

## CONTEMPORARY COMPOSERS:

# STEPHEN GOSS

Interviewed by THÉRÈSE WASSILY SABA

*THE WELSH composer and guitarist Stephen Goss is the head of composition at the University of Surrey. Before that he was the head of academic and supporting studies at the Yehudi Menuhin School. I spoke to him about the balancing act required to maintain his performing, academic and composing career simultaneously.*

*How did you come to start playing the guitar?*

I was seven years old and I wanted to be a pop star. That was in about 1972, so my parents found me a local classical guitar teacher in Swansea. By the time I was about ten or eleven, I was listening to a lot of classical music. Then at senior school there was a chance to learn an instrument for free, so I chose the violin. The violin took over from the guitar for a long time. I had a strong urge to join orchestras and to be a part of what was going on and worked my way through all the grades by my mid-teens.

*You must have been obsessed to do Grade Eight at the age of 15.*

Yes, at that stage I wanted to be a violinist. But then I won a scholarship to Wells Cathedral School to do composition, violin and guitar, and I discovered that the world was full of fantastic violinists. I decided that my guitar playing would be the thing to push. It was a pragmatic decision really. I didn't have a love affair with the instrument. I was the only guitarist at music school and, consequently, there were lots of opportunities.

*When did you start composing?*

Almost immediately, I was writing little guitar pieces when I was eight. The first things I played in concerts were things that I had written myself. I always had a desire to become a composer from very early on. I listened to a lot of 20th century music in my early teens, Bartók, Stravinsky, and then discovered Mahler in a big way. I got to know a lot of romantic repertoire from playing in the youth orchestras. I would play one symphony by someone like Sibelius and then need to go and listen to then all.

*You get quite a different of the music view when you're playing in an orchestra, don't you?*

Yes, it was fantastic. The local orchestra was the West Glamorgan Youth Orchestra. Then, at 16 when I discovered all these other violinists, I switched to viola. Again, it was purely for pragmatic reasons, to get into better orchestras.



*Stephen Goss.*

*What did you think of the viola parts compared to the violin parts?*

They were easier to play, that was very noticeable. But it was nice just sitting in the centre of the orchestra and being a bit nearer the wind and brass.

*So did you hear things differently?*

Yes, certainly, but what taught me the most was just sitting for hours in rehearsals while the conductor dissected the orchestra. I would hear horns alone, or just the upper wind, or just first flute and second bassoon together. You got an idea of how instruments sounded and how they worked together.

*Who did you study composition with at Wells?*

David Lyon. He was very helpful.

*Were you trying to write large scale works at the age of 16?*

Yes, huge things. I remember the piece I wrote for my Wells audition was a 25-minute orchestral piece, very much in the style of Bruckner. By that stage I had developed a passion for late 19th century music. I was very into Wagner, Mahler, Bruckner, and Strauss.

*You mean structurally similar, don't you? But what about the themes?*

It was tonal. The themes were mine but it was more or less a pastiche of late 19th-century works, which I found really exciting at that time. That was in 1980.

*When did you write your first orchestral piece?*

I wrote a suite when I was about twelve. I was very fortunate to have a group of friends who grew up with me in Swansea who also were keen. I remember one of us came to school with some 45-stave manuscript paper, and then we started trying to write for a massive orchestra that needed 45 separate parts. We also wrote serial music.

*Was there a guitar part in those early pieces?*

Not at all. I did other instrumental pieces as well, string quartets and so on, but I didn't write for the guitar until much later.

*Didn't you have to specialise at Wells then?*

No, they let me do what I wanted really, but Wells had a link with the Royal Academy so they fixed up for me to go to Michael Lewin in London for a weekly lesson.

*What was your playing like when you started with Michael?*

Very wild. After my lessons with Evan Crawford, my next teacher left me to my own devices. So by the time I was 15 or 16 I was playing large-scale repertoire pieces, but in the most undisciplined, idiosyncratic and intuitive way. I studied with Michael Lewin for about seven years in total. Most people don't realise that he's an incredible player, and he taught me discipline. Michael would add pencil markings to scores in unbelievable detail. Students at the academy used to joke that after a lesson with Michael that their scores would weigh twice as much. I used to compete and bring along my own fingerings, and if they were acceptable to Michael, I would feel I was making progress.

*At that stage were you playing guitar concertos at Wells?*

I did a couple of concertos with the orchestra at Wells. We did the Vivaldi D major a few times, and toured to Hong Kong and China, when China had only just been opened to Western visitors.

*Then you went to university?*

Yes, to Bristol University where I studied mainly composition with Robert Saxton. He was excellent. He was the first composition teacher I had who would say: 'Right, justify that, what's going on here? How can you have this chord at this particular time? What is happening structurally? You're never going to hear the second oboe in that texture. Are you sure this works on the horn in this register? How about a fifth higher?' Just really analytical, detailed stuff.

