

Reginald Smith Brindle.
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Lance Bosman



Reginald Smith Brindle

Interviewed by **Lance Bosman**

After consummate dissonance of his orchestral work *Apocalypse*, of 1970, Reginald Smith Brindle reached a point of revision. Since the early Fifties, and first ventures into serialism, his music grew increasingly diverse and explorative, embracing orchestral, ensemble and vocal mediums. It was then to move into the studio with electronic tape. During these years a sustained association with the guitar has led to over 30 self-contained pieces and albums. Unlike the other, outward-reaching forms, his guitar music has remained fairly consistent 'within the mainstream of modernity, and kept stylistically compact.' Even so, expansion can be traced through this, from the first flamenco derivations to serial based, to total chromaticism with improvisation. The consistent strain is one of discernible melody and a vestige of traditional devices. Yet reappraisal has also taken place in this area: 'my guitar music has turned full circle; what I would write today is no different to that of the Sixties.'

Glancing from the present over RSB's opus list conveys not so much a progressive musical line than a mosaic of styles. Stretching back to 1955 are the *Variations on a Theme by Dallopicolla*, the composer under whom Reginald studied, and *An Epitaph for Alben Berg*, written in admiration. In late pieces, extra-musical or poetic references are often suggested: the orchestral works *Cosmos* (1960); *Homage to H.G. Wells* (1960); the vocal and instrumental *Three Japanese Lyrics* (1968); the chamber piece *Tre Dimensioni* (1965); and the aforementioned *Apocalypse*.

Born in Preston, Lancashire in 1917, Smith Brindle's initial calling was to architecture, a prospective career curtailed by the Second World War. During lulls while on service in the desert campaigns, he took up the guitar, composing a little and following the Segovia repertoire. After the war he studied music at University College, North Wales followed by a stint in Italy, attached to the avant-garde, 'because you couldn't be in between; it was either the old or the new.' In 1957 he took a post at Bangor University, and later at Surrey University, the county in which he now lives.

From so many years composing, lecturing and the full exposure to contemporary music's turbulent fashions and extremes, Smith Brindle has developed, along with keen

discrimination, open scepticism too. While acknowledging the spirit and adventure of new music, he repudiates those icons of the avant-garde with intellectual poses and their high mathematical processes. Music is the product of feeling, unrestrained and composed as the basic senses direct.

"My orchestral music has moved from pillar to post; you couldn't really identify one piece as being specifically mine. I would get bored if I had to keep to one style. It is a prime necessity with most composers that they stay within one style in order that they be recognised; but some people have managed to get out of it. Stravinsky couldn't have written neo-classically all his life; and though I can't associate myself with him, I have that kind of eclectic nature. I like to do different things in different ways. But look at Webern; he wrote 44 pieces which are almost identical; to me that must have been the most boring experience possible. Yes, always chiselling away at the same piece. I find it positively boring — and I really dislike Schoenberg. Berg is the only one; he was a very human personality. The other two were, I think, restricted emotionally. Berg was a warm personality despite the serial system, and that's the way it should be."

Like many present composers, Smith Brindle draws on combinations of quite old and new resources. Unlike in the 19th century where different elements were homogenised with prevalent major/minor harmonies, later fusions drew on extremes such as plainsong and atonality, generating a modern aura with an archaic framework. *Concerto de Agelis* is a case in point, being variants on a kyrie mass charged with chromaticisms. From the same hand, numerous other pieces utilise early music techniques, though not necessarily with the intent of presenting them in new settings. Renaissance devices of imitation and ground bass lend themselves to serialism, and appear in this way in *Guitarcosmos*. Of its 3 volumes, the 2nd and 3rd have notable examples of old contrapuntal treatment in new light. So knowledge of these techniques is clearly relevant for more than only an understanding of early music; but how far are they probed before they may impose on the uneffected creativity of the student composer today?

"There's no need to go through a real grind of the old resources. There's a student I'm in touch with, and in one year he's gone through the style of Debussy, Bartok and others. He will move on rapidly. I tell them to look at the music, look at as many scores as you can. And listen to what you like, then find out how it's made up. A book I'm preparing at the moment is intended for school leavers and early university students. It's to be read quickly and then they go off on their own. It's for all musicians, for I don't think that a musician is complete unless he knows something about composition; through that they can interpret. And the only way to learn is to do it. There's a proverb: 'I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand'. And that's what this book is for: the general musician. I start with form first, then melody, instrumental accompaniment, song writing, then go on to free diatonic harmony, quartel harmony, free chromaticism, bitonality, serialism and aleatoric."

