

# contact

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INTERVIEW WITH BRUCE COLE

The 25-year-old English composer was interviewed recently by Keith Potter.

I believe you originally intended to go to Edinburgh University to study science but switched to music before eventually deciding not to go anyway.

Yes. I think I decided to do the music course because I'd already started playing the piano again and improvising and scribbling things down.

That was when you were, what, 19?

Yes, But there wasn't a dramatic jump from science to arts; things overlapped quite a bit.

What did you do between 1965 and 1968 before going to the Academy?

That was when I freelanced as a mechanic and toured playing piano in a rock group while doing sociology A level on and off.

So that was your first major outlet - playing pop music?

Professionally, yes. I did that for several months.

And then.... why the Royal Academy of Music? How far had you decided that you wanted to be a player, or to do anything in particular?

I think I'd decided to be a player, really. But I wasn't particularly worried which way round it was - piano or composition.

So you then had Harrison Birtwistle as second study tutor for composition and changed to first study after a term.

Yes. You see, studying with Harry is a much more relaxed business anyway. We'd generally go to his house and spend an afternoon there. So I was getting much more than a normal second study.

Did you choose Birtwistle?

No. I didn't know he was teaching at the Academy when I applied. I don't think many of the administrative staff knew he was there either. He ran a new music group with Alan Hacker but they found it difficult to keep going.

It seems to have been a very gradual process - you taking up writing. It wasn't a sudden thing - that you suddenly decided you wanted to write, or could write?

No. By comparison with most of the other students I started writing very late. I mean, there were other pupils of Harry's who were writing serial canons at the age of eleven. When I was that age I was still riding around on my bicycle with a catapult..... It just hadn't occurred to me to write anything.

So you started from basics with Birtwistle?

Absolutely. I just wrote pieces and a technique built up from there.

Did you have a very wide knowledge of the contemporary repertoire?

Yes, but not a very detailed knowledge. I think some of the first pieces I analysed with Harry were Webern's Op. 11 pieces for cello and piano.

Can you tell me something about how he teaches? Is it just based on what you write or does he do much analysis with you?

Yes, he does do analysis, but one is left very much to one's own devices - both technically and in an analysis class. These classes tend to get rather... well, undetailed. So one has to do the work oneself. I've done some serial analysis.... Webern, Schoenberg. But since serialism was never a thing of mine anyway it rarely came into a lesson with Harry. His basic attitude is that one should simply find out the thing for oneself rather than accumulate vast areas of knowledge and then extract things from it. So one is building in a straight line.

Who were the composers who appealed to you most?

Webern, Debussy and Mozart were the three composers I'd analysed the most - I'd say from whom I've learnt the most. With Harry and before, too.

So nothing really changed - you just deepened your knowledge of music you were already enthusiastic about.

Well, partly..... but after five or six lessons with Harry there was analysis on the one hand and the pieces I was writing on the other. Prior to that I had thought of them very much as a unit.

In retrospect, do you think that he didn't change you so much, but that you were pretty much on the same wavelength to start with?

I think that was the case. I remember being very taken with things like Linoi and Tragoedia, and for ages everything I wrote for the clarinet sounded like Linoi. This got pretty serious: at the extreme point I stopped going to concerts of his music.

Yes, it does seem to me that some of your clarinet works in particular - Eclogue for Cerberus for three clarinets and the clarinet writing in a piece such as Caesura - do have obvious affinities with Birtwistle's style.

Yes. Caesura is really the first piece that I acknowledge. It's actually the result of a fairly gruelling lesson with Harry in which he tore a lot of sacred cows of mine apart.... The title comes from the Latin verb "to cut"; this is what the piece is concerned with: cutting in a

film sense. It has nothing whatever to do with internal development, although there are, of course, correspondences between sections.

It seems to be in a kind of refrain structure.

Yes. There are really three types of music in the piece: *tuttis*, solos or duets, and the refrain, or, perhaps more accurately, the point of departure - which is just a group of notes which return throughout the piece in somewhat different contexts. Thus the piece is a series of apparent repetitions - but it's really a kind of mirroring process going on.

This seems to have close connections with serial methods: using inter-relations of groups of notes; the same yet different.

Yes, except that this piece isn't really about the notes, it's about the passages which contain the notes. I think it is potentially very dangerous to get tied up with pitches as an abstract.

Abstract as regards the notes in themselves without any outside reference - this is surely justifiable?

Well, I mean "abstract" in the sense of a piece which is simply about its own terms of reference. If all the piece describes is itself, or rather, if all the pitches describe are themselves, then the whole thing becomes a circular process.....

