were well out off, because it wasn't a good film. But you worked a lot with Carl Davis didn't you?

CM: Yes, on silent movies. Which I owe a lot to, because I learned a lot about orchestration from that. Not at the technical level, but how to write music that can sound complicated without actually being so – a rather crude way of putting it – but if you're writing film music, it's got to be sight-readable. And that was a very good experience, to be able to do elaborate orchestrations which is what Carl wanted. And he was very generous in the way that he gave both my brother and myself the freedom to elaborate. It was a very good experience, helping to assemble these massive scores. I think they're the best things that Carl has done - quite an extraordinary achievement. *Napoleon* - to have put together something of that length, and then to have conducted it when at that time there was no time code on the film. The technique didn't exist, or if it did it certainly hadn't been superimposed on the copy Carl was working from, so he had to get all his timings using a stopwatch, and it was all a question of finding points in the film where he knew he had to be at any given time - for nearly 3 hours in the first part, I think.

BG: One of the things he asked you to orchestrate was from a silent film called *The Wind*. Tell me about that.

CM: Well that was where he wrote just a graphic score – more or less just lines and curves and dynamics – and then gave me complete freedom to do the big storm sequence. We had a string orchestra and I used strings and I think 5 tamtams, so that it almost sounded like an electronic score. I was asked, I remember at the time 'how on earth did you do that? - people thought it was electronics. It's a great film, with an amazing climax.

BG: How did it start? You were born in North East London, Leytonstone. Was it a musical family?

CM: Not really. There are some musical antecedents. People who were ... no more musical than any other. There must be something musical on my mother's side because her first cousin became a cathedral organist and a choirmaster. I don't know about her father because he was killed in the first world war, and whether he had any music in him I just don't know. On my father's side, he was one of 5 or 6 brothers, all of whom could dabble at the piano, but none of whom could read music. But there was no particular music in the background and it was very much an East London family. If you go back into the roots, none of them ever moved outside of this tiny enclave of Bow and Brick Lane. There's a Huguenot silk weaver somewhere in the mid nineteenth century. Otherwise they are a pretty mundane bunch. Moving out to Leytonstone, which my parents did, was a pretty radical step.

BG: It's like the famous move of Jewish families from Whitechapel to Stamford Hill. You've made it up the hill. Where did music come in? Was it presumably from the radio I guess?

CM: From the radio. Both of us had piano lessons at an early age. And again it was sort of the lower middle class aspiration. Neither of my parents were particularly well educated. They both left school early, and I think felt a sense of frustration, and that feeling of wanting their children to have the benefits they didn't have. And of course that was a time when state schools, the funding for education was terrific. We actually went to a minor public school, but it was completely funded by Essex county. The school itself was no use musically. No real music teaching at all. Wherever it came from I think did come from my parents' aspiration - both of them liked music, or liked the noise it makes, as Beecham put it. But I don't think they would have expected, certainly didn't have any thought that either of us would become musicians. I don't think they had ambitions beyond us getting a fairly successful job at a bank or whatever.

BG: So music came in perhaps like any other schoolboy interests? What were those interests?

CM: Birdwatching. David was an avid trainspotter. For some reason we got addicted to motor racing. We used to go to Brands Hatch and Crystal Palace - our father took us there. Very strange. Whenever we got interested in something, we got really interested, so when music became the thing, that was that, and that was the one that survived.

BG: So you moved in a kind of symbiotic way?

CM: Well we tended to do the same things. although I never took up trainspotting! But we were our own educators. We didn't know anybody else. There were no cultural surroundings, apart from a very good public library. There was nothing, we had to teach ourselves completely.

BG: And did you teach yourselves, or each other, composing, writing music?

CM: We both just felt that this was something - we liked music, so we thought well why not try to write it? Somehow we found the right thing to do. Although at one stage I did think I would take up painting - my ability, certainly, at drawing and painting was considerably in advance of my musical ability at the time. But I didn't pursue that because I recognised that I wasn't good enough. Though why I thought that I would be good enough at music I don't know. There was no real evidence of it. BG. No. There doesn't have to be though, does there? Either it will happen or it won't, which it did.

