

TO-ING AND FRO-ING: STEPHEN GOSS

Talking to COLIN COOPER

STEPHEN GOSS was born in Carmarthenshire, Wales, in 1964. He studied guitar with Michael Lewin and Gilbert Biberian, and composition with Robert Saxton, Edward Gregson, Peter Dickinson and Anthony Payne. His CV shows an extraordinary range of musical activities: visiting professor at the Royal Academy of Music, visiting artist at Trinity College of Music, London, six years as head of academic studies at the Yehudi Menuhin School (where he also coached football), since 1999 Senior Lecturer in Composition - now Reader - at the University of Surrey, where his teaching reflects his interest in pluralism, Post-Modernism, electronic music, film music, improvisation, performance studies and the late music of Beethoven. He reviews for the 19th Century Music Review, and is on the editorial board of Guitar Forum. In 1999 he was made an Honorary Associate of the Royal Academy of Music.

In addition to this, he is a prolific composer. Recent commissions have come from flautist William Bennett, pianist Graham Caskie, The Gemini Ensemble, soprano Jane Manning, and the Delta Saxophone Quartet. *Frozen Music*, for guitar and strings, was commissioned by The Yehudi Menuhin School with funds provided by Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones. Other pieces for the guitar have been written for Xuefei Yang, Jonathan Leathwood, the Hand-Dupré Duo, Michael Partington, Craig Ogden, Allan Neave and, still in progress at the time of writing, David Russell.

As a professional guitarist himself - he is a member of the Tetra Guitar Quartet - it might be said that Stephen Goss writes for the guitar with particular insight, though so fertile is his creative mind that it scarcely seems to matter what instrument or instruments he is writing for: the result is invariably compelling. That ability to hold the attention was never more apparent than in *Oxen of the Sun*, in which Jonathan Leathwood played both a ten-string and a six-string guitar, simultaneously. This feat required a great deal of collaboration, and I wondered if it had been as stimulating, profitable and enjoyable as the evidence suggested.

Stephen Goss: I suppose my number one priority is to write a piece that's exactly what the performers commissioning it want. It should fit their need. So the more specific they can be about what they want, the better. The collaborative process with Jonathan Leathwood involved a great deal of going back and forth with ideas and notions, both of us contributing.



Stephen Goss and David Russell.

A lot of the process was about discovering how you can play two guitars together. *Oxen*'s an extraordinary piece, only because Jonathan does extraordinary things. When he suggested to me that he'd like me to write a piece for 10-string and 6-string guitar to be played simultaneously by one person, my initial thought was, well, after Jonathan's played it, who else is going to play it? Often, with a commission, you've got half a mind on future performances and possibilities. For example, if someone says 'I want a piano piece', you know there'll always be a call for a piano piece. You never get asked 'What have you got for 10-string and 6-string guitar to be played by one person?'

Paradoxically, since the recording's been out and it's been performed a lot, many people have contacted my publisher (Cadenza Music) to get hold of the music and have a go at learning it. However, I'm still waiting to hear of another guitarist who has actually performed the piece.

Jonathan is an exceptional musician; he does many remarkable things in *Oxen*. There's a compendium of techniques we developed between us over a period of time, a really interesting process. Because Jonathan was a beginner, if you like, on the 16-string instrument when we started.

Jonathan played the piece a lot. 18 months after the first performance, I wrote a whole different finale, mainly because his playing of the two instruments together had developed so

"Improvised music is on its way back"

much. There were now so many more things he could do that it seemed sensible to try to exploit them into another piece.

There were all sorts of sonorities I imagined and wrote down, and asked Jonathan to try. He'd come back and say, 'No, this is impossible.' Then I'd get another email saying 'Well, maybe it is just about possible.'

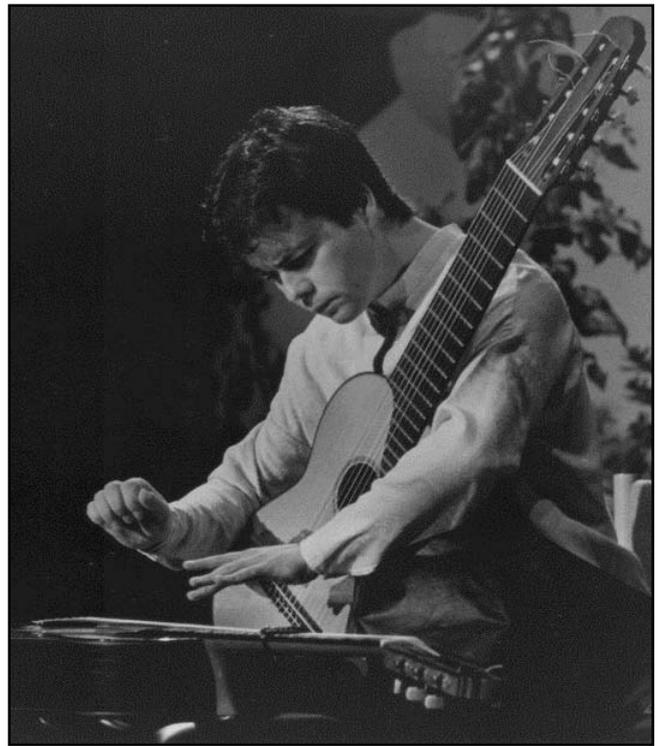
Probably the most interesting thing about the collaboration with Jonathan was that there's no 'original' or 'urtext' version of *Oxen*: the ideas I put in front of him, drafts of movements, he would use as a starting point, and say 'This isn't physically possible at that tempo. But if I take it slower....' So there was a lot of changing of the material from my original idea. That piece, more than any other, is the result of collaborative work.

