Stephen Goss, Composer

by Guy Traviss

Stephen Goss’ music receives hundreds of performances worldwide each year and has been recorded on over fifty CDs by more than a dozen record labels, including: EMI, Decca, Telarc, Virgin Classics, NAXOS, and Deutsche Grammophon.

Steve has built up several long-term collaborative working relationships with a wide variety of musicians, including: John Williams, David Russell, Xuefei Yang, Nicola Benedetti, Miloš Karadagić, Thomas Carroll, Jonathan Leathwood, and Andrew Lloyd Webber. Steve is currently composer-in-residence for London’s Orpheus Sinfonia, which premiered his Triple Concerto (2013) for saxophone, cello, piano, and orchestra in July. Steve is now Professor of Music and Head of Composition at the University of Surrey, U.K., and a Professor of Guitar at the Royal Academy of Music in London.

All musical examples in this interview were reprinted by kind permission of Cadenza Music. For further details please visit: stephengoss.net and dobermaneditions.com

GT: Half of your works involve the guitar. Is being a guitarist an advantage when writing for the instrument?

SG: It’s a double-edged sword. If you’re an outsider wanting to write for guitar, it’s a steep learning curve. It’s not like learning how to write for saxophone, for argument’s sake. With a wind instrument, you learn the range and fingering charts, the qualities of the different registers, what’s comfortable and what’s not comfortable, how certain articulations and effects are executed, what the balance issues are, and off you go. With guitar, there is a lot more tacit knowledge to unpick. Very few non-guitarist composers have really understood the idiom well. There are exceptions, like Britten and Takemitsu for example, but significant collaborative input from a guitarist is absolutely crucial for most non-guitarist composers. Performers like David Starobin, David Tanenbaum, and ChromaDuo work very closely with composers in this way. Many composers fall into the trap of thinking of the guitar as first and foremost a harmonic instrument. I think of the guitar as a melody instrument, more a violin or a cello with extra possibilities of resonance, than as a piano with debilitating limitations.

If you’re a composer and a guitarist, then you tend to know the dark secrets of the instrument, but there is a danger that you depend too much on familiar formulas and pre-conceived ideas of the instrument’s boundaries. In a similar way to Stephen Dodgson, I like to think of music as something imagined rather than found. I’m always trying to escape default responses to musical stimuli—the war against cliché, as Martin Amis put it. I think composers have to keep finding new and interesting ways of writing for the guitar in the light of an already extensive repertoire.

GT: How long have you been particularly interested in aspects of resonance on the guitar?

SG: This preoccupation dates back to Oxen of the Sun (Cadenza 2006), which was commissioned by Jonathan Leathwood to be played on two guitars simultaneously—one six-string and one ten-string (see Figure 1). Here, textures are built across the two instruments through a number of new techniques that we developed together for the piece (see Figure 2). Next came three solo pieces that explored resonance. El llanto de los sueños (Telarc 2009), a collaboration with David Russell, developed elements of resonance in Flamenco and Spanish folk guitar writing as well as in the Spanish-influenced piano works of Debussy and Ravel. (The first movement, “Cantiga,” appears on page 33.) With Xuefei Yang in The Chinese Garden (EMI Classics 2008), we looked at resonance in various Chinese and Japanese forms of traditional music. In Sonata (Rosewood 2009), Michael Partington and I looked at ways of simulating the effect of the piano’s sostenuto and una corda pedals in guitar writing. I
have now written many other works that explore resonance further. Several of these pieces feature guitar in a chamber music setting where the sound of the guitar’s resonance is colored and partly masked by other instruments in the ensemble. Both my guitar concertos are designed to be played with amplification so that subtle resonant textures can be heard in an orchestral context in a big hall.

Figure 1. Jonathan Leathwood performs Oxen of the Sun.

Figure 2. Excerpt from Oxen of the Sun.

