

Stephen Dodgson
England

Interview.

‘As there is rhythm in all life, there is rhythm in composition.’

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Lance Bosman



Photo: George Clinton

STEPHEN DODGSON

"As there is rhythm in all life, there is rhythm in composition"

LANCE BOSMAN

It is heartening to hear a composer dispel the notion that his art is a heaven-sent gift. True that within every worthy composition there is an inexplicable attraction, an element of mystery eluding definition; but this must be given a context through the conscious craftwork of manipulating ideas and balancing parts. It is this, the extensive labour serving the fleeting inspiration, that Stephen Dodgson can define through long experience and reasoned procedure.

In outline, Dodgson's music is traditionally structured inasmuch that its phrasing is broadly symmetrical, and its forms are sectionalised with contrasting moods. These regular schemes, however, frame distinctive compositions, recognisably his through their melodic and rhythmic quirks. Motifs constructed from these are a prominent feature of Dodgson's music, and once introduced, generate impetus with their expansion and alteration. Offering seemingly endless development, such figures must surely have been carefully chosen, and subject to preliminary investigation so as to explore their potential.

"Often, but by no means invariably. I really like to go at a piece head-on, without thinking too much; but preliminary probings help to build up confidence and give speed and decisiveness to the imagination." Considering the thought-process at subsequent stages, to what extent is the germinal idea borne in mind? Without constant back-reference it's possible it could become submerged by the influx of new elements springing from it, hence a break in coherence. "It's all too easy for me to lose sight of the original impulse. New ideas will keep presenting themselves, and I have constantly to ask 'are they relevant, do they belong here? Should I save this or that for some future occasion?' On the whole, the difficulty is not having ideas, but having too many all the time. So the answer is certainly yes; it is necessary to keep referring back to the origins; but it's an activity for between-times, not so much whilst actually *progressing* with the music."

Progression is directed towards, or may even give rise to, an immediate objective, and possibly even the distant-end one. If the emergent structure was totally predetermined there would be no latitude for the parts to follow their own dictates or the instrumental colours to be varied at will. Somewhere between the two, a fixed conception and spontaneity, a balance is set. "Just occasionally I will all of a sudden start something quite unconsidered, on impulse, but usually because an *idea* of the whole jumps unbidden to mind. It's generally something quite short, happens very seldom, and is always welcome. Usually, and virtually always with any more extensive work, I ponder a lot on form, colour, constituents; but modifications do indeed present themselves as one works. It's wrong I think to have too rigid a plan, it spoils the sense of discovery and exploration. But a plan for the journey is essential so as to focus the imagination."

Stephen Dodgson has written in several idioms, with a predilection for instruments with plucked-strings: the clavichord, harpsichord and guitar. Vocal, chamber music, a symphony for wind instruments and a sonatina for brass quartet are also included in his repertoire. In addition to composing, he teaches at the Royal College of Music, entering there in 1956 as a conductor of the Junior Orchestra. Born in 1924, his studies were interrupted by war service with the Royal Navy, after which he continued studying, spending a year with the composer Bernard Stevens. During 1947-9 he attended the RCM, then undertook a travelling scholarship to Italy. From 1951 onward came private and school teaching, with a post in 1955 at the RCM, and in 1957 became involved in broadcasting on musical topics.

Among guitarists Dodgson is renowned for his prolific output of solo compositions, and with the instrument in dialogue with others or in the company of the orchestra: *Concerto for Guitar and Chamber Orch.* (1956); *4 Poems*

of John Clare for Tenor and Guitar (1962); *Partita No. 1 for Guitar* (1963); *No. 2* (1964); *20 Studies for Guitar* (1965); *Duo Concertante for Guitar and Harpsichord* (1968); *Fantasy Divisions for Guitar* (1969); *2nd Guitar Concerto* (1972); *Duo for Guitar and Cello* (1976); *Transitional Studies for Guitar* (1980). A non-guitarist, his association with it is unique, revealing an intimate knowledge of its intricacies. Not only are the virtuosic possibilities of the guitar given vent in his writing, but also the progressive means for accomplishing these from a technical standpoint, through the studies written in collaboration with Hector Quine. Whatever drew Dodgson to the guitar has certainly paid dividends to its contemporary repertoire.