I very much like working collaboratively. A lot of commissions are, to be honest, very much the sort of 'produce the score and parts by a deadline, a bit of rehearsing, and then a concert'. In fact, every piece I've written for more than four players falls into that category; you turn up, the score's complete, the parts are ready, you rehearse it, and that's it. Which is why I think I go more towards writing for soloists, duets and up to quartets.

You can get much, much further with these smaller groups. The preparation for performance is much more collaborative and the rehearsals go into much more detail. For example, working on the piece the Menuhin School commissioned (*Frozen Music*, for violin, viola, cello and guitar) was fantastic, because I had the luxury of being able to go in, have as many rehearsals as I wanted. There was time to experiment, time to get feedback and try different things, time to make amendments - constant to-ing and fro-ing.

My scores don't get finalised in time for the first performance, or even the second or third performance. Often it takes between 20 and 30 performances before I get to a point where I think, 'this piece is beginning to settle down into some kind of fixed shape, and it kind of works'. And I suppose the point at which a piece is finished is the point at which it is recorded and/or published. And you say 'OK, this is it - the piece is finished'. I see the role of the early performances of a piece as contributing to the whole compositional process.

I had an interesting experience last night. I've just written a new piece for Xuefei Yang (*The Chinese Garden*) based on Chinese folk songs; I finished it on Monday, and I went to see her yesterday (Thursday), and of course she'd got it all already. She has fantastic spontaneity as a player; everything is so instinctive. She was able to make musical sense of the piece in a way that when I was composing it, bogged down with



Jonathan Leathwood.

notes, I couldn't necessarily see. She revealed my piece to me in a completely fresh light. It would have been very easy to say 'Well, actually I think you'll find that that's not *forte*, that's not *pianissimo*', but there's this wonderful thing about players, that they can actually make sense of music from a performance point of view, and often capture things that composers completely miss.

You're saying that the player discovers something that was there all the time, but hidden?

There's plenty of that; particularly with longer-term phrase-shapes and ideas of colour. Some performers are very contributing (they say things like 'This section could be longer', or 'How about another movement?') and some are not. Some simply try and replicate what you've provided; they already imagine that what you've provided is some kind of text not to be questioned in any way.

There's a great reverence for notation, which is very much a 20th-century phenomenon. Composition and performance became separate specialisms in the first part of the 20th century. Before that, musicians generally did both. The great 19th-century performer-composer tradition - Paganini, Chopin, Liszt, Rachmaninov, Scriabin etc, - suddenly stops; the great performers of the 20th century are no longer composers. You look at people like Barenboim, Brendel, Heifetz, Segovia - a hundred years earlier they would have also been composers: it was all part of the tradition. A kind of severance took place, around the time of the first world war,

"The guitar has a very healthy relationship with new music"

when composition suddenly got separated off into some kind of much more academic exercise. No longer was it comfortable to be both a performer and a composer; you had to choose one specialism or the other.

The gap between the processes of creating and recreating music became so wide that performers got out of the habit of thinking about music in terms of writing it, improvising it, composing it.

The focus of the study of music also shifted from the sound to the score. The way we're taught analysis and about looking at relationships - it's all to do with notation. It's as if the kind of systems and workings behind the music are much more important than the actual sound of the piece - the musical surface. As composition theory became more complex it got to the point where performers no longer understood the process of composition, no longer had a relationship with how the notes came into being. And as a result, all they had to work on was a score. So they began to treat the score - I'm talking in hopelessly general terms here - with obsessive attention to detail without necessarily understanding how the music functions or works.

One thing you can't see in a score is the composer's approach. The composer might have a constructivist approach, might be working with magic squares, note rows, rhythm patterns and so on. That's one kind of composer. Another kind of composer is working much more spontaneously, essentially writing down improvisations. Of course, nearly every composer works at some point on a continuum between these two extremes.