**GT:** It sounds like your work is highly collaborative.

**SG:** Collaboration is a very important part of my compositional process. Having someone to bounce ideas off feeds my music. I always come into any project eager to learn new things, to find fresh ways of solving compositional problems, even to completely rethink my approach to composition from the ground up. Some collaborators like to be involved in the nitty-gritty of working on musical material. When I was writing my recent *Triple Concerto* (2013), which transforms pre-existing music in unexpected ways, pianist Graham Caskie would send me short recordings of musical ideas for possible inclusion. Others like to discuss the overall design and concept and leave the music to me. When John Williams commissioned *The Flower of Cities* (2012)—for violin, two guitars, percussion, and double bass—for the City of London Festival, he started by asking for something that celebrated the open spaces of London, even requesting that particular places be portrayed. He also suggested the instrumental line-up. The collaborative side then picked up again once the score was drafted with details of fingering, phrasing, and articulation. Others like me to tailor the music to their playing style. When Graham Roberts commissioned the *Guitar Concerto* (2012), he specifically asked for something that would make the most of his phenomenal range of strumming techniques. I remember one day we met and recorded a whole load of them for possible inclusion.

**GT:** There is a common perception that composers have an ideal version of a piece in mind and that often the collaborative process dilutes and muddies the purity of the composer’s conception. The recent urtext editions of the Segovia repertoire are testament to this.

**SG:** I would argue that true collaboration works towards an “original” version rather than away from one. As Jonathan Leathwood has said, many of the best collaborative performers are *composeurs manqués*. It may well be that any score is not only a poor translation of a composer’s ideas, but also something incomplete. The composer’s initial text may not take the form of an imaginary performance, but something slightly more abstract: something that only comes to life in performance. In that case the performer/collaborator has the job not only of interpreting, but also of completing the composition. The Segovia-Ponce letters make fascinating reading on this topic.

**GT:** When your music is so closely linked with specific performers, what happens when it is later played by other people? Many of your pieces, like the “Welsh Folksongs” or “The Raw and the Cooked,” have been recorded several times by different performers.

**SG:** That’s a very good question. When I’m working on a piece, I never think about possible future performances. It’s impossible to predict what might happen after the initial run of concerts, publication, and recording, so I focus on the circumstances surrounding the commission. Who is the piece for? Who is playing it? Where are they playing it? What else is in the program? These questions really help to crystalize the piece in my mind and give it a context. And the answers to them help make my pieces different from one another. They make each piece bespoke. I don’t think about producing a body of work, I only think about the particular job in hand. I think the idea of writing for posterity is a hangover from the nineteenth century. I’ll gladly admit I’m a pragmatist.

Once a piece is in the public domain, it doesn’t mean it’s fixed like a relic in a museum. Michael Partington recorded my guitar sonata twice. Once after around twenty performances and again after he’d done fifty more. His reading of the piece had shifted over the intervening time and he felt he had something else to say about the piece. When the ensemble Music on the Edge recorded my *Welsh Folksongs* and *The Garden of Cosmic Speculation* they reworked them considerably, not unlike a remix in popular music. The result is wonderful. Once my music is out there, people can do what they want with it. Musicians are imaginative people.
Stephen Goss, Composer (continued)

GT: What happens if you don’t like what they do?
SG: It doesn’t matter in the slightest. For example, wouldn’t it be dull if people always performed Shakespeare in exactly the same way? All the parts played by men, Elizabethan costumes, no amplification: somehow always aiming to emulate a Platonic ideal version of the work. Baz Luhrmann’s film of Romeo and Juliet is a good example of how art can be reinvented. Sometimes people ask me to rework a piece for a different instrumental combination, sometimes performers rework it themselves. Adapting music for different performing contexts has a long history. Somehow we have inherited the anachronistic Hegelian model of the genius artist producing original masterpieces through divine inspiration. I like the idea that music is adaptable rather than fixed. This may well come from being a guitarist growing up with a repertoire that has transcription and arrangement at its core.

GT: Your music often quotes or refers to other music. Appropriation is very much part of your musical world.
SG: I don’t see interpretation, transcription, arrangement, improvisation, and composition as different things with distinct boundaries between them. The distinctions can be useful, but they are artificial. It’s rather like the colors of the rainbow. We are taught that there are seven colors, but the reality is that there is a continuum of color from red to violet. It was Isaac Newton who decided on the number seven, simply to match the number of notes in a musical scale as it happens. As a breed, we guitarists tend to tamper with the fixity of musical notation more than, say, pianists or violinists. This is evident in the various performing editions of Bach lute or cello suites or in the myriad versions of Albéniz transcriptions that exist. I am particularly interested in the idea of hearing familiar music in an unfamiliar context or setting. Max Richter’s brilliant recent reworking of Vivaldi’s Four Seasons or Uri Caine’s performance of the Goldberg Variations are very useful models for this kind of extreme interpretation. I very much enjoy exploring the grey area between arrangement and composition.