For a detailed approach to serialism, one of the most accessible texts must be the composer's *Serial Composition* (1966, OUP). Covering the method from its germination, Schoenberg, etc., it progresses to integral serialism developed after the last war. There are also analyses of intervals, dissonance, forms and counterpoint, of which many of the examples given can be applied to the fingerboard. Following his second book *Contemporary Percussion* (1970) is *The New Music* (1975, OUP), subtitled 'The avant garde since 1945'. Among its contents are serialism, pointillism, free 12-note music, indeterminacy and improvisation. Rightly, the subjects are not regarded in isolation, but presented in broad relation, and in the contexts of musical and sociological change. Implicit in its title, *Guitarcosmos* brings many of these developments into the range of the guitar. Beginning on traditional ground they progress into the modern, and all

within the grasp of the intermediate player. Some of the easy, conventional pieces are routine, conveying a point more than adding to the repertoire. Outside these, old and new scales and techniques are exemplified in a host of miniatures for solo guitar with occasional duos. So much for the material: now the prospect of applying it.

"Students often begin a piece without any conception of what it's going to be. First, decide whether it will be, say, a string quartet? Is it going to have one movement or several? Then map it out. If I start with an adagio I've got to follow with something fast. Then decide how the movements start, and gradually come down to the details. With these, you do a lot with a small amount; not everything new the whole time. To compose every bar, that's hard, and difficult for the listener too.

"A composer can do a lot with a small amount of material. Now what do students usually do? Start with something and never use it again, just on and on composing; and there's no logic there for the listener. The kind of melody I prefer has not perpetual change, but comes back using the same material in a slightly different way, worked over and elaborated. In good public speech you've often got to say something three times: the first simply, then after that you expand on it, fill it out. There's a principle here of restatement or saturation point, then change. Once the change has given relief, you come back to the original material; that's what form is all about."

Maximising on the smallest of material is amply demonstrated in the full-length solo guitar pieces. Consistency and structural unity are accomplished through repetition and variation of a single idea, and repeated phrases. Along this line is *Sonata El Verbo*, composed from a repeated-note motif and developed into phrases which themselves become subjects of repeats. Similarly, *Sonata No. 3*, with a trill-like motif in the first movement, is adjoined to descending figure in the second, and lastly to staccato chords. And once again, *Sonata No. 4* is distinctly melodic with contrasting sections and internal repeats.

Against the factors of melody, structure and so on, the question of texture is often given little space; yet it may be the foremost consideration. Amorphous texture for its own sake has expanded not only the 20th century orchestral palette, but also the acoustic potential of the guitar. Indeed this seemed to be the aim of the Smith Brindle's *Music for Three Guitars*. If this is the case, then recognisable melody and thematic development would be subordinate to the textual dimension. Apparently not so, for hidden within was an ostinato recurring in different forms. "So basically it is thematic. It may not be perceived that way, and why? — because a composer doesn't want his music to be too obvious. That's one of the problems of being understood. We as a race of musicians, we haven't been too obvious. You just ask: we won't write anything obvious, it tends to be obscure. Other arts like painting can be naive, extremely simple; our music is extremely complex. I think we are trying to get out of it; I personally have. It's inevitable that it's brought alienation to the average person — if he can't make sense of it.

"As far as I'm concerned, let me qualify this. However complex I've been I've always wanted to express myself fully and emotively. And I've managed to enter a period of greater simplicity of expression, but still with emotive quality. Then I'm more intelligible to the listener; but you see, simplicity for a contemporary composer is almost anathema. It's almost impossible to belong to a school of contemporary composition and write simple music. Boulez's 3rd Sonata may demonstrate extreme ability, yet to the listener it says very little because it's so complex. It's like Joyce, Finnegans Wake, you can read a few pages and soon become completely saturated: you can't go any further. After a certain point your mind can't accept any more. And we've reached that point with music."

Can music be really atonal? Even in obscure and dissonant

note groups, certain forces seem to conspire and somehow propose a tonality, however momentary it may be. Despite conscious attempts to avoid this, the ear may detect polarities which in theory aren't there. "I don't think there's any such thing as atonality except when you use clusters, when many notes eliminate each other. But it only needs one of those notes to predominate and it forms a tonal centre. Compared with that, what is called atonal music is not in the least; it's just complex tonalities; even intervals like tritones and others without roots have a tonality. Any notes put together form a harmonic relationship; it's just that the relationship is obscure. Even Webern can write in C major when he's not quite aware of it."

