

Tim Parkinson

Conversation with Richard Emsley,

17th June 2003

Gloucester Arms, London NW1

(Richard has just given me a score of the 'for piano' series)

T: -could do with switching the microphone on, that's always helpful. Right. So which one did Mary [Dullea] play, was it six?

R: Er, no, number five.

T: Oh right.

R: Were you at that concert?

T: Yeah... I didn't know you wrote them all on one stave.

R: Yeah, that's turned into a conceit - is that the word? - because when I started writing these piano pieces I was working within a rather narrow register. Up to three octaves, something like that. And the hands were very close, um, and I just had the idea that rather than write for each hand, I'd write a single line, and the pianist could sort out the hands themselves.

T: Like in these early ones?

R: Yeah.

T: So how do you get your pitches and rhythms?! (laughs)

R: Well, yeah, the whole idea of this single line I should say is that um... there's always this ambiguity going on- it's notated as a single line, but it's actually composed as quite a lot of parts, maybe up to nine parts.

T: Layers.

R: Yeah, so if you divide up, say, three or four octaves, um, into narrow bands of perhaps a minor third, you could get nine, ten or so, parts, each occupying a minor third. Um, so quite strictly they'll stick to that band. Then the way I composed it is er, each of those parts is a real part rhythmically, it's independent, um, composed them, superimposed them all on top of each other, and then derived a single line. Does that make sense?

T: Yes it does, yeah. I see, yeah.

R: So I've sort of hidden away the part structure by writing it down to a single line.

T: There's like an imaginary grid sort of from top to bottom, all the different boxes...

R: Yeah, but then of course the- the part writing is very bare, so that you don't really hear it as part writing a lot of the time.

T: No, well I never thought of it as part-writing, it always sounds like- and nor did I really think of it as a line, you know, because the pedal's down

R: Quite, yeah.

T: it sounds- I mean that piece that er- well when I heard for Piano 5, that sounded- it really reminded me of rain, that particular performance, which

I've never thought about before really but now I have, that landed as a sort of image in my head.

R: Yeah well um... With the pedal held down I'm really interested in setting up that texture or musical space so that there is this great ambiguity about is it in parts, is it in one part, and am I hearing this as a jump between notes of one part, or am I hearing this as two parts, and is this an entrance of a new part, or is this the continuation of an existing part...?

T: So your procedures have changed through the pieces I guess, just looking at them anyway. Because here you have got levels going on.

R: Yeah that one's got three parts on one stave. And again it becomes almost arbitrary once I've collapsed say nine parts on top of each other, it then becomes almost an arbitrary decision whether I choose to notate it as one part or two parts or three. So I then might extract out a kind of notated couple of parts in a rather arbitrary sort of way. But I like the fact that it reminded you of rain because the rhythms are very much supposed to be not to do with pulsation or metre.

T: Yeah well I was gonna ask you how- are they sort of chance derived or something? Just because of the rain thing that's what I think...

R: Well if you think of just one of those parts, um, I'll typically set up some starting durations that might be, say, five seconds apart, and maybe I'd have five, six, seven of those, and then between those goalposts as it were I'd insert little ritardandi and accelerandi, so from two notes five seconds apart I might end up with an accel and then a rit, so you get a kind of bum...bum-bum...bum.....bum.... And I use a computer programme that I wrote with my own fair hands, er, to get those accelerandi and ritardandi between the goal posts.

T: Yeah I see.

R: Then that would be my first part, just rhythmically, and then the second part would be a copy of that, then a distortion of it, so it might kind of move the goalposts (to continue that sort of metaphor) and it might distort the rhythms. So you end up with a kind of aggregated accelerando and ritardando, but it's not a simple one. It's a sort of messed-around one. Um, if the piece was in nine parts, they'd typically be grouped in three parts of three, so I'd start off with three parts together and they'd be typically about an octave apart, and then after a while three other parts would come in, and because those are using a different group of a minor third bandwidth, um, you'd get a kind of harmonic shift when they enter.

T: Uh-huh.

R: Are you with me?

T: I think I'm following you, I'm gonna digest all of that

R: There's quite a lot there.

T: but it's quite kind of um... it's very composed isn't it, it's very sort of systematic.

R: Yes. It's a mixture of very closely rule-bound, but then there is the randomness of how I distort the rhythms that I've got. But then how do I give notes to those parts within a minor third each? Well that's usually just a random sequence of pitches, using the four semitones that occupy a minor third.

T: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

R: So I might randomly go um, you know, one four three four

Person: Is someone sitting there?

R: It's free, yes.

T: So with numbers then?

R: The notes that crop up are fairly random, within that tight registral constraint.

T: So do you use numbers then, rather than notes then, you sort of focus in on an area and then...