GT: Given what you’ve just said, how far can one speak of a personal style for your music?
SG: 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 outdated concept of a composer having to nurture or seek an individual voice. It seems to me that all too many composers writing the same piece over and over again. An individually distinctive voice could be seen as a manifestation of limitations. My aim as a composer is keep growing, developing, and moving forwards. Each time I start a new piece, my number one priority is to make it as different as possible from the one I’ve just finished. From this perspective, my models are Beethoven and Stravinsky. Their music is recognizable as their own in an instant, but, crucially, it can be dated, almost to the year, by the way it sounds. Just think of the journey from the Opus 18 quartets to the Grosse Fuge or from The Firebird to Agon.

GT: This freedom sounds liberating, but does music still have the capacity to shock? Are there any musical taboos left?
SG: I think many people still find pastiche, kitsch, and sentimentality uncomfortable. Back in the 1970s, David Del Tredici’s Final Alice caused quite a stir, and George Rochberg’s Third String Quartet was criticized for its use of pastiche Beethoven. The middle movement of my Guitar Concerto is an homage to Elgar and, for the most part, Elgar is kept well below the musical surface. At one point, however, he is brought into sharp focus in an orchestral tutti which is pastiche Elgar. The section seems to have split the critics so far. One thing’s for sure—it never goes unnoticed.

GT: While you celebrate variety and contrast in your work, are there any constants in your compositional process? Do you always start in the same way, for instance?
SG: There are certainly constants. The underlying process goes through roughly the same stages each time: impetus—ideas—design—finding good notes—refinement. To begin any compositional project, I start with an impetus. Examples of impetuses might be a text to be sung, a narrative, something visual, or simply a musical idea. Recently, I have been writing a lot of landscape music that evokes time and place. The impetus drives the compositional process on every architectonic level. In my work, a “good” impetus should act as a consistent link between form, method, and materials. The impetus then usually leads to research where the main ideas of the piece are developed and refined. This is probably the most enjoyable part of the process.

For example, my recent Piano Concerto had the architecture, sculpture, and designs of Thomas Heatherwick as its impetus. I was bowled over by an exhibition of his studio’s work that I saw in London. The sheer range of styles and leaps of imagination between projects was staggering. So, once the impetus was chosen, I then had to work on the ideas for the piece. After some research, I settled on four specific Heatherwick projects, which would act as models for each of the four movements. I then thought about the kinds of sound worlds and overall structure I wanted for each movement. For example, the second movement is based on Blegiesien, an indoor sculpture eight-stories high made of thousands of small glass beads suspended on wires. The wires catch the light and blur the viewer’s image of the sculpture.

The ideas are the easy part. Everyone has creative and inventive ideas all the time. The difficult part comes in taking those ideas and realizing them in a satisfying way. Back to Shakespeare—it’s a long way from having an idea about a story where two people fall in love, but eventually die because their parents don’t get on, to the final intricate text of Romeo and Juliet. This is where technique comes in.

Once the ideas are clear in my mind, I start working on the design. This might include deciding on a form or structure, on
El Llanto de los Sueños
(The Weeping of Dreams)

for David and María

1. Cantiga

Sustained and expressive $\frac{5}{4}$ = 56
calm and still, not too sentimental

cantabile

$\text{p} \quad \text{sempre l.v.}$

poco rit. $A$ tempo

VII

campanella

pp

mf

very calm and still

mp

$\text{p} \quad \text{campanella}$

attacca Madrugada

© Cadenza Music 2008

ISMN 979-708057-78-9

www.guitarfoundation.org  Soundboard Vol. 39 No. 3  33
Stephen Goss, Composer (continued)

where to use particular orchestral colors, registers, textures, densities, harmonies, and so on: roughly planning out the piece. In the case of the Bleigießen movement, I designed the harmonic structure and registral limits ahead of working on the notes themselves. The delicate, continuous solo piano part is a portrayal of the sculpture, while the glittering reflections are rendered in varied orchestral hues.