Surely about themselves and the relationships between them?

Yes. You see, I can't think of music which works in a straight line: the "Bach chorale mentality". I mean gradually putting things - chords or whatever - end to end and "getting somewhere". I can neither compose like that nor think like that. To draw an analogy with art: there's never a back to any of Picasso's objects. What he has done is to take three dimensions and reduce them to two, so you see all possible views of the object at once. In music you're simply starting with the one dimension of time; but given the materials that music has to offer you can theoretically move things around. Again, the best medium for this is the film. I suppose I see myself as a kind of "music editor" - I mean in the way an editor edits a film. The making of a film - for someone like Eisenstein - exists in the editing and cutting, not in the actual story-line per shot. I think I've learnt more from reading Eisenstein than from analysing music, actually.

Do you mean that you write much more than you eventually include in the piece?

No, I don't write music like "footage". But the actual business of composition happens when I'm thinking of juxtaposing the contents of a piece rather than actually dealing with the notes individually.

Do you feel this has any kind of relationship to pop? Do you think you've taken anything over from it?

I think the only thing I've taken from pop music is the electric guitar in my theatre piece Pantomimes. Though I still write rock numbers occasionally.

Do you see pop and "serious" music as two different worlds?

Yes I do, but I don't think they're as irreconcilable as the bad attempts at reconciliation would suggest.

If you're doing different things when writing, say, pop music on the one hand and Caesura on the other, do you think you're writing for different audiences?

No, I don't see a distinction between audiences at all. I think the best situation would be one in which you could play Webern on the village green and have the Stones in the Elizabeth Hall, followed by a Schubert song recital. That's ideal, but it's ideal as far as the audience is concerned. I don't feel you should make a point of putting them together because there's no point to be made. But there's no reason, from an audience's point of view, for things to be so pigeon-holed. And really, I find it depressing that the biggest outlet for pop music is the record. All pop should be live. I'd like to see facilities equal for all types of music. But it's up to the people who make the music to make the gesture. I'd like to see the Fires of London playing at the Marquee and Rod Stewart renting The Place for a week. It's not up to the audiences to trail round.

Surely this is a question of the function of various types of music. Do you see yourself as fulfilling any particular "function" as a composer?

No. No more than I think of a bus-conductor fulfilling a function as a bus-conductor. One thing that depresses me is the kind of "seminar situation" which you get with so many composition students - the kind that seems to promote endless discussion about musical procedures. It only ever seems to have two results: either boring music or, worse still, no music at all. Basically one is better off just getting on with it. There's a terrible tendency to gestate for nine months and then say "Here's another opus, folks!" I think that, as a composer, one should concern oneself with creating music, not with producing masterpieces. You're not filling up the Tate Gallery, you're a composer. It's for the people who run the Tate Gallery to fill it up. I can think of composers who feel that a piece is something to be put on a shelf - and you're compiling a set of them. Each one is..... well, I won't say very sacred because I think one should regard one's pieces as being individually sacred, but this shouldn't become a syndrome where each new work is seen as a finite thing - like climbing mountains. One ought to look at the view from the summit rather than just finding another mountain.

How do you see a work when it's done? Do you see it as self-expression, or something that is a part of you in any way, or just something that's done, and you put it away and that's that?

Well, on one level it's something that's completed, to which one can relate again in retrospect. You see, I'm not sure that a new piece is really a new piece. I think one does eventually reach a point - though I haven't reached it yet - at which every piece is more an extension of the last one. Both Harry and Max Davies have reached this point now. But it's also rather more than an extension.....

Do you feel each piece is a new departure for you at the moment? Looking at your music from the outside I would say that this was more likely to be the case, because all the pieces sound so different.

Well, I think that at the stage I'm at you're starting, as it were, from the centre of a wheel and exploring the spokes one by one. But one can get to a stage where each different piece is an aspect of something - simply an aspect of oneself perhaps. Rather than this idea of putting pieces on shelves. One is simply covering similar ground, perhaps the same ground, or perhaps different ground in the same way.

Do you write because you have to write, because you need to write - for yourself? Would you write if you didn't get performed?

Well, I have written pieces which I knew stood very little chance of being performed. It's a difficult thing to imagine - you see, right from the beginning at the Academy everything we wrote as pupils of Harry was performed somehow, somewhere.

Do you feel that a piece is finished when you've finished writing it, or only when you've heard it?

Neither, actually. I think it's only finished when an audience has heard it.

So you're writing for communication, then?