*What sort of approach had composition lessons had before?*

Before that it was more general, airy-fairy stuff. The big mistake that people make is that they imagine that they can sit down with a new contemporary, complex score and hear it as they turn over the pages, which of course is rubbish. People sit there and they pretend they can hear what's going on. Of course, you can hear scores if you know Brahms's style very well, and then if you pick up a piece by Brahms that you haven't seen before, you can pretty much hear how it sounds. You can hear the patterns and transfer them into sound quite easily, but with contemporary music, it's almost impossible to do that.

My links with Wales are still strong. I am a member of Composers of Wales. I graduated from Bristol University in 1985 and then did a post-graduate course at the Royal Academy of Music. I got a Welsh scholarship called the Ryan Davies Memorial Scholarship, so that took me to the academy where I studied composition with Edward Gregson, who is now Principal of the Royal Northern, and guitar with Michael Lewin.

*What was Gregson like after Robert Saxton?*

Eddie was brilliant because whereas Robert was very keyed up on things like structure, harmony, and use of material, Eddie was much more practical. He would say: 'Right, next week I've got a horn player coming along. Write a solo horn piece lasting two minutes.' So I went through all the orchestral instruments and then all the combinations of instruments. It was amazing. We might have a wind quintet or a trio of violin, flute and viola, or two 'cellos and bassoon. Eddie gave all this practical information about writing for the various instruments, and the fact that we could hear what we had written immediately was invaluable.

Then I did an M.Mus in performance at the Royal Academy. At the time I was focusing on contemporary music, so my final recital was of Tippett, Britten, Takemitsu, Walton and Henze. At the academy they have composers' festivals, so I had the chance to work with a number of really top composers. I got to play *Changes* to Elliott Carter. I also played to Takemitsu, which was incredible; he was so polite, so gentle and so encouraging.

*What sort of things did Elliott Carter say to you about *Changes*?*

I had analysed the work in some detail. I had gone through it with Jonathan Leathwood. Of course, Carter was much more interested in the gestural aspects and the long-term aspects of the piece, how its structure worked.

*Had you got it?*

Yes, but I was slightly concerned because the rhythms in that piece are incredibly difficult, and I've never really heard anyone get close to it. I

heard Jonathan Leathwood play it and that was incredible. The metric modulations are very tricky. You can't just feel it, you have to calculate it coldly and try to work through it. For him, I think, the processes of composition and performance are entirely separate. Once the piece is done, he's much more interested in how you execute it on the instrument.

*Do you feel that way about your compositions?*  
Yes, very much so.

*Is that because you have to be philosophical about performers and performance?*

No, I don't think so. I think it's very exciting to work closely with performers who often bring a lot to the collaboration. More recently I've had closer relationships with performers, writing bits then showing it to them, and spending hours just going over details. *Oxen of the Sun*, which I wrote for Jonathan Leathwood, was great because he said he wanted something for the ten-string and the six-string. I wanted to write a big piece for an instrument that only one person in the world plays. I met Jonathan in 1988 when he was about 18, and then we started a long series of sessions where we would drink tea until four o'clock in the morning.

*Drink tea?*

Well, he drank tea. I didn't. He has done quite a few of my pieces with his students at the University of Denver, where he has been teaching for about four or five years. He also teaches at the University of Northern Colorado.

Anyway I'd seen him do a six-string, ten-string piece playing both instruments at the same time. I'm always keen to write pieces for the performers; I try to really make them tailor-made for the performer. The title *Oxen in the Sun* comes from James Joyce's *Ulysses*. There is a wonderful chapter where he starts in pre-English and as the chapter develops so the language comes forward in time, to old English and then to Chaucer. It goes through a whole series of pastiches and finishes with various modern styles, but it melts from one to another. It is the most amazing piece of virtuoso writing you can imagine. Initially my idea was to write a piece that did a similar sort of thing but then the other idea was that with ten strings here and six strings there, you have a harp basically. So I thought of Orpheus and his harp and that became the central piece. The music of Orpheus is a reworking of a piece by John Cage. Nearly everything I write is based on other pieces, to an extent.

*Is that your style?*

That's how I write music. Sometimes they are just fragments, sometimes they are transformed completely, and sometimes they are incredibly near the surface.

*Is that because of a need or an inspiration?*

It's what I've always done and I like doing it. I did it as an undergraduate, with quotes and references to things all over the place, and it comes from my fascination with writers like Joyce, Dylan Thomas and Umberto Eco and composers like Berio, Ives, Frank Zappa and Berg where they are always making references.

*Do you think the guitar is a restrictive instrument to write for?*

No, the restrictive thing about the guitar is being a guitarist; that is why I always try to write away from the instrument. I might go and try a few things out but the danger, as Leo Brouwer famously once said, is that everything sounds beautiful on the guitar; so your critical skills as a composer are seduced by the wonderful sounds that come out when you play. Otherwise the guitar is one of the most varied instruments there is in terms of range of tone colour, nuance and types of attack. Also, there are the different note colours on different strings, and different combinations. It's incredibly rich and it's all incredibly small-scale. There is a whole world in there that is absolutely fantastic.