"I don't have a particular attraction to the guitar; but the difficulty of composing for it, and as idiomatically and distinctively as possible, now *this* is a challenge to the imagination and compositional technique; and that appeals to me. I must say, so does the eagerness of guitarists who have done me the honour of keeping up requests for further efforts from me. I keep saying I'll give up the guitar, but somehow I never seem to do it. My introduction to the guitar was through Julian Bream, and I was never quite the same afterwards. Then John Williams led me on a virtuoso exploration of it, and I was certainly not the same after that. Hector Quine sent me back to school, and in working on the studies, encouraged me, forced me, I nearly said, to understand systematically where previously I had blundered with untutored instinct. Like all growing up, it was at times a painful process; it was almost as bad as having to learn to play the guitar. I say that lightly, but there's some truth, because I did learn to play it with quite a vivid picture of hand positions even as I was imagining what notes to write: that is to say, I *saw* what notes I was writing as well as imagining the sound. More recently I've tried to liberate myself from this; after all, I'm not a guitar player, and it's foolish to think myself one, even at a remove — my technique could never approach actuality. So in writing for two younger players, particularly Phillip Thorne and Gabriel Estarellas, I've begun to get back to a purely instinctive approach. And as that's what I'm trying to do now generally in composition, I feel it's a logical approach, and the timing is right; so I'm looking forward to it once more never being the same."

This then marks a reversion in thinking to when the imagination was unimpaired by knowledge of the guitar's physical limitations. Yet surely these must have been the foremost consideration for the studies? "I did indeed think about the fingerboard. And in working on the studies, all of them, I thought about it closely, and very instructive it was. But through it, finally, I believe I can sense guitar technique, as it were, organically. When you learn the guitar you have to think much about where your fingers are. Later you have taught them to do much of the work by native response, with more chance for creative factors. As I say, I'm trying to tell myself that, in composing for the guitar, it's time I reached this stage. It's time I stopped fussing about the frets as much as I sometimes have in the past."

The rhythmic drive of Stephen Dodgson's music generates a sense of lyricism that frequently takes precedence over the melodic element. Another prominent characteristic of his style is the motivic development from uniting fragmentary ideas. In forging these facets, have other composers exerted influence? "I think *all* composers influence me; since there is always something to be learned from those you do not admire — even perhaps particularly from those you do not admire. Those I love, I have to be on my guard against, lest they influence me too much. I feel I can't say anything too meaningful on this one."

"I certainly believe that my idiom is traditional. Not because I've tried to make it so, but mainly because I can't stop it being so. I can't write in a way that feels unnatural to me, and my idiom has just grown the way I am. In so far as I can view it objectively, then in several important respects my writing is in a neo-classical style."

Yet from classical moulds, Dodgson impresses a distinctive stamp, recognisable by particular characteristics, the thumbprints of his music. Motivic-working, in a way reminiscent of Bach, permeates the studies and solos. Urgent rhythms generated by incisive figures surge through, or weave contrapuntally around, the principal line. These figures take the shape of slurred-or dotted-note pairs; or repeated-note pairs, or repeated-note triplets. Injecting into, or ending phrases with, repeated chords has the effect of creating expectancy while maintaining impetus. "My rhythmic ideas are remote from the Baroque. In this respect, more debt to Janacek perhaps. I'm aware of the characteristics mentioned, even sometimes try to intercept them, but I suppose it's deeply ingrained. If I tried I expect I could add to this list, especially as I'm inclined to drive rhythms on other instruments apart from the guitar."

"More and more I've come to think of the guitar as a melody instrument. When the player's main concentration is upon a single line, the expressive projection is at a maximum. Too much harmony cramps the hands, dulls the sound, and impedes the movement. I suppose it's an elementary lesson, but it took me a long time to learn it. The injection of chords — I like your phrase — here and there can be very exciting, and also suggest whole areas of harmony which are seldom actually sounded."

In connection with this is the personal way in which unresolved discords are implanted to intensify the impact. "Discords only give impetus where the rhythm has grip; and the stronger the rhythm the more they can give. Where the rhythm is inactive, I find I don't experience discordancy; they are more intervals in space, more or less complex and dense. So the very term discord implies rhythm and drive; and that of course means where does it lead to and *when*? The longer maintained a discord, the more the motifs will tend to rotate, become obsessive. How it is all resolved, or even left unresolved, is entirely a matter of context, and small differences can have a surprisingly large effect on mood and emotional impact."

