

Julian Bream

England

Interview

'I become what the music is.'

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**JULIAN
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- Early Days
- Julian Bream & The Luthier
- Julian Bream Plays Cricket
- Bream on Bream
- Bream from the 'Archives'
- Guitarra! — T.V. Series
- Bream Discography

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Julian Bream

"I become what the music is"

by Lance Bosman

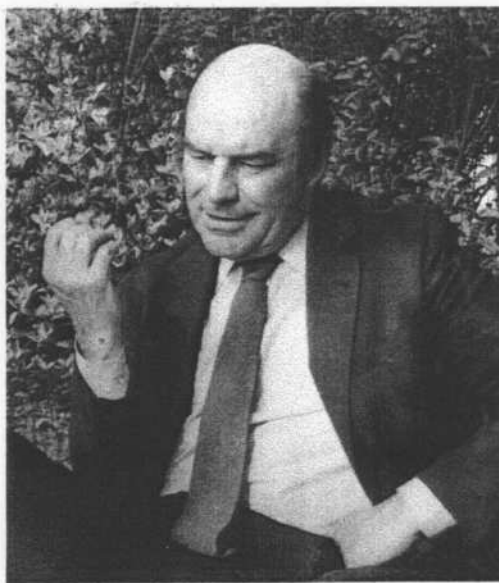
Topics: George Clinton

Such is the intensity of Julian Bream's playing, it seems he is living only for the music of that moment. Vivid in line, colour and dynamic contrast, his interpretations bring to the minds eye almost visual images of their subjects and period settings. Never are these impressions stirred more than in lute music, especially so those profound works of Dowland, *Farewell* and *Forlorn Hope*. From their brooding openings to agitated endings they are raw with emotional exposure; yet with Bream's melodic definition and his sensitive counterpoint, they retain dignity without ever lapsing into sentimentality. Equally through all idioms, his preoccupation with the music and respect for its character draws the audience into the performance with compulsive participation. Fast pieces, be they baroque dances or classical allegro, charged with that extra impetus, set the mental pulses racing, at times outstepping the music's actual momentum.

In the field of modern music, several new works now established as foremost contributions to the repertory still bear the imprint of this guitarist on the strength of their definitive first performances. Unmistakable in Bream's contemporary guitar music is its impulsive punctuation and velocity of line. It has a certain tonal radiance that seems to emanate from vibrato embedded within the notes than being imposed on them. It's in this avenue of music, and particularly in extended compositions, that you might find the music somehow becomes disassociated from the guitar; colour, expressive power and musical argument are so predominating that the individuality of the instrument loses its relevance; it could be a harp or piano — any means of sound production.

For Julian Bream, music is the only medium through which he can fully express his feelings, emotions — in fact, the sum of life's experiences. And the guitar is the vent for these expressions, it acts as a spontaneous release valve for the ups and downs of living, the effects of its gains and losses. In performance he lays himself open with complete abandonment, his countenance reflecting the music's rise, tensions and release with smiles and grimaces. Over more serene movements that trance-like look, indicative of outer composure, briefly disguises the volatile temperament within — a side of his nature hinting of a man given to public and private displays of arrogance. Away from this, the platforms and glare, Bream relaxes in solitude at home. In conversation his manner is considered, even hesitant when trying to define his motivations. Sitting there in his preserved farmhouse kitchen with its quarry tiled floor, a glance to the corner reveals an old Aga stove, standing like a squat sentinel, as if guarding its surroundings against the intrusion of mod-cons. Within these walls its difficult to imagine his other, hectic world outside of a globe-trotting performing career. Over the years, however, his performing schedules have fallen into an accommodating stride; and all seemed set to continue that way until his recent car accident nigh brought all future plans to abrupt end. If this wasn't enough he still has to contend with the disappointment resulting from the mishandling of his long-cherished film project recently shown on TV. Though with the commitment and purpose which is so strongly felt in his music, Julian Bream will overcome these obstacles in his strive to reach the point in the near future where he envisages his artistic peak.