R: Well I arrived at that way of writing the notes from a sort of theory of mine about how a piece becomes harmonically interesting or uninteresting, and it's to do with er really semitonal tension like a gravitational pull. If you have notes that are a semitone apart, or perhaps an octave and a semitone apart, and moving around within those sorts of proximity to one another, it creates cohesion. I think that's just something that physiologically happens.

T: Yeah. No, it's very sort of um... There is a sort of harmony to your music...

R: Yeah, I think harmonic colour does crop up, and it is- it's kind of news to me when it happens, I just put my procedures into operation and stand back and see what happens.

T: It's quite detached, isn't it.

R: Yeah.

T: I'm sure there's a wonderful sort of um... a major triad pops up in er maybe six, number six or something? I can't remember, I'm trying to remember...

R: Is it the last movement of number two? Where it's all on an augmented triad?

T: Oh yeah. That's it. Is that it?

R: That one.

T: Oh yes, yeah. So did you restrict your- restricted yourself even more?

R: Well that's an example of the sort of... something would happen during the course of composing it with the computer programme and in that case I looked at it before- before I'd allocated the moving semitones so each of the parts just repeated a pitch, as a sort of place-marker, which was a starting point in the composition perhaps, and I listened to that and I thought well that sounds interesting just like that, so I won't bother moving any of the pitches around.

T: I didn't know you used computers, I mean, you know as part of the process. It's sounds very sort of um... it sounds quite intuitive your music, but also you know quite... it's got a kind of er....

R: Well the computer solved a lot of the problems I was having. I went through a long period of not finishing stuff. I was writing away but not getting where I wanted to get.

T: Is that your sort of Varese-like hiatus. (laughs)

R: Yes. The er the moratorium. Er and I think I decided at one point- I'd always felt a bit of a problem with writing things down on paper and feeling confident with the way I was hearing them. And I thought I would work on some way of getting a machine to play me some music, and then evaluate it in a more direct- just hearing it then saying that's good, that's not good. So I then embarked on this, what turned out to be in fact a nine month process of learning a computer language and then writing my own programme, because none of the proprietary ones were- would really fit the bill. So having come through all of that it kind of saved my life in composing, cos it was then great, I could generate stuff very very quickly, then mess it around, distort it, do all sorts of things with the computer, and immediately listen

back to it.

T: Yeah, the need to hear it straight away or... sooner than six months later.

R: So yeah I'm listening to it as part of the process of composing. So typically with a lot of those processes I might actually compose a great bunch of music and maybe even thirty minutes, having decided on the numbers in advance and just typed them in, and then simply listen to it and say well that's incredibly boring, won't go near that, this bit is interesting...

T: Oh that's great.

R: And then I might decide well what if I slow that bit down which you can also do very quickly. Er, and I often arrive at things by slowing them down and speeding them up, arrive at a kind of optimum speed for those notes.

T: That's a very sort of immediately strikes me as a really very painterly way of going about. You do the whole thing and then you kind of...

R: It is like dragging bits of paint around on a surface, yeah. And in fact, um, I'm telling you all of the juicy bits right at the start, but from here on I'll get steadily more boring if I'm not incredibly boring already.

T: (laughs) You can say all the information that you need in ten minutes, then I won't have so much to write out!

R: Well talking about that sort of Varesian silent period, um, the way I actually got out of that and into these piano pieces was I'd been using the computer to write what was supposed to be- what was gonna be the start of this piece, and I had it all planned out, typed it in, listened to it and I thought there's far far too many notes within about ten seconds, so I thought I'll just slow it down, so I'll slow it down by a factor of six so it lasts a minute and I listened to it and out popped this really interesting thing which is part of um- it's the second movement of 'for piano'

1. So that whole thing was originally about

T: About ten seconds! (laughs) Good God.

R: And it's six times slower. And that's really how I just happened upon this very pared down, listening to the minutiae...

T: It's a very- it's a nice combination between obviously a very systematic approach on one level and a very intuitive approach on another.

R: Yeah.

T: Thank you very much again. I look forward to playing through these things.

R: One thing that quite a lot of pianists baulk at are the irrational rhythms.

T: Oh yeah.

R: Which are by no means as complex as some irrational rhythms you

T: Well no sure...

R: you bump into. And that's to do with what you were saying about rain. Simply... I find if I listen to something on a computer and it sounds right, I've a feeling that the notes have to be pretty crucially in just that spot.

I find in this slow music that you get very attuned to just the distances- the exact distances between the notes. And what notes they are is part of that total experience. So I feel I've got to notate them fairly carefully.

T: You just get a more specific er recognition of rhythm, just listening to that. So how does that- how does it vary with performers then? Do they... Do you look for a sort of accuracy or is there a kind of a...

R: I wouldn't claim to be able to spot er all the rhythmic inaccuracies that

go on, um... although you can spot quite a lot. (laughs) I don't worry terribly about that. I just- if somebody's- it's more likely if somebody's got the piece terribly wrong like they're lifting the pedal when it shouldn't be lifted, things like that.