Inside knowledge of the guitar fingerboard speaks for itself from Reginald's extensive published guitar pieces. It is obvious, anyhow, by his idiomatic writing for the instrument. Left-hand fingering is specified, but more telling is the frequent use of combined open — and stopped — strings. These radiant, indefinable sonorities set the atmosphere as introductory chords to *Four Poems of Garcia Lorca*, the 3rd and 4th Sonatas and *El Polefemo*. The difficulty in imagining the effect of these chords away from the guitar, suggests that composing is done at it. "I love chords with open strings because you can use them not in the sense of tonic and dominant, but to be contradictory to the surrounding harmonies. They are disrupting elements whereas previously they were tonal. And yes, I do write at the instrument. In fact a lot is improvised, recorded on tape then copied on paper. For a duo the first guitar part would be all taped, and then as I play back I would improvise an accompaniment. I've found this very fruitful. If I'm composing without a recorder I might find something and know I like it, and then improve it, changing this and that, and then can't remember what I did first. So I began to use a tape recorder to avoid losing things, then graduated to improvising entire pieces. Suppose I'm getting towards the end of a section; that's always a critical point, of not knowing what's coming next. But if that's on record I can almost automatically go on. If it's good enough, then that too is taped, and we're off again, there's no stopping. Now this piece here, a guitar quartet, *The Pillars of Karnak*. I drew on paper a sketch of the pillars vertically, then as harmonies. Then I sketched in the melodies but with no notes, the whole thing on paper in about ten minutes, its form, what's going to happen here and there. So then I sat with the guitar and improvised the first line and copied it down. Then the second line followed, then the third and fourth. From one starting, another follows with the same thing and yet another in imitation. Entering at different times they add up to a thick texture. In the end I get them to come together on one note, then cascade down to chord."

And it is serialism that is usually the basis for these compositions. Examples of its strict application are to be found in *Guitarcosmos*, *Simple Serial Melody* and *Duo Canzona*. These can be regarded as preliminaries to the composer's usual individual treatment of the method whereby a 12-note sequence is not kept to rote but expanded at will. Three notable pieces in this vein are *El Polefemo de Oro*; *Tierra Seca* from 'Four Poems of Garcia Lorca' and *Ricordo di Luigi Dallapiccola* from *Guitarcosmos* 3.

Serialism is of course well established as a fertile basis for composition. But does it mean anything to the listener as scales would? Can the underlying serial process of the music help the ear to assimilate or grasp its contents?

"I think that for the listener it doesn't mean a thing. Serialism is a form of organisation with the total-chromatic. If you try to write totally chromatic music without a series, it's extremely difficult; because all the time you're having to choose notes; you've got to look back to see what notes you've used to see what's still available. So there's a process of assessing the total-chromatic all the time — which is laborious. If you've got a series which establishes the note order, all that

hard work is cut out. To the listener, though, this is immaterial.

"The series is an incentive to ideas, giving me a note shape. Then I let my imagination run riot — why should I do otherwise? I'm dealing with notes as emotions, spreading a series over a wide area. I might apply it in two fragments, going over the notes to one point, then starting again and gradually move on. So far I've only used six, so I might continue the row or break off and do something completely different. With many composers, their music fits into 12-note compartments. Well that's the first thing to avoid; you've got to have continuity. I make the 'O' version go straight on the 'I' version and come back to R, RI, so I've got 48 notes to deal with, not stopping after 12. And with this you've got an infinity of material; especially if you spread it out. Don't let yourself get blocked."

Unawareness of its existence can be the only reason for lack of performances of Smith Brindles's *Guitar Concerto*. In a single movement lasting 14 minutes, slow sections with supporting strings are alternated with agitated ones. Scored for flute, oboe, clarinet, glockenspiel, vibes and piano, it has a unique feature, an electric organ. Balance and separation are achieved by economical use of instrumentation: the guitarist taking mostly a single line against a distant orchestration, or silenced for orchestral interludes. Although serially based, the guitar projects a definite melody, frequently stating with variants its opening figure. Other instruments too may take up this figure or combine in a background of dissonance.