"I think that in my performances I trust my intuitive capacity for expression. I was trained in composition at the Royal College where I learned musical structure, and though I don't compose much, my sense of structure has been stimulated by the work I've done with contemporary composers, especially those whose musical forms are not straightforward. Even with these, though, I've learned the structures intuitively. Of course, analysis of structure is an intellectual exercise — looking at the piece, studying the score to see what the composer is aiming at. This is my approach to a new piece before I start working on it. However, a lot of my repertoire I've been playing for 30 years or more, and of course



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those pieces have often changed in interpretation over the years. That comes about because, as an artist, and I don't mean by that just a good instrumentalist, your experiences accumulate, and you are in a sense a vessel that absorbs and sorts out all those experiences — the real ones as opposed to the negative. You then acquire a reservoir of inner feelings which metamorphose into musical sound. And this matures over performances, the whole piece is itself an act of intuition. Therefore I become what the music is. As I get older this association intensifies; for in becoming older you spend more time clearing away the debris to get to the point."

Since music is a tangible expression of assimilated experiences, it would seem that other, more immediate influences should play a part too. If so, do specific reactions, be they stimulating or depressing, to personal relationships, the present environment, also effect choice and presentation of musical material?

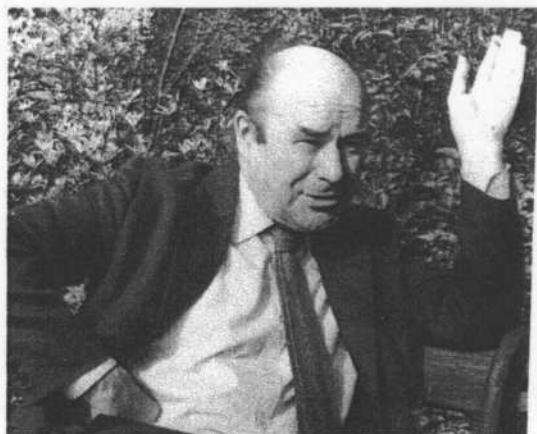
"No, I can't say this. I don't regard experience as something which is quantifiable or static. It's an increasing interplay of action and reaction — an accumulation. For me it's something which comes through keeping myself vulnerable. It's no good closing up when things get unpleasant; the unpleasant things

you can eventually dismiss, and the pleasant things soak in. You have to take in everything and sort it out. You must read and study as well as laying yourself open to experience; for every experience, if it's one with positive sides, is terribly worthwhile. The whole thing is to keep yourself vulnerable, like a child, to everything. I say this knowing that it's a dangerous attitude to have today."

"But what really counts is the music. When I talk I ramble on, I don't find it particularly expressive — words are a pain in the neck. Through music I'm coherent, I can convey. Another person would use words or a brush. You want to say something so you find the medium that is eloquent and expressive, and that expression holds further possibilities under questioning for development; and it's this questioning that gives the artist evolutionary development. Some artists start out very good and then nothing much happens after that. Everything is there, and yet somehow it doesn't develop. There are others, not that tremendous at the outset, who do develop and evolve — and that has been my good luck. I've always had it in me to do it, I wasn't a bad musician when I was 15; but what's good at 15 is not necessarily good at 25; and I'm really grateful that I was born at a time when you could develop. Nowadays it's much harder because if anyone has real talent, others get to know, the talent's exploited. At the end of this they've got no real resilience to continue developing because they've shot their bolt."

"I now know that in perhaps 5 years time I'll be playing as well as I'll ever play. I know that intuitively. I can stand back from performances I've given and say sometimes yes, sometimes no. A particular phrase for instance has got to do more than I'm going with it, it has to have more height and emotion or its got to be a little dryer, more succinct. The trouble is finding the technical equipment to be able to express that."

Treatment of tonal colouring and dynamics is a most striking feature of Julian Bream's interpretations. Hear, for example, in Walton's *Bagatelles* how colour change not only distinguishes complete phrases, varied shades cast across the spans enhance their individual contours. Perspective — foreground, background, counterpoint — is brought out with refined dynamic control. Melody line, motific fragment down to minute detail, the scintilla of a momentary passing note, are projected dynamically or are subdued in shadow. Such sharpness of contrast invests the music with several



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dimensions of almost visual clarity. So well integrated are these elements, it would be fair to assume that they are meticulously calculated and worked in beforehand.

