

Interview with Andrew Palmer

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1. *Does the term 'British composer' mean anything other than someone born in this country who writes music? Did it ever?*

It conjures up for me the image of the insular outlook that called Britten 'too clever by half' in the 1930s, and railed against William Glock's innovations at the BBC. I think virtually everyone working today is far too aware of what's going on elsewhere to be pigeonholed; although I suspect that British composers are regarded as relatively conservative by their European counterparts, which may or may not be fair. This leads into your second question, as in France or Italy, say, you're expected to have an aesthetic, a guiding principle, adherence to which can be more important than the music you write. If there is something that characterises British composers it's perhaps a slightly magpie-like tendency to take bits from everywhere rather than follow a particular path, and a reluctance to be typecast.

2. *There doesn't seem much point asking a composer, 'Why do you compose?' But I think there's value in exploring why he writes the kind of music he does, in the way that he does. This question could be phrased in terms of the intended function of his music. I imagine all composers want their work to entertain and stimulate to some degree; probably most of them are motivated by a technical challenge to be solved; and probably most of them want to do something new and different in order to help music evolve. But if you're a composer because you want to express yourself in music, what is it that you want to express?*

I'm sure those three aims are pretty much what motivates most composers - although there's always a risk in aiming at 'something new and different' that you might be embracing innovation for innovation's sake. After all it was Schoenberg who said 'there's plenty of good music to be written in C major' (not that his own late tonal music is much to write home about). I'd add to that Boulez' 'anyone who hasn't felt the necessity of serial language is useless', and suggest that the ideal path is to balance the two. But that's more about the technical challenge of composing : 'what do you want to express' is a much tougher question. I want listeners to be challenged, involved and perhaps moved, but all I can do is to try to write the best music I can in the hope that the rest will follow. Can I add yet another quote? 'The man who is misguided enough to compose in the hope of pleasing others generally ends by pleasing neither them nor himself.' (Percy Grainger)

3. *An instrumentalist told me recently, 'There's no language of modern music anymore. There was a language of baroque music, of classical music, even of 19th century romantic music, from which composers deviated in their different ways. But now there's pop-influenced music, classical music, jazz influence, folk influence, modernistic, influence by ancient religious music, such as John Tavener - music is going in all those different directions.' Does this make composition today more or less difficult? Had you established your identity as a composer before these boundaries merged or broke down?*

I think one of the reasons that there isn't a pervasive musical language today is because of the ready availability of music of every kind. Until relatively recently there was only classical music and popular music (in the Western tradition, that is) and the two were closely related; and virtually all music was contemporary music. Now we can very easily access all kinds and eras of music, so our ears (and everyone else's ears) are much more open, and there's no sense

of a tradition that we have to follow. I'm not sure music is going in different directions though - I have the feeling that there's still a sort of current carrying everything with it, but we're too closely involved to see the bigger picture. Does all this make composing easier? Not really, and there's no less need to acquire technical expertise - other than in the world of 'sound art' there's no real musical equivalent to the kind of conceptual art which requires imagination but not necessarily technique (especially if you get someone else to do the actual work for you). Everyone I know still faces the same problems with a new piece, whatever the style. I'm not sure I've yet established my identity as a composer! I don't like the idea of feeling secure and knowing what I'm going to do next. But there was already a large range of choices available while I was learning my craft in the 1960s, and I was aware of and open to the influence of, to take a few extremes, Terry Riley, Milton Babbitt, John Cage and Cornelius Cardew, as well as having a close interest in non-Western music. That all seems far away now, but it was beneficial, if only as something I reacted against.

4. Both the painter and the novelist create art that's tangible even when nobody's looking at it. But (ignoring recordings), the composer creates something whose full existence is dependent on performers to bring it fleetingly to life. Are you ever frustrated by the transience of what you create?