T: Is the pedal down throughout all of them?

R: Yeah. (pause) I think that's part of- I think the pieces announce their conceits, if you like, laying their aesthetic cards on the table, like this is the deal with this music, and the deal with these pieces is that the pedal is going to be held down throughout, and I think listeners just twig that quite easily. So I'm interested in just setting up um prescriptions about how the music is going to be.

T: Oh yeah sure.

R: So, you could think of that as painterly as well, if you like, it's like working within a frame.

T: Well definitely, very um- it's very immediate as well, you know where you are as soon as it starts.

R: It's a WYSIWYG process.

T: A wissywig process?

R: Yeah. You don't know WYSIWYG? What You See Is What You Get. Computer jargon.

T: (laughs) Ah, right, now I know how to spell it.

R: Yeah, capital W, capital Y, and so on... It's usually used to do with graphics software, um, like rendering of fonts so that the computer doesn't substitute some approximate version, it gives you the exact size and look of the font, for instance.

T: Oh right, yeah. So do you think very visually then? Or do you just see where it takes you? In the compositional process. Do you think that's what I want, or does it sort of evolve in the working procedure?

R: I think maybe I do think quite visually.

T: Because I get a strong sense of imagery out of your stuff.

R: Well, when I started it was all very much sort of to do with um- the early pieces I liked, and the very earliest ones were pop music, um, I found they gave rise in me to a sensation um which wasn't visual, a musical sensation that it seemed to be to do with um... modelling time, experiencing time in ways that would- ways apart from the every-day way. So for instance everyone's probably familiar with feelings of time standing still or circular recurrent time, things like that in music. And it can be a kind of corporeal, you could feel you could almost see it or grasp it. It might set up a, I suppose, a visual image, maybe a teeming surface but one that is standing still, as a whole.

T: Mmm, I see, yeah.

R: But, visual in that way.

(pause)

T: That's what I felt when- what?

R: Well I was gonna say that the- the earlier work that I did um it was all to do with trying to recreate that- those particular sensations that had excited me. So I was- I think of it now as a top-down way of composing. So I'd start with a I-want-the-piece-to-feel-like-this, and what am I going to do to achieve that. So you'd have started with a top, an overall thing. And then you start- well I started getting into a lot of pre-composition planning. Um, the trouble was when you'd worked out all the plans and put them into operation, you very often didn't get the results you were after.

T: Yeah.

R: Yeah, that was why I was a very constipated composer during that whole period. I think because I was working in this top-down way. So the new way which I discovered with the computer in the piano music was really a bottom-up way. Because I'm just starting with the units, the notes and rhythms, um, messing those around and seeing what the top er happens to come out like.

T: Ah yeah that's- I completely understand. Have you retained any of that previous sense of top-down? I mean for example, you know when you're sort of thinking about series like this Stills series, and so on, and another series for Phil Thomas.

R: The er piece for Phil Thomas was gonna group together 'for piano' numbers thirteen through to twenty four, which would have been the second group of twelve, um, because they were all gonna be three minutes, and all very closely related, but I'm thinking now that because they're- they are so very turning into one piece, I might just simply call that 'for piano 13'. It'll- that'll be a much bigger one than the previous ones.

T: Oh right, yeah.

R: So not a series, just another piece.

T: You're going all Stockhausen on us. (laughs)

R: I knew somebody would say that.

T: The higher the number, the bigger the piece.

R: Well I suppose using "for piano" is a half-hearted attempt to do something you've done more thoroughly. But you use "untitled".

T: Well yeah, titles...

R: I thought "for piano" was half way towards "untitled".

T: Yeah, we all need an abstract title nowadays. The days when er... I like the er...

R: I got really annoyed with having to come up with titles.

T: Yeah.

R: And also the feeling that I've written the piece, now I've got to think about what it might- a title- what it might be about, and you think well sod it, it's not actually about any of these things.

T: I know. I still feel er if a title occurs which fits then I'll use it, but it's very rare these days. Although I still actually agonise a lot about whether to have something as an untitled whatever or- for example, um, "clarinet and words". It's a piece I just did for Andrew Sparling, "clarinet and words" for clarinet and um speaking voice. And I did think about that for a long time.

R: You thought about that title for a long time?

T: Well just you know, not while writing the piece, but it's sort of running through your head when you're not thinking about the actual process

R: You do, don't you, in off moments.

T: Exactly, daydreaming about... But I was gonna say I like the er the early classical era where there's- looking at C.P.E.Bach's work list there just one sonata after another. Sonata, sonata, sonata...

R: I think it's something that very much came after the Romantic period, isn't it, or began with the Romantic period.

T: Yeah, the curse of programme music.

R: I know there were plenty of poetic titles before then, but they were the exception rather than the rule.

T: Mmm. Then we have everything nowadays.