"Not really, no. Some of the parts I work out because otherwise I might not be able to play them. So is the overall scheme, but within it I leave a considerable area of flexibility. It's a question of compensation: if that goes a bit quicker, this might have to go a little slower; if that's a little subdued then

the next phrase may have to be a little strident. Similarly I change the sound colours on the moment. Application of colour is also an intuitive thing; for sometimes I might reverse them, light with ponticello, or sometimes play the opposite. So I find that with the next phrase I have to change that again. It just goes according to how I feel."

"Now supposing I give 50 performances of a piece during a season. Forty of those may be, you know, quite good. With the other ten something else happens. To put it in a corny way, they have an inspired lift to them. I can't say why that is; it's not because I had ham sandwiches beforehand or a glass of beer or a good sleep. In fact sometimes those performances occur when I'm not feeling particularly well. There's no way of telling why that special performance happened. Sometimes the guitar is sounding good, the strings are maybe not new but not worn; the hall may be good acoustically, the audience may be particularly responsive. It's impossible quite to define. And that's what makes the whole business of being a performer so interesting, so frustrating and yet always so stimulating."

Flexibility, which allows for instant selection of colour and dynamic, also figures in the sudden mood changes which characterise Julian's music. At one moment sustained and reflective the music may perhaps in the next unexpectedly surge for a moment before tailing off. The impression received is that of an act of impulse rather than one of predetermination. Spontaneity is then its own generator of descriptive and motive power.

"Definitely. Ideally a performance should be unique. Performing mechanically through over-preparation is an anti-creative act. Not only does it negate the very life which is essential to the initial performance, it also ensures that those which follow will lack living quality. And that has to be undesirable."

"Just occasionally I can play a passage at the beginning of a piece and it goes so well it can send me off, set alight the whole thing. It is as I was saying earlier, there is something special in that from its first notes I encapsulate the whole piece. Paradoxically, when you hear the first note, you should ideally hear, or feel, the last. Now I know that this doesn't make much sense because we're hearing musical ideas develop in time, the time-span of the music. It's important for me to be able intuitively to make that leap to the last note. What goes on between is not of time, it's timeless. This is a particularly acute problem in slow movements because the time factor is much longer, there are generally less notes, less cadential punctuation; but in that timeless state anything can happen . . . it can reach magic."

Twenty years ago a critic from the daily Telegraph, reviewing Julian Bream's Wigmore concert, described his performance as masterly with colourful contrasts, generating an overall spontaneous impact. Further back still, in 1960, a milestone pointing to the future potential of the instrument was laid with the recording 'The Art of Julian Bream' (RCA RB 16239). Devoted to classical and contemporary music, the latter launched Lennox Berkeley's *Sonatina* (1958) and an ambitious arrangement of Ravel's *Pavane*. This example of the guitar's capacity for transcription and extended contemporary works has been repeated time and again in dozens of recordings and innumerable concerts worldwide. These have elevated the status of the instrument in the public eye, demonstrating its ever-widening flexibility, attracted established composers to it and inspired beginner players. This pioneering path Bream has pursued for over 30 years; then suddenly within the space of a few seconds it almost ended. On the 21st of July last year, while travelling home in his MG, his projecting right arm struck the side of a railway arch as the car passed under it. Soon after he blacked out and, due to quick response from friends who happened to be nearby, was rushed to hospital. (See report *Guitar Int.*, Sept. 84). Though still recovering Julian Bream is now performing again. Commitment and determination, that which has so

advanced the guitar and lute, will see its player through to flourish still.