For example, in very constructivist music, like, say, Boulez in the first Piano Sonata, copying the notation as exactly as you can is absolutely what it's all about. Whereas someone who is a much more improvisation-based composer - someone like Roland Dyens - the score just happens to be a particular version of the improvisation which was written out.

What occurred to me the other day, when I heard somebody play a Dyens piece in a competition, is that his music seldom if ever sounds quite right when other people play it.

That's a very good point. It's absolutely right. I've only heard Dyens play once, but it was fantastic. He's brilliant, and you can see that he's a great improviser. And yet, when you hear other people playing his pieces -

The same is true of Chopin, interestingly. His pieces are written-down improvisations. Take something like the Barcarolle; it's an improvised melody over a very simple chord sequence.

There are many different versions of the Barcarolle. Chopin published different versions in different countries at different times. Liszt wrote different things on his scores for his students. If a student had a particular technical skill, he wrote new material to suit it. It's the idea of a score that is constantly changing, evolving, to be adapted according to your needs.

Barrios is another example, I think.

Yes, absolutely - especially the fact that his music wasn't written down by him. The wonderful thing about Barrios, of course, is that we have those recordings. So we actually hear what he did. There's nothing missing from the notation in the recording.

There are big differences in compositional approaches. That sort of composer-performer, improvisation-based school of writing was completely dominant throughout history, and the time during which the composer was a separated

academic being - moving the notes around on paper but not involved in the performance of his composition - was a very recent phenomenon, and one which I think is dying out.

Improvised music is on its way back. Harrison Birtwistle said recently, (in a Private Passions interview on Radio 3), that he felt improvised music was the music of the future. He said as far as notated rhythmic complexity was concerned, the high modernists had split the atom, and had got to the point where things were so complex that you couldn't actually hear whether the rhythms were being played accurately or not. He felt that the way forward for concert music would be to have a simple structure which allowed for the possibility of incredibly complicated and intricate improvisation through it.

Indian music, jazz and electronica exemplify this approach - people like Talvin Singh, Nitin Sawney, Bill Frisell and Aphex Twin.

It simplifies it, doesn't it? The composer doesn't have to search so hard for a performer, and the

"I hate it when my words are taken out of context"



Stephen Goss, Xuefei Yang, Maurice Summerfield, Colin Cooper.

performer doesn't have to look for good new music the whole time.

It would be economical to put them both together.

The guitar has a very healthy relationship with new music: not only do we have the fantastic pieces of modernism that Bream commissioned - he was really pro-active with major composers - but there are also people like Tom Kerstens at Bath, who's gone to high-profile composers and said 'Come on, write for the guitar.' This is great.

Guitar recitals contain much more contemporary music than violin recitals, cello recitals, piano recitals, song recitals, and chamber music recitals. Much much more. I did a little survey for a talk I gave a couple of years ago, and I found that post-1970 repertoire appeared in a high percentage of guitar programmes. There's this real culture of new music that reaches canonic status. Because someone plays the piece at a festival; someone hears it; they want to learn it; someone records it, and it's a kind of process. And suddenly you find that you've got hundreds and hundreds of performances of things. That happens to my guitar music; but it doesn't happen in quite the same way to any of the other music I write.

Is that something to do with the fact that other instruments don't have a wide network of festivals where people can mix together, as the guitar has?

Well, they do up to a point. Another thing is that the classical repertoire, particularly for violin, piano, cello and voice, has become totally calcified within a particular era. You go back as far as Bach and forward as far as Shostakovich, and this is the canon. And the canon has very little added to it in recent years. In particular, the didactic or teaching canon of studies for violin, is pretty much the same as it was a hundred years ago.

I think improvisation is bandied about a lot as a kind of buzz-word. 'Classical musicians need to learn to improvise', we often hear. However, this doesn't mean getting up on stage and making something up - far from it. What it means is understanding that the process of composition comes from improvisation. And the improvisation that's most relevant for classical performers is to sit at home, try things out, play things and then develop ideas over time - rather than feeling that everyone has to get up and play an instantly improvised piece on stage in a concert.

(to be continued)

Xuefei Yang's latest CD for EMI (provisionally titled 'Forty Degrees North' at the time of writing) includes three of the four pieces that comprise Stephen Goss's *The Chinese Garden* (written for Xuefei Yang). The work was premiered by Xuefei Yang in her Wigmore Hall concert on 16 April. Each of the pieces is based on a traditional



Stephen Goss and Max.

Chinese folk theme familiar to Chinese people. The CD contains both Chinese and Spanish music, and the title reflects the fact that the capital cities of both countries lie on a latitude of about 40 degrees north.

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Part 2



Tetra Guitar Quartet.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Has it always been like that?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And no one notices?

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

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

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

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

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

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

What about Bruckner?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Would you feel insecure without all these commissions?

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

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

Stephen Goss's music is published by Cadenza.