R: I think you... er... We're forced to declare our colours in a way. Your titles- I'm not saying this is something to be welcomed but you're nailing your colours to the mast aesthetically in a way aren't you.

T: I guess. And people start to say, well what's this going to be?

Untitled....?

R: Yes, I was sitting next to Laurence Crane during- when your piece came up last night, and I said Tim's gonna run out of titles. (laughs)

T: (laughs) Well, you know, I've yet to see... I have done-

R: Do you use numbers? Like "Untitled Piano number one"?

T: Well no but there are two "untitled quartet"s. Um, but I don't at the moment-

R: Are they both called "untitled quartet"?

T: yes, but I don't at the moment (laughs)

R: It's like having two children and calling them both the same name.

T: I don't like numbers at the moment because there's a hierarchy implied of sorts. I just stick a year after it. "Untitled Quartet" from 2000. And there's another one from 2001. Which makes it confusing enough.

R: That's a good solution.

T: I mean, because again, like all the Mozart quartets for example, Haydn ones, they were just Quartets. Oh, Quartet?in E flat, didn't you just write something called Quartet in A major? And I like that. And of course they've since been numbered because of the need for cataloging.

R: But the key that they were in was quite important.

T: Well, sure, yeah, but even then you might get, you'd probably get about a half a dozen G majors or something.

R: Yeah but then people say the early G major, or the late G major...

T: Well that'll suit me I think. The early Untitled Quartet and the one the year later. (laughs) I don't know, we'll see.

Loud Person on phone: And then when you come to er the tree you'll see a road called Ivor Place?

T: So yeah, because I've been thinking about Stills as well. That's your next series.

R: Yes, I- there's only been two series so far. One is the pieces for piano, that's "for piano", then I began this other series for um small groupings of instruments called "Stills". And um I was beginning to think it was about time I stopped writing just for piano although I intend to carry on writing for piano, to do something else as well. Um, and that "Stills" series, I think you know, er began with the collaboration with the painter Joan Key and you came to the very first performance at the De La Warr Pavilion.

T: July the sixth. I remember.

R: Yeah. Well Joan wanted me to use the cello, she's a cellist herself, and she suggested solo cello for that piece. We could talk later about how that collaboration worked. But, um, having written that piece, um, I thought well, I wanted- I thought I'd be expanding it into rather a lot of pieces, and I thought well, let's use instruments that people will easily be able to um use for performance. So there are a stock of five instruments, um, flute, clarinet, piano, violin and cello. And the twenty four pieces of "Stills" are all the possible solo, duo and trio combinations available from that stock of five.

T: It works out at twenty four?

R: It works out at twenty five. The one I missed out was solo piano.

T: (laughs) There's a poetry about that, though!

R: Yeah, twenty four just- maybe we're all hung up on the legacy of Bach.

T: Sometimes it's good to be traditional... You should have written thirty!
Let's be decimal! (laughs)

R: (laughs) Yeah. The Euro version. So yeah, knocking out the solo piano one, that gives us the twenty four.

T: So, how many have you done now did you say?

R: Three.

T: So there's solo cello...

R: Yeah I planned out a sequence for the pieces using the- there is an order- a structure involved in the way the instruments crop up in the course of that twenty four. Um, so I planned that out and as people asked for pieces, like the Libra ensemble asked for a clarinet and piano piece, that turned out to be number twenty two, so they got Stills 22. Darragh Morgan asked for a piece. That turned out to be thirteen. Darragh objected strenuously to the number thirteen, so in deference to his Irish superstitiousness, I changed that to fourteen.

T: So who's gonna be the poor guy who gets thirteen?

R: (laughs)

T: Well I'm looking forward to hearing it though, because the only one I've heard is the cello one, and it was very um, again very sort of er striking imagery, I remember it as this kind of [makes hand gesture]

R: Yeah, flat.

T: Yeah.

R: And it's really- I find I've very much got to discover er the right sort of space now for pieces.

T: In terms of venue?

R: No no, in terms of the music.

T: Oh I see.

R: I really like narrowing it down very much now, and so with these "Stills" pieces it's a matter of finding the right way to write. And that took me a while, to arrive at that but it was really based on the idea of cross-rhythm. So typically you might have two parts going along, um, and each part- well the first part would start, so I composed it as just a straightforward periodic rhythm, maybe an attack every three seconds, then I'd use the computer programme to more or less distort that, so instead of ba... ba... ba... it would be more sort of ba.. ba..... ba... ba...

T: Right.

R: One hopes in an intriguing sort of way. And I'd distort the duration of the note as well, so they kind of concertina in and out. And then the second part would pretty much track the first part, but it would be distorted itself, so you're getting a kind of er... I don't know, a bit like two animals tracking each other and slightly getting out of step as they go along. And that idea of cross rhythm has always been, kind of, of central interest for me. It also goes back to ideas about time. I'm quite interested in the way when you get cross-rhythms, you're not looking at a single psychological focus going along in a narrative, you're actually fracturing that, and you're being forced to listen to er two strictly independent things occurring, which can be indifferent to each other. I'm interested in the way that subverts our formulaic way of narrowing time perception down to just one strand.