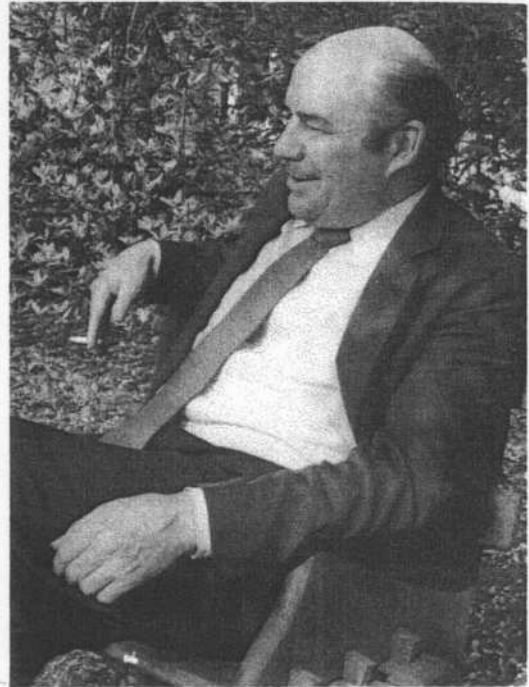
"Rehabilitating has been such an effort of will, concentration and hard work. Just after the accident I thought I would never play again, which is an interesting thought because I don't know what I'd do — but I would do something, you can be sure of that. My arm was so damaged, the doctor said it was a miracle it didn't come off altogether. When it began to mend I knew I could move my fingers a little, I knew that at least I'd be able to play some chords on the old guitar. That's very important to me because what gives me such personal pleasure is the guitar's tactile sound production. Of course, that wouldn't have been enough finally, for to have lost all facility would have been, psychologically speaking, very hard to come to terms with; but at the time, when I realised how lucky I'd been it was sheer joy. When I started playing again I was a complete beginner, and just plucked open strings a quarter of an hour a day. This has increased to half an hour in front of a mirror and I'm still working like that only many more hours now.

"I damaged the main right arm and nerve, the funny-bone nerve, which the surgeon had to redirect through the arm. Eventually I found I could move my fingers but the second and third wouldn't return to enable me to pluck the strings again. That still happens, though to a lesser degree because I've just worked and worked at it in front of a mirror and I know I'm going to lick the problem. I'm a determined person anyway and I felt so grateful to whoever is on high for granting me this immense good luck to get back to playing again. In a sense I feel I'm living on borrowed time, because it was nearly all up. I mean, not just the arm — I could have died so easily had circumstances been different."

For some years before this Julian Bream was planning a series of films tracing the emergence of the guitar in Spain. Now released on TV, the guitar is heard within on-location shots of Hispanic art, architecture and scenery. In addition to highlighting the artistic treasures of the Spanish Interior, the chosen backdrops are especially significant in having particular historical associations with the music played. To overlaid narrative and sequences of Julian Bream speaking and performing, the background of the guitar and its precursors is traced against wider references to Spanish history and cultural development. From the outset the programmes were evidently designed to be broad enough in scope to appeal to a general audience, while at the same time providing, with Bream's scholarship and prowess, musical enlightenment.

On reaching the third episode, the focus of the series presumably intended to concentrate on the lineage of plucked instruments and their music in Spain, had dispersed through inordinate exposure of extra musical subjects, a lack of cohesion and omitted information. For fear, perhaps, of taxing the audiences' powers of concentration, arrays of faces, places and things were framed between glimpses of guitar makers, instruments and tablettes which received scant, if any, acknowledgement or explanation. There were beautiful scenes to be sure, with insights into the Spanish character and its artistic magnificence. And where else could we witness in such settings Bream's versatility in performance of the vihuela and early to modern guitars too. Yet for all these graces, *Guitarra* still comes over as a hotch-potch of disjointed clips veering from travelogue to musical documentary, all too often relegating the guitar and its music to a secondary role.

"It was one of those things that had not come off as I had hoped. Normally I can blame myself when I play or record poorly; but here was a situation where not only I couldn't do anything about it, but nobody else would do anything to help. The original idea for these films really came out of my long series of gramophone records 'Music in Spain'. I thought that while I was researching that, it would complement a series of films, shot on location and with visual elements of the film related to the spirit of the music and the composers and their



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times. Generally, music comes off a poor sister on television, one of the reasons being that music has to be listened to and not looked at. So the medium of TV is to some extent not necessarily sympathetic to music. Guitar music, though, or most of it lends itself to television because its largely not intellectual music, though it is very often evocative of Spain. So my whole idea was to do something for *music* with the guitar and allied instruments projected through a media of sound and vision.