Yes, with reservations. I think it's terribly dangerous to say that one is communicating something. You can't live up to the Romantic ideal of pouring out one's feelings in art. You can't write a piece that is consciously something, because then it won't be consciously anything, it'll be self-consciously something. No, ultimately I think it's a question of a salesman and a customer, really. I don't think there's much point in writing music unless people hear it. But then again, if I was living on an uninhabited island for ten years I'd still be writing music.....

Continuing with this idea of communication: your two music theatre pieces - Harlequinade written for the Finchley Children's Music Group and Pantomimes for the Fires of London - these were both written at the same time, weren't they? How did that come about when nearly all your earlier pieces had been instrumental?

A lot of it has to do with the way I always thought of music theatre anyway: that it wasn't so much an accompanied action, but music which is accompanied. So that ultimately you've got a piece of music which is accompanied by theatre, rather than theatre which has incidental music.

So it's the music that's important to you?

Yes, though when Harlequinade came along I'd been chewing over



the idea of Pantomimes for some time. And I'm still chewing it over now, a year afterwards.

Did you start by wanting to compose a piece of music accompanied by theatre or did you start with an "idea" which needed to be put in theatrical terms?

I think it's always a bit suspect when music theatre pieces start in either way. I don't think you could seriously sit down and say "I'm going to write a music theatre piece".

No. But was there an "idea" behind Pantomimes that you can put into words?

It depended on which stage of evolution Pantomimes was at. It started off as a sort of exercise piece at Dartington Summer School - which was actually a clarinet solo.

So it started from purely musical beginnings?

Yes. And the electric guitar: well, I was supposed to be writing an electric guitar piece for somebody and somehow it got incorporated into this theatre piece I was writing. And then Die schöne Müllerin came along at the same time. Thinking of all the various aspects of Pantomimes on their own it seems to be a fairly random selection of sources: commedia dell'arte, Schubert, electric guitar.

From what I remember of the first performance it was all rather confusing.

Well, there were production problems. I'm revising the piece at the moment too. Both text and music have changed considerably and it's acquired a circus clown - Mark Furneaux - who's also going to be the producer.

So you're trying to express the ideas more clearly?

Yes, though when Pantomimes came along I'd been chewing over

I think what needs to be done is to extract the most important aspects of the piece and then underline them in visual terms. I suppose that Pantomimes really started as a six-verse electric guitar work which acquired characters. While I was writing it I saw a copy of "La Vie de Scaramouche" in Cambridge University Library, which has a six-verse song in it that was reputedly sung by one of the first actors to portray Scaramouche at the court of Louis XIV. This song had a refrain which was six lines long, the last line of which consisted of a six-note group; ut, re, me, fa, sol, la. And this got grafted onto the electric guitar work, together with the whole mythos of Scaramouche and Harlequin and various theatrical routines which are described in this book. There was also a suicide scene in which Harlequin takes up a guitar and sings his own funeral oration. But this comes from a traditional commedia text I called "Harlequin and the Eagle". Things started accumulating, although the six-verse structure was retained, and I have now transferred a lot of the action to puppets, rather than using instrumentalists in costume.

Can you tell me something about your most recently completed piece, A Spray of Dead Arrows?

This isn't a theatre piece - it's a chamber work for soprano, clarinet, violin and piano on a text by Pablo Neruda, the Latin American communist poet who's at present living in Cuba. Most of his poems are compounded of two very obvious elements. One is the political element, the other is basically the love-sonnet.

Which side of his work are you drawing from, or are you using both?

I suppose, firstly, the political side, which is very unusual for me.

Is this in any way intended to be a political work, a socially relevant work?

Oh no.

Do you see things in these terms at all?

Basically, I feel, anything which can be expressed in political terms is better expressed in those terms rather than in music. I mean, I'm not at all convinced that one can write a political piece of music. One can set a political text, but not in a political way. Ultimately one is simply setting words.

Is there any connection between Pantomimes and A Spray of Dead Arrows: in the type of idea that you're putting over? Or isn't it like that at all?

There's certainly no conscious ideological connection between them. Pantomimes is working on a much more abstract level anyway. I think one thing it does indicate is that I'm moving out of a purely abstract area: I'm using texts which are in fact about something - as opposed to Autumn Cicada, which is based on four Japanese texts. That piece just sets texts which aren't "about" anything at all, although obviously the image of the cicadas is significant for the Japanese.

Do you see your own music in a very different way from the way you see other music? Are you contributing to something which you can then look on and say: well, there are two pieces of music; one happens to be by me and the other happens to be by someone else?

No, not really. It's that thing about specialisation: lots of people digging holes, and the holes get deeper and narrower the more people there are digging. At this stage I'm still really burrowing.