T: Sure. You're kind of dissipating your focus.

R: Yes. Yes. I'm always excited by things that get away from a single

narrative thread.

T: Yes I'm quite excited by that.

R: And again that conjures up a spatial er...

T: Hence when we were talking last night about Charles Ives.

R: Yeah, I think he's a case in point.

T: That's where it's going, that's the where the root of all this is in a way

then, because I'm thinking that it's a really healthy mixture of what appears to me to be a very rhythmic way of working and also- but also counterpoint as a definite- you know, I'm not saying you have a total disregard for notes.

(Pause)

R: (Laughs) It's the rain.

T: I thought I felt this little drop...! (laughs)

R: Richard Emsley's notes keep falling on my head. (Laughs) So from that do you mean there's a discipline involved, a rigour...?

T: Yeah but I mean just in the way that you were talking about how... for example that one where you only use... the last part of 'for piano 2' when it's just the same pitches. It's very... it just becomes almost pure rhythm as well, obviously there's a harmonic colour going along but it's a very rhythmic approach primarily.

R: Yeah actually that's quite pertinent because with the piano music- with 'for Piano 13' I use that very idea and turn it into a kind of bell piece.

Um, so I had um seven parts about a minor third- typically a minor third apart, it was very close, and simply the first one was I think an attack every two seconds, um, and then all the others- the first stage of composition, the other six parts would be with that, just one chord repeating, but then I slightly distort all of them so they're getting slightly out of step with each other. So you get this (sings) in what I find a delightful- like listening to church bells.

T: I'm looking forward to November, I can tell you. Phil didn't have any objection to being 'for piano 13' did he? (laughs)

R: No he didn't. (laughs)

T: So they evolved then, the 'or piano's? Is there a-

R: Certainly they've- yeah the piano music evolved to that using repeated notes rather than notes that creep around in a semitonal way to create bell-like sounds. I suppose that's then translated into the "Stills" pieces which also use repeating notes. They don't sound so bell-like, not being the piano, but er... Yes, I'm into that way of writing, very much, now. In fact the pieces for Phil are going to um... I've written six already which are all bell-like, um, they're quite close to each other, they gradually distort one to the next. Then I'm interleaving those six with five quieter pieces which are more in the lyrical vein of the earlier ones.

T: Oh right. So it's gonna be another kind of suite.

R: Yes. Yeah, it's a bit like a suite.

T: Fast movement, slow movement

R: It's a very old idea, yes! (laughs) But, hey! (laughs)

T: Nothing wrong with that either. But that's what we were talking about the kind of er what it does to time. That sort of um

R: Well if you stand listening to church bells ringing it's a sort of transfixing experience.

T: It is, isn't it.

R: You know, fixing. It's sort of to do with, er, something still and static. I don't know why those things fascinate me particularly, I suspect they fascinate a lot of composers. And you can get philosophical and um... talk about the way human thoughts have often been attracted to something beyond our immediate experience, beyond appearance, which kind of stands beyond, a kind of eternal static, like Plato's Forms.

T: Yeah. A constancy.

R: Yes. Something timeless, eternal. I mean that idea's cropped up so many times in human thought.

T: Hmm, yeah. (pause) There must be something in it then!

R: (laughs) There must be something in it! In er thoughts that you find in Indian religions, um, the idea of the... is it the Atman and the Brahman, a kind of still spirit that you find in each of us, but it's your contact with the eternal and with something beyond our material existence. Phrases like 'motionless behind the flux'. I came across that in a book on Indian thought, and thought 'That could be a title.' (laughs) 'Motionless Behind the Flux'.

T: You're a good man for not using it as a title though.

R: You wouldn't like that.

T: Well, yeah, it's um... I'd prefer it as a programme note.

R: Well, yeah, to summarise all that, there does seem to be this interest in er... stillness and something static and fixed. And a lot of um... a lot of our powerful experiences, religious experiences, maybe drug-induced experiences, um, strong emotional experiences, poetic... they're often coloured by a sense of something still and unmoving.

T: A fixity.

R: Yeah, and emotions are like the way food sits in your stomach. They don't go anywhere much, they just overtake you. Unlike rational thought which is always chattering away going from step to step.

T: Absolutely, yes, yes.

R: That's another thing that I'm interested in is getting away from er... I'm interested in art as a non-conceptual experience, so you're getting away from mental chatter, and the clutter of conceptual thoughts.

T: I'm with you there.

R: (laughs) Good on you, mate! Shall we celebrate that with another pint of Guinness?