"The concerto was an aesthetic problem because I couldn't honestly write a popular concerto, as Tedesco's style, and on the other hand it couldn't be in a contemporary style which nobody would understand. So I had to find an intermediate place; to write music possibly comprehensible to everybody but also to be contemporary in idiom. And I'm not sure if I've found the answer. It worked in this way: the guitar part is conventionally melodic in spite of being chromatic. The background I made more complex, more contemporary in nature. That was my formula here. I like the electronic organ with vibrato, a kind of cosmic sound like an echo. I could have written more difficult music, because for me this is extremely simple stuff; and sometimes I think I've been a bit too simple."

Unfortunately, as yet there is no recording of the concerto other than that broadcast recently on Radio Three. The performer on this occasion was Carlos Bonell who took to the work immediately, and, judging by his following reaction without the above reservations.

"What I likes about the concerto is RSB's ability to be straightforward in his music, not frightened of being simple. There are moments of stillness and reflection and then it all seems to jump up and get moving. I remember when I played it with the BBC Welsh Symphony Orchestra for a BBC recording: I first discussed the work with the conductor Lionel Friend. We thought we could fill in the long, still moments with a little more activity, so we asked the electric organ to do something special. I was naturally a bit apprehensive when the composer himself arrived later at the rehearsal. I said 'I hope you don't mind what we've done. You will tell us if you don't like it?' We proceeded with the rehearsal until we reached the critical moment, when a very electric warble filled the silence. 'What do you think?' I asked. 'Oh yes, yes', he replied, and with a twinkle in his eye disappeared behind the organ to see how it was done. It seemed to sum up his natural curiosity and open-heartedness that he should embrace this small change so immediately and spontaneously."

And of the future, what is next for the guitar? "I think I've written myself out of a straightforward way. The guitar has a tremendous technical potential which has still not been tapped; and that's what I would explore. They would probably be pieces that nobody would play for the next 50

years. I don't necessarily mean obscure music. It would be available to anybody on, say, the piano; but we still haven't got round to it on the fingerboard, technically and aesthetically. I would like it to be valid music, but with much more technical demands on ability. Music equivalent to Paganini on the violin, and the rest of the way such as Bartok's violin sonatas, which nobody will dare play even today; but is for players of the future. And I think that the guitar needs music like that to stretch peoples' fingers and imagination."

Reginald Smith Brindle has retired from regular lecturing and research into electronic music. At a cottage in Surrey where engaged on his next book, the dog occupies a corner and a big ginger tom commandeers the best armchair. If the image, though, seems of warm content, it's far from the case. Detectable in his measured Lancastrian brogue is an air of despondency, lingering after total involvement with a musical epoch of ferment and excess. A period of experimentation that has left in its stride an enriched language, ever-widening the void between composer and public. "I can see that a lot of what we've done has been with a great sense of adventure, and we've not known where we were going to end up. But it became evident to me in 1970 where we were going to end, and that is with white sound; all frequencies sounding together. In fact, my last orchestral work *Apocalypse* was written with clusters. And they found it difficult to get on with. To me, those clusters were extremely beautiful; but what can you do more than that — you've got to return to other means."

"When I said earlier I had turned full circle, this is not true. Since the Sixties we have made mental and physical changes which made it impossible for us to return. What is true is that, clarifying my guitar music, I have got rid of the complexities of intervening years and come back to an original style, something like *El Polefemo*, which is clear and not cluttered with intellectualisms and avant-gardisms which intensified up to 1970 or so. After *Apocalypse* my orchestral style has simplified too, and I have gone back to earlier principles, especially melodic."

Can all this change continue? Reginald mused ten years ago for this magazine. "The big alternative to it is a long period of static assimilation." And now, in the light of a passing decade? "I think that it has happened in the last ten years. The last piece I heard of Boulez *Réponse* is no more than very elaborate formations of white sound again and again with instruments played back through computers. You can't go further than that, there's nowhere to go except to come back. I think that the most beautiful thing to happen would be that we write again with single notes, with no chromaticisms. Use only the old modes where the position of a semitone in a pentatonic group makes all the difference, where the subtle inferences of each sound are quite different. If we could discover how to use simple material again, — to find the beauty that exists in a tone and semitone — that would be terrific. Contrast this today, when it hardly matters what notes are used. Some composers even avoid the need to choose. We've lost it all. One note is the same as another; in *Réponse* it wouldn't matter what notes you played — the effect would be more or less the same. It's a bad situation."