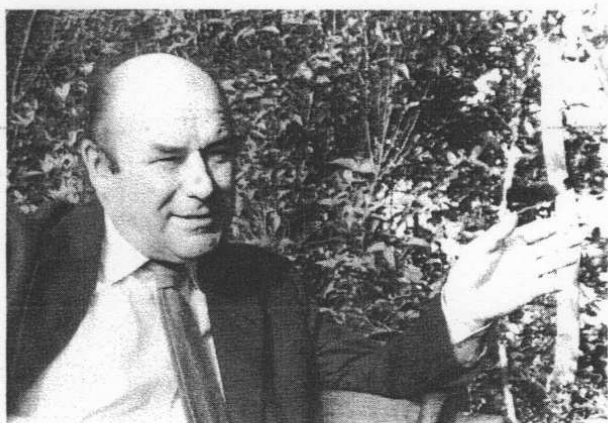
"I was keen to do this, really feeling that music does suffer on the box, and therefore I made sure that the music production was of optimum excellence. So I pre-recorded it near home in the Wardour Chapel. I happen to have a knack for being filmed performing against the playback, but it demands a great deal of concentration. And I must say that after filming 38 pieces of music in 35 days, I was whacked. The financial opportunity for doing such a project will probably never occur again. To take a team, a film crew out on location for 35 days is very expensive, and we went all round Spain. So the whole thing was like a dream in a way. But the difficulties in trying to launch it, to get the money together, to arouse interest were phenomenal. It took 5 years and a lot of dealings with my gramophone company and with business men who were not idealists, they were only interested in the returns. And there's another thing: I wanted to relate the sound tracks to a record, so that people liking the music could go and buy the record. I thought this a good thing because you don't often get the chance to follow up the sound track of classical music and its evocations with a record. So the project had a lot of things going for it. As time went on, and especially over the last year, I got fed up dealing with business men so I asked my agent, my manager, to deal with it. In fact I gave up, I said I'm not going ahead with the project, it's too much trouble. He said it was too good a project to drop, so I struck a bargain with him: if he gets that show on the road I'll give him a case of 1961 Claret. That's probably the best vintage of the century, and so I wasn't going to part with that so easily. And eventually I had to part with it, but not unhappily because I thought it was a beautiful thing to do.

"One of the problems of the freelance film industry as opposed to, say the BBC, is that it is a very insecure world. Money is put up for a project and then just as they've got the project under way the money is withdrawn and they're all out

of work. Then miraculously the money may come through and the project is hurriedly put together again. And from this insecurity arise one or two unfortunate things which in some instances are a lack of time and preparation. A series of films, not like a one-off documentary, has to be planned well, because not only must it have an authentic historical basis, in addition each film has to lead on to the next in serial form, thus enticing people towards the next episode. I think these films lacked a great deal of production preparation; and in this respect I was unfortunately deceived as to how they were going to be put together. Anyway, when I initially saw them there was no chance of me having any say about what changes could be made. It was a *fait accompli*. Therefore I was in an agonising predicament of having to decide 'can I go along with that and myself?' and I finally found that I couldn't; so I withdrew my sponsorship in helping to publicise the film. It's the saddest thing I've ever done, representing 6 years of work, it was most important to me psychologically. So it was a hard decision, but I have to live with myself, and I couldn't live with those films, the way they were put together. Also there were one or two principles which aroused me: an artist does a show, and when he's completed his music some other person comes along and can just change its artistic relevance by visual additions. I think that the power of the director is great, and should be . . . but it's too great, too inflexible. It's as though their egos are inflated because of the importance of television as a medium. And when people get into a position of power they are never at their most charming. Now if you consider that plus the insecurity in the industry, it has to be a frantic business; we're at the mercy of these people putting films together as they feel they should be finally seen.

"On the other hand, I'll say this, a lot of people will like them very much. But having conceived the idea I know what they could have been. When you see them you might say 'it's a very nice series, so what's he on about?' But that's not the point; the point is they could have been so beautiful, honest, and put together with feeling and affection and still be seemingly entertaining; yet it's turned out to be just another series edited in an old fashioned way. It's then you realise — if you know what I think it could have been — how disappointed I am. Also it's the first time I'd played the vihuela, the baroque guitar and the little renaissance guitar. I went to great trouble with Romanillos to sort out these instruments and their music, and what's more, learn the pieces. So it was a terrific effort for me really, in a way too much for one person. But I knew I could do it, and in spite of the visual razzmatazz I think they sounded well.