T: That would be fantastic, I'll put it on pause. By the time you come back we'll have run out of-

(End of first half)

Conversation with Richard Emsley, contd.

Second half

T: (laughing) -it's moved sort of

R: (laughs) Radical shift.

T: There we are, we're on now. It's running now.

R: I feel inhibited now. (laughs)

T: (laughs) Your wild beast of our brains is running wild.

R: Well if you follow the notion that you just expressed about a sort of blind evolutionary process, um, that would mean that what we fondly term as knowledge we're somehow inventing for ourselves as we go along. As we evolve blindly, we're bringing into the equation what we call knowledge as we go through life. So that would be a rather bleak way of looking- just taking a neo-Darwinist view it's a rather bleak materialist atheistic view.

T: Well it's a religion now.

R: Well, somebody might suggest, well, what is actually happening is we're evolving towards some sort of absolute standard of knowledge like we were talking about Plato, there is some absolute knowledge of the universe, or knowledge of ourselves, so it's not a blind evolutionary thing, we're actually getting closer to that.

T: The idea of progress.

R: maybe it's too comforting.

T: Well you can't help but think, well once we've got to that, then what do we do? Does this search for knowledge just evolutionarily of its own volition just switch off?

R: What the Buddhists think of as Nirvana. You arrive at that ultimate point of self-knowledge and you- they're not very forthcoming about what actually does happen, but, I think they believe that you dissolve in- you become part of the universe. Very sort of fluffy way.

T: A selflessness. Well, do you feel a sort of kinship with that kind of Eastern philosophy?

R: Well, yeah- when I've- I didn't discover Zen Buddhism, the ideas in that, until I was in my early thirties, and that was quite a bombshell because it- I was suddenly reading ideas that crystallised all those half-thoughts you have for ages and ages.

T: Yes, yeah.

R: You've been bumbling around looking for something to conform to your own ideas and not finding it, and the suddenly discovering Zen was that thing for me. Um, I think it was bound up with the idea that we use language to think with and yet language is a human invention, or has arisen through simply human evolution, so in that sense we're trapped within the concept of language.

T: That sounds quite Wittgenstein.

R: It is, it is, yeah. Er, and so I think some of the ideas in Zen are critical of a language based and a conceptual- a concept based approach to living. And they're saying let's have a critique of language, let's put it in its proper place and claim other experience which Wittgenstein said is

that experience outside of... you know, beyond what we can speak of.

T: Hmm, have you read some Wittgenstein?

R: Um, actual Wittgenstein I've only read small bits of, because it's pretty tough meat. I've read quite a few books about Wittgenstein, things about Wittgenstein. Yeah I... he's kind of a comforting philosopher for artists because he claims this territory for the arts or for religion and so on and for morality, it's what he thinks is beyond er... what can be spoken about. I've got certain problems with his starting point that thought is language. I think he starts from the idea that whenever we think we think in language. Although he must be defining the word 'think' in quite a closed way when he says this.

T: Does that um... disallow thinking sort of visually then?

R: Well that's what I'm a bit puzzled about because I think for him there were lots of areas of experience beyond what he groups as thinking and talking, so when he uses the word 'think', he's using it in a way that's associated entirely with language. So, what was it you just mentioned?

T: What? Thinking visually?

R: Visually. Well maybe he wouldn't term that 'thinking'.

T: Right, oh I see.

R: So if a taxi suddenly veers off that road and crashes towards this table would that be a... would we be thinking 'hang on, a taxi is...'? (laughs)

T: Well, no I was sort of thinking more... bringing it back to what we were talking about your um- about the way in which we think about pieces, working from the top down or bottom up or whatever, um... I feel I think quite... vaguely er... about pieces that I'm about to write. It's this kind of thing that I then try and-

R: Well I think one thing that's valuable about the arts is that we use all of our attributes, so we think in a way that Wittgenstein would have defined 'thought'. Maybe in a conceptual, logical, language-based way. But then when we're making art we're involved in a tactile way, in an emotional way, in an imaginative way, visual way,

T: Hmm, yeah.

R: Smelly way...

T: It's drawing threads together.

R: Somebody- I don't know if you know Steve Holt, he claimed that one of the things about the arts is the way that it involves all our ways of experiencing.

T: Oh right. The way that we experience art?

R: Well I find, just to particularise it, say, when I'm writing these piano pieces, just for an example, if I listen back on the computer to something, um, as I sort of experience that and evaluate it, there a kind of huge wealth, a richness of- I'm being emotional, I'm being rational, I'm being tactile, or sensual

T: Yeah, I can identify with that. I find that when I'm in a piece I see analogies for it all over the place, various situations or various points of reference, I think 'that's like what I'm doing now.'

R: Yeah. And then the other big thing that I didn't mention was that I'm being musical as well, I'm referring back to the history- my whole musical experience up until now. So it's actually quite an incredibly rich experience.

T: Yeah.