The next stage is where the really creative work goes on. Mark Anthony Turnage once said that most important thing in composition is finding good notes. This is the part composers rarely talk about—the part where we actually choose which notes go in the score. This part of the process, for me, takes the longest and goes through many drafts and stages of refinement. The refining includes fixing many musical parameters into place: pitch, rhythm, orchestration, dynamics, and articulation.

GT: How do composers “find good notes?”

SG: When composers talk about their work, they generally talk about what I call the impetus, ideas, and design phases of composition. They will often miss out the choosing-of-notes bit and then talk about rehearsals, performances, and revisions—the sheen. Of course, the reason we talk about choosing notes so little is because it’s done largely intuitively. One note is selected over another simply because we think it sounds better. How do we know when we’ve made a good decision? We don’t know, we can only feel it. How can we talk about intuitive decision-making? Recent research into adaptive subconscious suggests there is a locked door between what we can do with our subconscious minds and how we try to explain it—the story-telling problem, as Timothy Wilson calls it.

Musical experience is built on thousands and thousands of hours of listening and music making. It’s this embodied or tacit knowledge that we draw on when making intuitive decisions. The following are two examples from Malcolm Gladwell’s book Blink. Thomas Hoving is talking here about the art historian Bernard Berenson, who could unfailingly spot fake artworks. “He sometimes distressed his colleagues with his inability to articulate how he could see so clearly the tiny defects and inconsistencies in a particular work that branded it a fake. In one court case, Berenson was able to say only that his stomach felt wrong. He had a curious ringing in his ears. He was struck by a momentary depression. Or he felt woozy and off balance. Hardly scientific descriptions of how he knew he was in the presence of something cooked up or fake.”

Vic Braden describes a similar inability in sports players. “Out of all the research that we’ve done with top (sports) players, we haven’t found a single player who is consistent in knowing and explaining what he does. They give different answers at different times, or they have answers that simply are not meaningful.”

GT: So, for you, musical composition uses both the conscious and unconscious minds at different stages in the process.

SG: Absolutely.

GT: How does this affect your ability to be self-critical?

SG: Effective self-criticism is one of the hardest things to achieve as a composer (or in any area of creative work). One has to attempt to strike a fine balance between blasé overconfidence and crippling self-doubt. It is impossible to be totally objective about your own work. Trusted friends (or a teacher) can be very useful in offering feedback from a safe critical distance.

GT: What are the other difficulties with composition?

SG: Well, there is never enough time. Deadlines hurtle towards you at an uncontrollably fast speed. All composers share this problem, and always have done. Writing music is very hard work—it’s by far the most difficult thing I do.

GT: So, why do you write music?

SG: Because I won’t stop. I would like people to find my music useful. I aim to move people and to make them question assumptions. For me composition is social, outward looking—it’s how I reflect the world I live in.

GT: Have you been working with Andrew Lloyd Webber and Miloš Karadaglić recently?

SG: Yes, I’ve done quite a lot of work with Miloš, so Andrew Lloyd Webber (who is a big Miloš fan) approached me to make a guitar arrangement of some of the themes from his forthcoming musical Stephen Ward. Miloš recorded the arrangement for Deutsche Grammophon and has played it on TV and in some high-profile concerts.

GT: What are you coming up?

SG: I had my Triple Concerto performed in July, the Piano Concerto CD comes out in October, and John Williams is recording the Guitar Concerto with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in November for release early in 2014. My guitar quartet, Tetra, is celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary this season (2013-14) with concerts, commissions, and a CD release. The next work I’m writing is a new solo piece for David Russell. Next year, I’m launching the International Guitar Research Centre at the University of Surrey.

GT: What are your musical ambitions?

SG: To learn as much as I can from the people I have the good fortune to work with.

GT: Thank you.

Guy Traviss is a journalist and musicologist based in London. He is currently the Editor of “Classical Guitar” magazine and holds an editorial post with the International Guitar Foundation.