Fifteen years separate Dodgson's two guitar concertos. The first, while demonstrating his incipient command of the guitar, is conservative in comparison to the second with its adventurous combinations of orchestral timbre. Written in 1956, the mood of the 1st Concerto reflects the atmosphere of the surroundings in which it was composed: an isolated farmhouse in Wiltshire. Against this work in 3 movements and enlisting clarinets, is the more expansive 2nd Concerto, now in 5 movements, pitting the guitar with the prepossessing colours of marimba, glockenspiel, and trombones. At times an ethereal quality of sound is conjured by blending these instruments with rapid, though soft guitar arpeggios. Perspective between orchestra and guitar is enhanced by sustaining supporting lines whilst the guitar is busy in front; acute divisions of dynamics, and in setting follow-up parts to adopt the same rhythmic patterns that the guitar, now at rest, had formally taken. A more general technique is to deploy the guitar as a single-line melody instrument with occasional interjected chords, reserving its full harmonic thrust for crescendos, particularly in fast movements.

"As soon as the guitar is placed with other instruments, its own nature has to change. With a voice or the flute, provided the guitar is content to accompany, it will show itself one of the perfect accompanying instruments, but the listener no longer appreciates the constituents of its tone colour — I'm searching for the phrase — in the same way

as when it plays alone. But the situation changes dramatically again if the guitar seeks to be an equal, or near equal with other more dominant instruments. The solution is not simply the brutal one of writing 6-note chords; but how to write for those other instruments in a special way, that gives light and air without seeming to emaciate them. The discoveries I have made are: a balance occurs more easily if other instruments avoid the register being employed by the guitar; also, rhythmic figuration is also kept quite separate. In writing concertos, I try to avoid as artistically unsatisfactory having the soloist all on his own, and the tutti on their own. This works but hardly leads to integration. When a balance patently does not work in an ensemble piece with guitar, adjustments in scoring seldom help put it right, because it is nearly always a fundamental matter of the wrong sort of music having been imagined in the first place. I was rather pleased to find in my 2nd Concerto that a short passage of sustained, slow-moving harmonies on three trombones placed low, well within the bass clef, allowed softly played harmonics on the guitar to be perfectly heard without any strain at all. On the other hand, a single held note on the cellos, if in the *same* register, is almost certain to force the soloist into playing louder than he wishes."

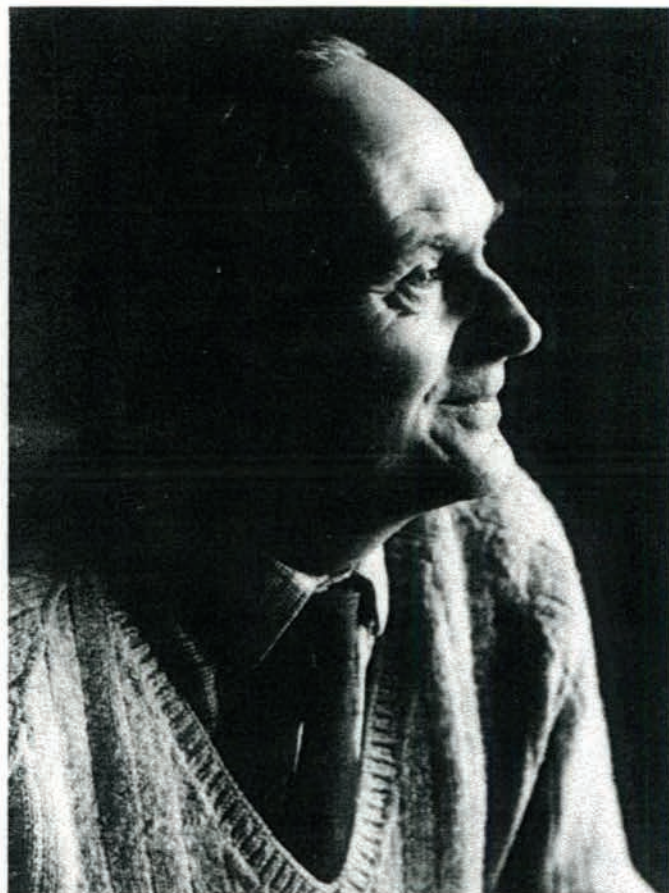
With fanfares of repeated notes from the trombones, parallel 4th-chords and rasgueados from the guitar, a kind of early music — moorish sound is engendered. Would it be that these were intended to evoke strains of exotic music in the concerto? "Not that I'm aware of. But it is modal, certainly. I am always inclined to be modal; a mixture of them, with intrusive semitones which 'threaten' but do not dislodge them. The 2nd guitar Concerto is distinctly Phrygian, and that I believe is a great Moorish mode. So I'm happy with your question, but the thing you detect is, I fear, something impulsive in my make-up."