R: I think it's- I always find as a composer when I'm asked to talk about my work, um, I often begin by saying I feel very uncomfortable being asked to

talk about my work because words just don't go anywhere near the richness of what's going on.

T: Well, quite. There has to be a way in, really.

R: If you think society... because we've got words screaming at us from every corner, you can't avoid that, the media as well, it's set up this false notion that we can exhaust the meaning of everything in words.

T: That the truth lies in the words?

R: Yeah. And it can't.

T: Yeah, yeah. You're one of those people who instead of delivering a lecture on your music you'd simply play some. (laughs)

R: Yeah...

T: Programme notes as well.

R: Big problem.

T: The idea of just putting in some kind of... I mean that one that I did yesterday for example, just a... it was notes that I'd made to myself after I'd listened to that piece myself, you know, at some stage.

R: I like that.

T: And I just jotted them down and I thought, well let's keep those. Because not having heard it myself in a long while I sat down to listen to it and all this stuff was coming at me, so...

R: I thought that was an excellent programme note

T: Oh great!

R: because it was very very short, it was concise, and you said all you needed to say, you didn't set out on a great dissertation about things.

T: Well some of it was I felt quite esoteric, but I included it regardlessly. As, you know, as a- it's not always necessary that things are immediately understood even if they are language. Just put it in there are something to generate... bounce off ideas or something.

R: There's one of the American er late nineteenth century... I think it was Emerson, one of the people Charles Ives was interested in, um, who came out with the thought that trying to be consistent is just a..

T: Oh yes, Emerson on consistency.

R: Yeah. And if you get hung up on being consistent you're just er...

T: Yes.

R: Try telling that to a philosopher, he'd get in an awful tizzy.

T: Or some composers!

R: Dare we say. You think some composers operate in that entirely conceptual manner?

T: Um, I should- yeah, almost undoubtedly, but I can't- I wouldn't like to start thinking of anybody.

R: I suspect it would be pretty unfair to point at composers and claim that they were doing just that.

T: Well, it's a sort of um... It's an interesting thing though about consistency because some composers are quite- have quite a kind of eclectic output, each piece is very different, and er some composers like you I think, this 'for piano' series has a sound to it, it's definitely... it's this thing.

R: Yeah.

T: So that's a kind of consistency in itself. A continuity in a way of working.

R: That's very different from um logical consistency.

T: Yeah er- oh what you mean within a piece? In terms of the actual

composition of a piece?

R: I suppose I was thinking about composers who might feel they can exhaust the entire meaning of their work in a verbal account of the work.

T: Oh I see, oh right.

R: In the way that conceptual art seems to consist of just the concepts.

T: Right. So there's no need to listen to the piece now that I've explained it so thoroughly.

R: Yeah. And a piece of conceptual art, somebody did the ultimate by just writing up the ideas on a piece of paper and sticking it to the wall, so there was no actual physical art there, just the concept. That's definitely not the sort of art that interests me.

T: Well, no, that's pushing music out the door.

R: Yeah.

T: It's very demeaning.

R: Do you think maybe for instance some of the er the 'Brit-Artists' um... the importance of their work seems to boil down to an interpretation of the work that could be put into words.

T: I can't-

R: And the physical reality of the work counts for very little.

T: I... Some, yeah, but there's a lot that I like at the moment, and also a lot that I dislike as well, but I mean, my suspicion is that's from a- that's coming from an academic origin, I think because composers suffer from that as well, this um... explanation of your work, this justification. We live in an age of accountability.

R: Yes.

T: You know, be it budget or be it pictures.

R: I think we do- Sorry what was that?

T: No, just be it budget - money - or pictures. 'Why a B flat? What's the point of that?'

R: Maybe it's because we have to watch these terrible news programmes on television all the time where journalists are pestering these politicians about how you account for this and that.

T: They've turned the tables on us.

R: Yeah. I think that's why um... it's important for us composers to lay claim to spaces of experience that there's just not any worry about giving accounts like that.

T: Well I think it's clear you know that people like- people who's music I like anyway like you and so on, are doing- are obviously all operating in certain arenas, and its justification is coming out of itself, just having experienced it for a while. And, you know, the first time I met you I didn't think 'go on then, what's it all about then'? And then think 'ok well done, I'm on your side.' (laughs)

R: If you had I wonder whether we'd be sitting here now. (laughs)

T: (laughs) I might have been but I don't think you would have been!

(laughs) 'I don't want to be interviewed by him, he wants a thesis!'

R: Which is probably exactly what I've given you over the last hour.

T: Well, yeah but you know, you're- the future of your budget doesn't depend on it...