Did you in any way help each other with composing, were you able to teach one another?

CM: Well I suppose we did. Certainly we looked at each other's music. And David immediately - David had an extraordinary ability, both in the fact that he could write music intuitively - and physically write it, which is a thing like learning to write Chinese - it doesn't come naturally, and there are composers whose hands remain undeveloped. David had a natural ability to do it, together with a natural ability to work on a large scale, so he immediately started writing symphonies, whereas I was always interested in miniatures at that stage. Well I couldn't get beyond that, so my music was very fragmentary.

BG: Did you both go to the same university?

CM: We did, at quite a distance. David was 3 years older than me. He stayed at school a year longer than I did, so that we overlapped for one year at university, which was Nottingham.

BG: Tell me about, what kind of person were you in your late adolescence? What did you read? What were your intellectual pursuits, that dreadful word?

CM: I was very serious. It was Strindberg and Ibsen I remember in particular. Hermann Hesse, Dostoyevsky, Camus. I did find that this actually meant something to me, it wasn't - as it could easily have been - just pretentious, although I'm sure I was pretentious about it. But this meant a lot to me, so it did give me a sort of intellectual background.

BG: And what I notice from the names that you mention, they all have a rather dark view of the world in fact.

CM: True.

BG: In Strindberg's case terribly dark actually. Doesn't affect your married life in any way I hope!

CM: Kafka was another obsession. So it doesn't get any brighter.

BG: What kind of musical world did you find to listen to? You were always listening to the radio as children, but at any more at university and immediately after that? What indeed happened immediately after university? What did you do?

CM: I was able to find work as an editor. David had gone down that line, he wasn't sure what to do. He went and studied with Anthony Milner. And he wrote to Donald Mitchell asking if he could come and see him, and Donald invited him to start editing music, so later there was an opening for me too there. It seemed to be relatively easy to earn a living in those days. I'm sure I wasn't exceptionally poor. It didn't seem to be ... I managed to scrape a living on largely editing. It's at such a distance now I can't imagine how I did it, but that was my only source of income, because I certainly wasn't earning anything at all from composing, and didn't until I was nearly 30.

BG: And it was I guess David, you followed David into the relationship with Aldeburgh and Britten.

CM: Yes. David, because he had got the connection with Donald Mitchell, which was at a time when Faber was just starting up, then became an assistant to Britten, working on I think first *The Burning Fiery Furnace*, then *The Prodigal Son*, then *Owen Wingrave*. And he found, I think, I'm sure he will have said this to you, he found eventually the atmosphere at Aldeburgh was just too enclosed and he broke away from it. He also thinks it may be the case that he grew a beard and Britten was allergic to people with beards! But anyway he didn't so much fall out of favour as actually move away. And there was no particular reason why I should have come into the fold, although I had done a certain amount of work for Britten. I met Imogen Holst, so I got to know Aldeburgh. The reason I got drawn into the circle was because of the vocal score of *Death in Venice* which had been started by Graham Johnson, who, although he was very adept, even then was a wonderful pianist and was acting as Peter Pears' repetiteur for *Death in Venice*, didn't have the knowledge or the ability to make an adequate vocal score. So I was called in to rescue it; and that was the start of something that has gone on for quite a while!

BG: Yes indeed. And what, you say David found the atmosphere very narrow I think was the word you used, sort of confined, did you find that too?

CM: Well I didn't get involved in the way that David did because he would be up there for the whole festival. But I never got drawn in in the way that he did into both Britten's circle and circles within Aldeburgh. He used to stay with a family who were part of the Aldeburgh set up. So it was very intense and I think he found it was just getting a little too much. I was always at a distance, I never spent any length of time in Aldeburgh. I worked directly with Britten occasionally, but not very often. There was so much, he wrote at such a rate, it was a little bit like working on a production line. It was sent to me, I would have to make the vocal score as quickly as possible and send it back. I have these awful memories now of the fact that I was writing a pencil vocal score, and it would get sent to Britten. He would cover it with corrections, and I had to rub them all out. So there's a whole manuscript history that has gone. If photocopies had been easy to make I would have photocopied them, or if I'd had time ... I'd never even thought to keep them and recopy them.