There are certainly frustrations - notably that, unlike painting, there's no way to compose and complete a work at speed - imagine being able to create the musical equivalent of one of Van Gogh's late landscapes in a single day! In other respects composing isn't so different - you often read of novelists finding their characters taking over, which is something I find hard to comprehend just because words are so tangible : but it's certainly the case with music that, however pre-planned, it can head off in its own direction. I've sometimes used the analogy of a sculptor chipping away at a block of marble to find what's inside. I'm not sure transience is the right word though : what does preoccupy me is the temporal aspect of music, in performance - that, unlike a painting or a book, you can't really put it down and come back to it. I think that's at the root of a lot of the problem that people have with new music - they're trapped with something unfamiliar and can't get away, they don't want to respond to the challenge. (Of course recordings are an answer to this, but there's no substitute for live performance.) I realise I haven't really answered your question directly : I think the answer is that, as a composer, you take this restriction on board with the job, so you can't have any complaints!

5. When you think about a particular piece of your music, does your imagination hear the sound it makes or see the way you structured/notated it? Do the mind's eye and ear always work together?

My usual thought about a piece of mine is 'that's the piece that went wrong there'. So the first thought is certainly about structure, which is very important to me. The sound world follows - if you stick with the analogy of painting, it's how the painting is put together that matters the most, and colour is secondary - although that's not always the case of course, and, similarly, some music can be structured around its sound. 'Do the mind's eye and ear always work together?' In an ideal world, yes : I think Stockhausen said that he had little time for composers who didn't conceive their notes with the precise sound in mind, dynamic, pitch, timbre. But in his case that led, I think, to over-schematisation; while I always have the sound I want to create in mind when I write down the notes, the precise working out of detail is a separate process.

6. I get the impression - perhaps wrongly - that composers have differing aspirations in terms

of how widely or deeply their music should communicate. Some want to communicate to as wide a public as possible, and will favour a particular idiom that ensures this; others want their music to be heard but don't seem so bothered whether the average musical punter 'gets' it. To what extent does your music need a level of understanding (for example of your intentions and their subsequent technical execution) in order to be fully appreciated?

The Percy Grainger quote I used previously answers part of this question! But it's a lot more complicated than that. Of course I want to communicate, and when somebody understands what I'm trying to do then it's very rewarding. But I can't put 'communication' first : like it or not, we're saddled with very difficult questions of language - we've moved away from the vernacular, and can only move back towards it in a way that puts the language in quotes, or is ironic (post-modernism, I suppose). I can't see any point in writing serious music that is just simple and melodic, because there's more than enough of that already : like no other generation before we live surrounded by music of all types and periods. 'Who needs it?', Stravinsky's question, should be on every composer's desk. That's not to say that 'occasional' pieces can't serve a purpose, and I've written - particularly for children - music that is tuneful and uncomplicated, although always I hope contradicting expectations. But although that should be part of the job, it's a kind of sideline - plenty of other composers can do it as well or better than me - and I think the main job is to write music that makes people think. Whether it needs 'a level of understanding' is a different matter. I don't think it should : my preoccupations shouldn't be a concern for the listener.

7. I asked the last question because I believe music can bring different kinds of pleasure. For example, it can evoke a passionate emotional reaction - a heart response - or it can generate studied intellectual satisfaction - a mind response. And sometimes, of course, both. I'm not suggesting that one is more important than the other, but some composers do seem more concerned with one than the other. Are you?

I'm aware that something I create in a completely dispassionate way can have an emotional impact, and that's as it should be. I think my answer is that ideally I want both, but setting out to provoke an emotional response is the wrong starting point. If the work doesn't have intellectual credibility (whether or not the listener recognises it) it doesn't deserve to evoke emotion. Birtwistle once said something on the lines of 'a badly designed building will fall down; the same should apply to music'.

8. In his book Schafer writes of the different ways in which people listen to music, 'A composer is interested in how a work is made, a musicologist in where it fits into history and tradition; perhaps only the amateur can listen with pure aesthetic pleasure.' Since music is your profession, can you get aesthetic pleasure from it? If so, what do you choose to listen to?

I certainly don't listen in a musicological way, and sometimes I would like to listen in an un-composerly way, but usually 'how it's made' takes over; and when I know very well how it's made then it's all too easy to get upset by the shortcomings of the performance. Self-indulgent, pure pleasure listening would probably be headed by Strauss, and because I like to listen to them without concerning myself too much with how they work, Ravel and Debussy. I listen to a lot of contemporary music as part of my job at NMC, and record-producing has opened my ears to a lot of music I would not otherwise have heard. I prefer to restrict my listening, so that it can be something special, and I don't own an iPod!