From the buoyancy and lyricism of the concertos, the *Duo Concertante for Guitar and Harpsichord* is by comparison, ominous, its instruments aggressive. The progressive nature of this piece won favour at the Concours Internationale de Guitar, where in 1970 it received a joint-prizewinner award. John Williams, the executor of much of this composer's music, held his part in the way that we would expect yet, personally speaking, seemed forced into antagonism with the harpsichord. "It's recorded very close-up. All plucked instruments always are recorded that way. I suppose that producers like their artists to sound aggressive. I did mean a relentless tension, gradually broadening out at the end into a grand agreement. I wonder if your reaction would change if you heard the work live?"

A solo work for guitar that merits more exposure at the *Fantasy Divisions*. With a tonal anchorage on the note G, it nonetheless covers the range of the fingerboard. As to the structure, the title suggests free-form variations. "Yes, that's what I hoped the title would convey. I wrote the opening *Fantasy*, feeling that it was a *Fantasy*, well before the rest; and for a time not knowing what sort of composition it would belong to. The tonal location on G is strong all through; and the steady repeated notes, a feature of the *Fantasy*, are really recognised in all the succeeding sections."

The time spent over a composition of course depends on several factors: temperament, the urgency of the commitment, domestic and other musical obligations. Roughly, though, how long would say a concerto or partita take? "Probably about 30-day long working sessions. But they may be spread over a period of time, and a good many half-days are likely. I've occasionally kept a diary of a work's progress; this is how I know how to answer the question." But if the occasion demands, the work rate may be a mite quicker. The accompaniments for

Three Songs by Theodorakis were turned out overnight. "He used a chord symbols — very sketchy. I reckoned each song needed rather constant patterning, to match the mood, and yet give a distinctive quality to each. I didn't sit around on that task. Maria Farandouri, John Williams and I decided on the best key for each, and the character and motion for them. That was Day 1. On day 2 I'd finished, for better or worse. It was all the time we had."



An old man, alone with his memories, draws to mind past events, at times sharp with intensity, then more wistful with moments of sentimentality. These are the images conveyed through *Legend* a solo work commissioned by Musical New Services for its series of contemporary guitar music. Surges of bustling activity spring organically from two distinct motifs, a concentrated triplet linked to a lyrical quaver group. In contrast, soft and reflective passages are drawn by sustained, slowly moving chords. Besides these descriptive elements other factors, behind the music, figured in determining its length and lending to the mood. "After several attempts, the piece settled down to a concept of being wholly derived from its opening. At some point, on or nearing completion I fancy, I wrote at the top of the complete pencilled manuscript four lines from Chesterton.

The Legend of an epic hour

A child I dreamed, and dream it still.

Under the great grey water-tower

That strikes the stars on Campden Hill.

"Up to that point the piece had been called in thick black pencil 'George Clinton's'. Length was determined by the request, 6 to 7 minutes, all in one piece, not separate movements. When such a request is made, I'm normally prepared to believe there must be a need for what is asked for. I tend not to question it, merely to see if I'm able to respond. I remember the mood to be reflective, sombre, even brooding, yet an agitation within which never really breaks into the open. I see the music as containing three basic elements: the first 6 bars, down to and including the all-important echo effect; the triplet agitation, bar 23; the brooding chords, bar 33. And these are closely related by

interval and harmony; their contrast shows wholly through rhythm. The two chordal appearances, from bars 33 and 70 stand up like two solid columns supporting a vaulted structure. Once this prime architecture was clear to me, the shaping of the surrounding phrases was a process of motion.

