

The Cross-Eyed Pianist

Frances Wilson blogs on piano playing and music, art and culture

Meet the Artist.....Stephen Goss

Who or what inspired you to become a guitarist and composer?

I can't remember a time when I didn't want to compose my own music. As soon as I learned to read music, I started writing it down. I haven't stopped since. As a guitarist, I was inspired by John Williams and Julian Bream. They made playing the guitar seem like the most relevant and exciting thing to do.



What are you working on at the moment?

A Triple Concerto, for saxophone, cello, piano and orchestra. It's for the Orpheus Sinfonia, a wonderful orchestra of young professionals. The solo parts are part-composed, part-devised and part-improvised. The piece transforms pre-existing music in unexpected ways. The pianist, Graham Caskie, has been sending me short recordings of musical ideas for possible inclusion. The work has been very collaborative and musically rewarding. I'm now putting the finishing touches to the orchestration. The first performance is at Cadogan Hall on 11th July.

Who or what are the most important influences on your writing?

Firstly, the musicians I work with. I have learned so much from them. Secondly, the various external impetuses that give my music its narrative content, character and shape. Recently these influences have come from the work of James Joyce, Thomas Heatherwick, Charles Jencks, Gerhard Richter, Norman Foster, Antoni Gaudi and Terry Gilliam. As for musicians, I have very catholic tastes. At the centre, though, it's Beethoven, Mahler and Stravinsky – and my recent work has been flavoured by Max Richter, Uri Caine, Mark Anthony Turnage, John Adams, and Frank Zappa among others.

What have been the greatest challenges of your career so far?

Writing music for my heroes has proved particularly challenging – I've done that a couple of times. There is a sense that you must somehow raise your game for the 'big occasion'. Of course, as soon as you put

pressure on yourself, it becomes impossible to make creative decisions.

What are the particular challenges/excitements of working with an orchestra?

When you write for orchestra, you can't afford to take too many risks. The music needs to play off the page, as rehearsal time is always limited. So keeping the balance between invention and pragmatism is the biggest challenge. Working with Orpheus has been great, as I've got to know the players and have been able to write to their strengths and be more experimental.

Which recordings are you most proud of?

I am very happy with many of the recordings of my music. However, once a project is over, I rarely reflect on it too much. All I can say is that I'm really enjoying two recording projects that I'm working on at the moment – the Piano Concerto with Emmanuel Despax and the Orpheus Sinfonia and the Guitar Concerto with John Williams and the RPO.

Do you have a favourite concert venue?

The Brangwyn Hall, Swansea in my youth. I went to many orchestral concerts there between the ages of 11 and 18. It's where my musical DNA was formed.

Who are your favourite musicians?

Here's a list for today, but it would be different every time you asked me – Alina Ibragimova, Krystian Zimerman, Joni Mitchell, Claudio Arrau, Martha Argerich, Paul Watkins, Branford Marsalis, David Russell. These are all musicians who've moved me in recent weeks.

What is your most memorable concert experience?

I went to see WNO's production *The Turn of the Screw* when I was 14. It changed the way I thought about music. Suddenly a door on a new world opened up in front of me. The range of emotional expression, instrumental and vocal colour, and depth of musical characterisation was breathtaking.

What is your favourite music to listen to?

I love listening to things for the first time (especially at a live concert). Nothing beats the excitement of discovering something new. You listen not knowing where the music is going to end up or what's going to happen next. Recently, I was really taken with Ginastera's Piano Concerto and Janáček's Violin Sonata. In terms of familiar favourites, Bach, Mahler, Debussy, Ravel, Miles Davis and Beethoven again.

What do you consider to be the most important ideas and concepts to impart to aspiring musicians/students?

- To listen without prejudice
- To question everything
- That asking for guidance is not a sign of weakness
- That everyone has creative and inventive ideas all the time. The difficulty comes in taking those ideas and realising them in a satisfying way.
- That the notion of an individual compositional voice is a dangerous one. W.H. Auden once said that as an artist, you spend the first half of your life imitating others and the second half imitating yourself. I would argue that self-repetition is a bigger problem than any notion of a composer having to nurture or seek an individual voice.

Where would you like to be in 10 years' time?

Exactly where I am now, but with a more manageable schedule.

What do you enjoy doing most?

Spending time with friends and family, and watching live football in N5.

Stephen Goss is currently composer-in-residence for Orpheus Sinfonia who will give the world premiere of his Triple Concerto for Saxophone, Cello and Piano at the Cadogan Hall in London on Thursday 11 July. The soloists are saxophonist Pete Whyman, cellist Thomas Carroll (also Artistic Director of Orpheus Sinfonia) and pianist Graham Caskie, with Toby Purser conducting.

To book tickets, go to: www.cadoganhall.com/event/orpheus-sinfonia-grand-finale-130711/

Stephen Goss' *Piano Concerto* was premiered by Emmanuel Despax and the Orpheus Sinfonia in London in April and will be released on the Signum Classics label in October.

www.orpheusfoundation.com

"Composer Stephen Goss draws on a variety of sources for his eminently listenable music. Despite the eclectic nature of his influences, which range from Beethoven's late piano music to the films of former Python Terry Gilliam, Goss's musical language comes across as brilliantly integrated...." International Record Review

*Stephen Goss is much in demand as a composer. His works have been recorded on over 50 CDs by more than a dozen record labels, including EMI, Decca, Naxos and Deutsche Grammophon. His collaborative project with Professor Charles Jencks, *The Garden of Cosmic Speculation* (2005) for violin, cello, bass clarinet and piano, was profiled on *The South Bank Show* on ITV1.*

His latest projects include a new guitar concerto for the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, which will be recorded and toured by guitarist John Williams in 2014. He has also received commissions from guitarists David Russell, Milos Karadaglic and Xuefei Yang, cellist Natalie Clein, violinist Nicola Benedetti, flautist William Bennett and the Barcelona Symphony Orchestra.

Goss has also collaborated with Andrew Lloyd Webber, arranging melodies from his new musical, Stephen Ward, for solo guitar. The piece was premièred by Milos Karadaglic on ITV on Easter Sunday (31 March) as part of a 90-minute celebration of the life and work of Andrew Lloyd Webber, marking 40 years in London's West End. It is the first time any material from Lloyd Webber's new show, which is based on the Profumo scandal which rocked the British government in the early 1960s, has been heard. The track is being released by Deutsche Grammophon to coincide with the TV broadcast.

After several years on the staff at the Yehudi Menuhin School, Steve Goss is now Professor of Music and Head of Composition at the University of Surrey, and a Professor of Guitar at the Royal Academy of Music in London.

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