

STEPHEN GOSS

WORKING FROM THE BIG BANG



LUCAS SAGE PHOTO

Welsh composer-guitarist Stephen Goss studied guitar at London's Royal Academy of Music and holds a doctorate in composition. He's currently chair of composition at the University of Surrey (UK) and a professor of guitar at the Royal Academy of Music. Goss has also distinguished himself as a performer and recording artist as a soloist and with the Tetra Guitar Quartet. He has created a large catalog with works for orchestra, chorus, piano, solo guitar, and guitar with other instruments or voice. About 60 percent of his music includes guitar.

For over a decade, Goss has been receiving commissions from top artists, including John Williams, Xuefei Yang, Miloš Karadaglic, and David Russell. He says the awareness of his composing began with his own performances of his music. "Some people heard my pieces, either live or on CD, and became interested in them, and they eventually started to ask me to write music for them," Goss says. "At first these commissions were unpaid—I was just happy to have my music played by professional players." Xuefei Yang heard Jonathan Leathwood premiere Goss' "Oxen of the Sun" in London, and subsequently commissioned the suite *Raise the Red Lantern*, the first of many collaborations between Goss and Yang. "John Williams heard Xuefei's recording of my *Albeniz Concerto* in 2009 and became interested in my music," Goss relates. "It's been a gradual process, a slow burn that has taken many years."

Goss gained even more visibility after Williams recorded his *Guitar Concerto* with the Royal Philharmonic in 2012. Of the piece, Williams has said, "I don't know of any guitar concerto which is as consistently successful on all fronts." Goss has already written five concertos—three with guitar. In 2017, he will have four new concertos premiered in the U.S., Germany, and Russia.

It's somewhat of a surprise, then, to learn that Goss finds composing a painstaking process. "It's the hardest thing I do," he says. "I spend a lot of time researching and thinking about each piece before putting pencil to paper. In a way, my creative process is similar to the Big Bang. There's an initial impetus at the start that explodes in every direction imaginable. It might come from a novel, painting, building, landscape, person, a piece of music, or an abstract idea. Then comes the difficult process of reining in the ideas. I spend a lot of time on the design phase of composition—planning structure, harmonic language, register, density, and many other musical parameters." Goss does the majority of his writing away from any instrument.

He also tailors his music to the performer who commissioned it, fashioning something to fit the musician's hands, playing style, musical personality, and concert programs. "I thrive on the collaborative process," Goss states. "I encourage performers to give me as much feedback as possible on what I write for them, and I'll often make changes based on their suggestions.

"With the guitar, the repertoire is constantly evolving," he continues. "For example, if a guitarist commissions a piece from me, they tend to play it in every concert that they do in a season—sometimes longer. When I write for other instruments, I'm lucky to get more than half a dozen performances after the premiere."

Goss says he does not factor audience reaction into his composing: "My main concern is to do a good job both in my view and in the eyes of the people who have commissioned or performed the work. It's always gratifying to have an appreciative audience, but trying to second-guess what an audience might enjoy, either now or in the future, is not a game I want to play."