"However, this does not connect at all with what I said about writing very demanding pieces in the future, I think the guitar now needs a very challenging vocabulary to get out of its rut and equal the progress of other instruments. It needs to expand its possibilities beyond Bream and Williams into that of coming generations; and I think this is now what I would feel like doing, if I write any more."

"Yes, I do feel a bit despondent after being such an enthusiast for the 'New Music' all my professional life, to realise that what we have done is to exhaust the musical language and drive it into the ground. Or else it is perhaps we ourselves who are inadequate. Music reflects the times which produce it, and if we look around at the shoddy theatre,

literature, architecture and art, how can we pretend that music should be any better? For all our complexities, perhaps we were only reflecting the impoverished human state. One thing we certainly did — create the most complex artistic language man has ever achieved, with much blood and sweat. There were ideals too, which one doesn't like to let go."

Reginald Smith Brindle - compositions for guitar

Works for solo guitar

- 1946 **Nocturne** (Published by Schott & Co)
Arabesca (Published by Philharmonic Society of the Guitar)
 London Serenata III
- 1948 **Preludes I - 4** (Published by Celesta Music Co. N.Y.)
 Variations No.5
 Prelude No.5
 Omaggio a Manuel de Falla
- 1949 **Etruscan Preludes** (Published by Schott & Co., London)
- 1950 **Berceuse III**
 Sonata Senese
 Prelude in the film "Il Serchio"
- 1952 **Dodecafonc Study**
- 1953 **Saraband**
- 1956 **El Polifemo de Oro Revised Edition** (Schott) 1982 (Published by Bruzzichelli, Florence)
- 1970 **Variants for Guitar** (Published by Peters Edition, London)
- 1973 **Memento** (Published by Bérben, Ancona)
- 1974 **November Memories** (Published by Suvini Zerboni, Milan)
Do not go gentle . . . (Published by Suvini Zerboni, Milan)
- 1975 **Four Poems of Garcia Lorca** (Published by Schott & Co, London)
- 1976 **Sonata 2 - El Verbo** (Musical New Services)
Guitarcosmos Vols. 1 & 2 (Published by Schott & Co, London)
- 1977 **Guitarcosmos Vol. 3** (Published by Schott & Co, London)
- 1978 **Sonata 3 - The Valley of Esdralon** (Published by Schott & Co, London)
Sonata 4 - La Breve (Published by Schott & Co, London)
Ten Simple Preludes (Published by Universal Edition, London)
- 1979 **Sonata 5** (Published by Schott & Co, London)

Various

- 1949 **Guitar Duo**
 Concertino for 4 Guitars
- 1951 **Concertino for Guitar and Chamber Orchestra**
- 1956 **3 pieces for Guitar and Piano**
- 1957 **Ten-string music for guitar and cello** (Schott & Co, London)
"5 Dipinto" for guitar and violin (Schott & Co, London)
- 1970 **Music for 3 Guitars** (Suvini Zerboni, Milan)
- 1971 **Concerto Breve "Omnis Terra"**, for 8 guitars and percussion (Belwin Mills Publishing Corp. NY)
- 1973 **"Concerto de Angelis" for 4 guitars** (Schott & Co, London)
Canzone a 8. Transcription of piece for 4 lutes by G.B. Terzi 1599 (Schott & Co, London)
Canzone a 4. Transcription of piece for 2 lutes by Merulo (Schott & Co, London)
- 1974 **Concerto "Cum Jubilo" for 3 guitars.** (Published by Suvini Zerboni, Milan)
- 1977 **Guitar Concerto**
- 1978 **Chaconne & Interludes** (The Instruments of Peace III) for Guitar Duo (Schott & Co, London)
- 1979 **The Pillars of Karnak for 4 Guitars** (Version for guitar duo published by Schott & Co)
2 Poems of Manley Hopkins for voice and guitar (Schott & Co, London)
- 1982 **Music for Recorder & Guitar. Hathor at Philae** (Schott) 1982.

Transcriptions of Lute music into modern notation

- 1954 **"Intavolatura di Liuto"** by Joan Maria da Crema, 1546, in collaboration with Prof. Giuseppe Gullino. (Published by Maurri, Florence).
- 1975 **"Intabolatura de Leuto"** by Castelfione, 1535, in collaboration with Prof. Giuseppe Gullino and Frances Mattingly. (Published by Suvini Zerboni, Milan).
"Intavolatura di Liuto", Book I, 1593 by G.B. Terzi.

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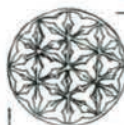


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