In recent years, Stephen Dodgson's involvement with the guitar has extended, taking in visits to Eastern Europe to record for BBC Radio 3, and adjudicating on guitar competitions. "The Festivals at Esztergom in Hungary were a fascinating two weeks; the first in 1979, the second in 1981. My feeling is that the standard of playing among the young in East European countries had noticeably advanced even in that short time. Apparently there's a great lack of decent instruments, and the poor tone quite often heard shouldn't be attributed to the players. In most countries of the Soviet bloc, it's very hard to get printed music from the West because of currency restrictions. All kind-hearted participants in Hungary were constantly besieged with pleas to make up parcels on returning home. On the other hand, I'm sure they know more about all of us, than we do about them. I was very pleased that the BBC asked me to help in the assembly and introduction of recitals and single contributions by players unknown in the UK. It gave me a reason to get to know them so much better.

"Regarding guitar competitions, I've come to believe that it's in the preliminary round that things can go wrong. Each competitor plays for so short a time; it's tense and unreal, and barely any audience to take the competitor's attention off the jury. The jury has scarcely settled to the task, and can have no idea of the general standard in advance. Slips and nerviness have instant exclusion; whereas the dull and accurate may pass through. There were at least three players in the first round at Leeds Castle who I really regret not having been able to hear again; and, conversely, one or two in the semi-finals who proved duller on second hearing than initially. Competitions are exciting but inescapably unfair in their progress. The truly remarkable thing is how often a very good choice is made for the principal winners. I'm only saddened by the emotional reaction that tragically assailed so deserving a winner on this occasion. I would like to add that I'd heard Tsuyoshi Horiuchi play on three separate occasions in the two years beforehand; but only with the competition had I sight of his true ability."

Accepting that fickle element, inspiration, as intangible, Dodgson's actual approach to its realisation is through conscious application and articulate thought. His reasoning seems, as it were, directed from outside the music toward its inner working. Motivation too, calls for discipline, scheduled to meet a deadline, or if not, simply self-imposed. "Even if there is no deadline of any sort on a composition, I find it a help to set some kind of timetable. Because, just as there is a rhythm in all life, so there is a rhythm in composition. If it does not move, it will stagnate. Sometimes I have to apply the brakes, to stop myself going too fast, doing too much in a single day. At other times, when the going is difficult or uncertain, you have to give yourself a prod."

Which brings about pressures, though not necessarily detrimental ones. These in turn arouse responses of perhaps compulsion, exhaustion, gratification and even depression. "Yes, all three; and the fourth sometimes. It's depressing if you're not enjoying it; for if you don't know, how can anyone else be expected to enjoy it? The so-called drudgery of composition, the writing out of the score in a fair hand, well I usually enjoy this bit; it's the real test of whether you have notated it in the clearest, least ambiguous fashion. I find I can never really admire what I consider carelessly finished music; I feel it's so unfair to the performers. And what right have I to imagine that I have

inspirations so powerful that hasty, unclear presentation could be justified. Then I see a facsimile of a Berlioz manuscript — that unstable guitar-playing hothead — so neat, thorough and soberly presented; which makes me realise that haste is a popular myth."

The objectivity of Stephen Dodgson's views are reflected in his music. Yet for all its directness, the sense of fulfilling a function, its conservative contemporary style, it is by no means inhibited: melody is unpredictable, rhythms are incisive, harmony is freed. It is individual, clear and with an outward bearing. "I dislike introspective music. My whole desire is for something positive, outgoing and full of life and motion. I agree that contemporary music often does seem tending to rhythmic inanimation; so that pieces which are full of interesting detail make overall a dreary and feeble effect; almost as though they dared not risk motion in any direction in case it proves a wrong one. I think that composers who concern themselves overly with self-expression are always boring. Involving your listener, that alone makes composition a worthwhile pursuit. And if there is only one performer, it is equally essential his involvement should seem to fit.

"Clarity, and rhythmic impetus; well, I certainly value those and strive for them. I find I have quite often regretted putting in too many notes, and virtually never felt I'd written too few. Power of communication lies in economy. It's a question of getting any idea to fill just the right space. In guitar music, I'm always hoping to achieve something pithy and succinct because my instinct says that that is characteristic of the instrument, one of its inherent gifts: to be potent, speaking expressively, at once softly and briefly."

Gabriel Estarellas will be playing Stephen Dodgson's Partita No.3 (written for Estarellas) at the Purcell Room on 21 May.

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