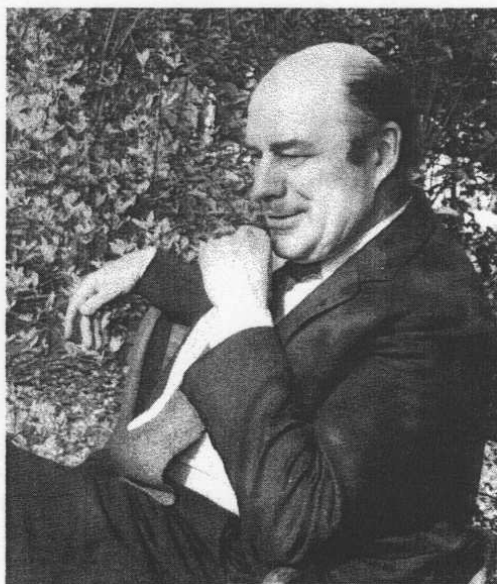
"It's often the case with TV films, the way they're edited and cut up often destroys the spirit that the episode should convey. For example there's a beautiful setting of Granada, and against this the music ends on the most languorous chord of E major. Just as the sound fades out the camera suddenly switches to a scene where I'm in a bar in Madrid with the noise of a lot of glasses. So you see the preceding sequence was wrecked. On another occasion I played De Falla's *Homenaje* in the very room in which it was composed; but you wouldn't know that watching the film. In the middle of the piece a great tube train came along. I asked 'what's that doing there,' a question you'll ask yourself. But on the other hand to have played the Falla composition in the room where he composed it . . . Also I performed *Córdoba* in the mosque in Córdoba; and some of *Cádiz* in a fishing boat going round Cádiz. Playing *Granada* in the Alhambra, the camera panned from me to a window overlooking the city and slowly swung back; then it was ruined by this inexplicable and extraordinary change of scene. This was one of the shortcomings with the films: they wouldn't allow quiet moments to capture atmosphere; I suppose they might think that people might switch off. But that's why you've got Channel 4 and BBC 2, that you can actually do something halfway decent. The interesting thing about this project was that some of the budget



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from which these films were funded came from Channel 4 Educational Budget. I mean, it's not 'Coronation St' is it?"

Thinking back to the original conception, why was the music contained to Spain. Paris and Vienna were also active centres of guitarist composers, not forgetting too, the present spawning ground of modern music in Europe generally and the States. "Well as I said to the director at the conclusion of these films, 'now we must do ten programmes on the lute in Tasmania.' The thing is to set yourself a framework, a discipline, and out of that something can emerge. My feeling was that I wanted to get a distillation of what music can convey visually, and Spanish music and Spain is most evocative in this respect. Also, very few people know about the Spanish interior and Spanish art. My feelings were that here we could use film naturally and a lot of rostrum camera work because Spanish art and architecture is so great, so mysterious. If you really film the guitar well, and by that I mean close, tight shots, you'll get a fascinating intimacy; and by way of contrast are the enormous plains, this great size of a country, the aridness of it, the mountains. There's so much of the intimacy of the guitar which is contra-distinctive to the geographical character of the country. Whereas the guitar in Belgium? — it could be quite a nice programme, but hardly a gripping-series."



"I feel grateful to whoever is on high"

Since the distant halcyon days of Julian's debut at Cheltenham in 1947, a lot of vino has passed under the bridge. Alongside the standard repertoire his accomplishments in early music, lute and consort, are legion too. Collaborations with composers over the years, notably Britten, Berkeley,

Walton, Arnold, Maxwell Davis, Rawsthorne, Rodney Bennett and Tippett have both enriched and widened appreciation of the instrument's repertory. In view of these past achievements, and possibly of those to come, how does he see himself in relation to the new innovations, extended techniques and upsurge of guitarists of recent years?

"We are all creatures of our time. Naturally, a lot of the younger players feel differently about music and the guitar which I would say is healthy. I mean, anything that remains static has to decompose. My feelings are, it's wonderful these players are finding a new repertory, new effects and sounds. I don't play these because you could say I'm of my time and that

I was old fashioned. I mean, these younger players are very good and sometimes technically quite outstanding . . . but it doesn't always say a great deal to me as music. It says a lot about the capability of those playing it, whereas I feel that knowing about those factors is secondary. I suppose I look at music from a different vantage point, neither superior or inferior, but *different*. This is one of the great features of Western civilisation, its continuous change, its evolution. You can't say that one thing is better than the other, but the new is always interesting if it has something to say. But only history finally can evaluate that."