R: What you?'e just said er... would then introduce to me the notion of er value. Because if we've started off by saying let's rule out of court any sort of conceptual, verbal accounts of what we?'e doing because we don't find that particularly valuable, would there not then enter the question er

some sort of absolute artistic value, in other words, is this a good piece of music or is it a bad piece of music? So that if I was sitting next to Laurence during your concert last night and the two of us might have had conversation between the pieces along the lines of 'I didn't think that was a terribly good piece', 'I thought that was a lovely piece' ... and so that's more the sort of thing us composers do talk about.

T: Well yeah, yeah.... I'm just gonna put a coat on.

R: Yeah, yeah. That's something that if I were interviewing you, because as I read you- yeah, ok, turn the microphone around.

T: Well it's an open arena.

R: (laughs) I'm interested in er your idea of life in the everyday world is something where things just happen. A lot of what we find in life is stuff just happening. You know, three Chinese people have just arrived outside the pub-

T: yeah I was just thinking that! There's stuff going on in there, cricket inside the pub, conversation over there.

R: Who knows what might happen.

T: And all of the traffic.

R: Well if you er celebrate that idea and you build your pieces on just that idea, um, would you lay claim to the notion that particular pieces of yours had any value beyond the value we might find in people just bumping into us on the street? And if you walk down a street and er different things happen to you, that's by definition a very prosaic everyday experience, is that just the sort of experience you would want a listener to find in your music? Or, because it's a piece of music, is it for you establishing some sort of a value that transcends that everyday sort of experience.

T: Well, um...

R: In other words could just anything happen in your pieces?

T: No.

R: Ah! I think that's the answer there.

T: No, or it, you know-

R: And it's a big question with Cage, isn't it.

T: Well exactly. I don't open the doors wide enough. And er Cage- you know, I'm far more of a closed- I mean you're operating within a minor third, (laughs) I'm a little bit wider than that, but Cage is maybe a football pitch, but still it's-

R: I suspect even Cage would say no, like you just said no.

T: Well I feel with Cage it's a sort of er... discipline is the sort of-

R: It's more to do with the performance of pieces.

T: Discipline of some sort is the other side to the balance of 'well, let's just do anything?. That's- it's an openness to anything but I think that's where- that's where I feel the- he um gets cross when the element of discipline in whatever is lost.

R: Yes, if during the performance of a Cage piece at which he was present, a drunken member of the audience staggered onto the platform and starting chanting 'England, England!'

T: (laughs)

R: Would that have been ok by Cage?

T: Well I er did hear a story about um... something Cage had done which was for a Merce Cunningham performance and there was an open element to it, and um, I can't remember where I read this, or whatever, but Christian Wolff and whoever was around at the time performing decided that they should sing some

political songs and that this would fit within this openness, and Cage was furious.

R: Well I've heard John Tilbury say that despite his putative openness, Cage resisted students performing his work, he very much favoured his chosen few experts for performance and you know that really begs the question about his openness.

T: Well, in terms of performers that's just performance practice, which is the same for anything I feel, if we were talking about...

R: So Cage is actually creating a space with boundaries to it.

T: Definitely I think.

R: So he wants to observe randomness- radical randomness but within the er boundaries of that space.

T: Yeah. I feel.

R: Why did he insist on the boundaries, do you think?

T: Er, because it's a form of focus really. Because if your openness is encompassing er, you know, everything, you have to focus in....

R: So does that mean he was interested in the experience of somebody consuming art, experiencing art. So he was interested in sitting somebody down in the auditorium and saying, now you are gonna witness art, even if it's a very random art?

T: Well, I suppose, it's putting things in a frame, isn't it. Just- it's the Duchamp wheel. It's putting it in an arena where you would actually pay attention to it.

R: I suppose the thing to compare it with is the Happenings in the sixties.

T: Well, yeah.

R: Which would be much more radically open to literally anything.

T: Well, yes, the Happenings are a sort of, if you like, mannerist consequence of these kind of slightly more disciplined in somebody's mind things that Cage was doing earlier on. I don't know, it's a speculation, I don't know the exact history of Happenings.

R: Maybe this is er... maybe this cuts quite deep in the human psyche. We do insist on boundaries all the time. You know, if you wanted to have a wild sexual experience with somebody, you'd say ok I want a wild sexual experience, but then if they went beyond the boundary of what you're expecting-

T: Well what's your definition of wild?

R: Yeah, you have set up boundaries even if there's going to be wildness within the boundaries.

T: But we all live within certain er... we all have boundaries. We live with certain expectations, and certain...

R: I saw something-

T: tastes.

R: This isn't relevant at all really... I was just watching television the other day...

T: It's still going.

R: Is it still going?

T: Yeah. I hope we haven't just wiped, let me just stop it for a second.

(Cut)

R: Is that a minidisc?

T: Yeah.

R: How much time can you get?

T: Seventy six, or something, minutes.

R: do you use both sides or is there just one?

T: Just one side.

R: Like a floppy disc.

T: yeah.

R: Is it going now?

T: Yes. Just thinking about what you were just saying, with that two piano piece last night-

(End of recording)