BG: What kind of character was Britten? Was he personable in the sense that he would take an interest in you and what you wanted to do?

CM: Yes, he did. But he was always a little resistant to talking about music. You had to be very wary about what subjects you could bring up. And of course I only saw him for a relatively short time when he was in good health. (And even then of course he wasn't in the best of health.) It was a very different relationship after he had the heart operation and I was helping him in a much more direct way. Then I felt a huge sympathy for the state he was in, and he was a much more gentle character then. He was very aware of his own mortality, and the prickliness and the difficulties to some extent had gone away, so I found that quite easy. But also one of the things is that I was something of an innocent. I hadn't got a great deal of experience of the musical world, I didn't know what questions to ask, so I didn't ask questions, which I now wish in many ways I had. But I think that's one of the reasons we got on - because I wasn't a nuisance.

BG: But since his death, a considerable portion of your activity has been in trying to sort out that vast legacy. Have you received the kind of disapproval that you would have got over the Mahler 10 over finding pieces and resurrecting either partial pieces or very early pieces?

CM: Not to any great extent. There are the sort of criticisms of scraping the barrel which people have made, when they have no idea how big the barrel is. And how good it is. And there are a number of pieces that if, I had had more of a say, I don't think I would have released - I think some of the complete pieces from certain periods are not quite up to it. Whereas I'm more fascinated with some of the unfinished fragments. But there is a huge corpus. And one of the things is the huge amount of incidental and film music, which is of extraordinarily high quality. But it's very difficult to find the context for them - we've done one recording of the film music [for NMC] which I think reveals the scope of what's there. But of course you can't really go much further, they can't be turned into valid concert pieces.

BG: I suppose they could be concert suites. But they don't ...

CM: They don't really add up. To be able to hear that music in context, that is quite extraordinary.

BG: Certainly it seems that of all the composers I can think of, with the exception of Mendelssohn, and maybe Korngold, his prodigiousness was quite remarkable.

CM: Well it's quite extraordinary, the fact that he wrote so much. The catalogue of pre-opus 1 music now comes to nearly 750 pieces. A lot of them ... some of these are scraps and early pieces of no consequence, but a lot of them are really big, large-scale pieces. There's nothing there now that would create a revelation if it were performed - we're not necessarily going to stop people from performing pieces - but there's nothing of real substance. The pieces that are of consequence have been published or edited.

BG: And certainly recorded, because the new record has at least 2 or 3 pieces which are really remarkable, and show a kind of Britten that we didn't know about.

CM: No, well I think that radical side of him, when he was under the influence of Frank Bridge, and pushing further than Bridge, is the most exciting period. That's the period when he wanted to go and study with Berg. And that's one of the losses.

BG: Tell me about your attitude towards the future. I'm sure you're in favour of it. We have to be

don't we! Do you have a planned future, or is your life just something where things have happened to you? Or have you got a kind of...

CM: I don't have any plan. I feel it's a great sort of sprawling canvas, where things have happened that surprise me, and still surprise me both in the future, and I look back at the past with a great sense of surprise. I certainly look back at that 14 year old in Leytonstone and can't recognise him at all. I don't think he would recognise me. But I think we would be quite happy with ourselves.

BG: I'll finish with a quotation which comes in from Eugenio Montale, and it's in the memoir, and it's 'Who knows, you can do it'. Not a bad motto for a composer is it?

CM: It's quite a nice one. And the circumstances which you will have read about of finding that those were the words which I had forgotten to set from the Montale poem in *Continuum*, and added half way through the first run of performances. Another happy circumstance.

BG: Well it's kind of a hopeful notion isn't it?

CM: It is, yes.

BG: Thank you very much.