I also studied with Gilbert Biberian after I left the academy. It was like an antidote to Michael, all those years of discipline and intricate arguments about fingerings and detail. With Gilbert, you would turn up for lessons and you had absolutely no idea what was going to happen. Gilbert would say: 'Let's put the kettle on.' Sometimes, if he were in a particularly creative and inventive mood, he'd talk for hours about literature, poetry, history and politics. It loosened me up a lot. Gilbert was the one who said I had to be a composer and that was it. So in a sense it was because of him that I started writing stuff again in 1989.

Then I decided to do a PhD in composition just because I wanted to write big pieces and I wanted to be a better composer. I wanted more technique and I wanted to know more.

*Who was your supervisor?*

Peter Dickinson, and he put a moratorium on writing for the guitar. I think because everything I had written since leaving college was for guitar; it was either for the Tetra Guitar Quartet, or for flute and guitar, voice and guitar, solo guitar, or two guitars, but it was getting played a lot. He shared my interest in composers who use quotations and references in their work. He is enthusiastic about Erik Satie, Charles Ives and John Cage, so it was great to go to him. He didn't take any nonsense. At my first supervision he just sat down and gave me a whole list of aural tests. He said if a composer can't hear, then they can't compose.

*Do you agree with that?*

The composers I admire the most are the ones

that really hear their music and the sound is just beautifully exciting, and exhilarating.

*How would you know if a composer hears their music or not?*

You wouldn't necessarily, but you know what music sounds wonderful, and more often than not, when it sounds absolutely fantastically beautiful, the composer has a wonderful ear. One example is Thomas Ades, who is a phenomenal musician.

*What about Tetra?*

Tetra is still going strong. We started playing concerts as a quartet in 1988 and since then we have made five CDs, toured all over the world, played on radio and television and we still have a fantastic time together.

*Has your repertoire changed a lot?*

No, not really. Certainly the pieces are different but the sort of thing that we do is pretty much the same as it has always been. If it was too busy, I wouldn't be able to do it, and the same is true for the others. We did a big tour in September and October to Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Saudi Arabia, Brunei, Malaysia, Borneo and India.

*When did you teach at the Menuhin School?*

That was in 1994. I was basically the head of academic music, which meant that I taught aural, harmony, analysis and composition. It was a full-time job. It was amazing because the kids were brilliant, and also because of the people that came in and out of the place, people like Murray Perahia or Andras Schiff or Mstislav Rostropovich. We were able to pursue a lot of interesting composition projects and various big collaborations. I got to coach football there as well; twice a week I got to run around and do a lot of shouting.

I was there for six years. The thing that was great was that it was so intense and that you were so much a part of these students' lives. But that was also the downside; it became your whole life. I wasn't able to do so many concerts and so much composing, although I did finish my PhD when I was there. Menuhin came, of course, to give lots of classes. I left because I wanted to get into academia and, also, I just wanted to do more writing.

Since I have been at the University of Surrey a lot more commissions have come through. It is a very good music department. We have the well-known Tonmeister sound recording course. There are probably 70 students in each year and we're about to get bigger too. I've just written a whole new degree programme called *Music with Computer Sound Design*, which is a computer composition based degree that includes a number of modules in popular music, film music, multi-media, dance music, jazz harmony, synthesis and sampling. I also teach a number of PhD

and Masters students in composition and performance. Our new PhD in performance is proving very popular.

*Are you used to doing five things at once?*

Yes, I often have several things on the go at one time. I have a little guitar piece on the go at the moment. Richard Wright is putting together a collection of guitar pieces for the Associated Board's Music Medals for ensembles in schools. The idea is to have exams for kids that are taught in groups in schools.

Recently, I wrote a 40-minute dance collaboration called *Spin* with the composer Tom Armstrong and an Indian musician called Jonathan Meyer. The piece basically came from improvisation sessions with two dancers. The whole piece was about referencing and spinning. It was called *Spin* because the ballet dancers spin in one direction and the Kathak dancers spin the other way. We took some traditional Indian forms and a Piazzolla tango and one of the dances from Stravinsky's *Agon*, which generated a whole lot of other material. It was an amazing piece, with video artists, lots of projections.

*What else have you written recently?*

I wrote a flute and guitar piece for William Bennett and Jonathan Leathwood, *First Milonga*, *Last Tango*, which they performed in March, a piano piece for Graham Caskie and then pieces for Tetra. I did a couple of new things for our Purcell Room concert last October. There is one that is a reworking of Satie's *Gnossiennes* and *Gymnopedie*.

I did a solo guitar piece for Allan Neave called *Looking Glass Ties* that quotes an entire Scarlatti sonata as one of its movements. It's a set of nine pieces. If you were to play all of them it would take 22 minutes but the idea is that you do a selection of three or four, and they are all based on other music to some extent. Sometimes you have just tiny little fragments. For example, the first movement is based on some of Morton Feldman's music. Another is based on a groove by David Byrne from Talking Heads, and another comes from a Bernard Herrmann film score. But often these quotations and references are well below the surface. The Scarlatti sonata is slightly changed because it is just a transcription of a recording by the Russian pianist, Mikhail Pletnev, who plays it in the Russian romantic tradition with lots of rubato. He adds notes to the harmonies, turning many of the ordinary diatonic things into secondary sevenths and chromatic, which make it sound very un-Scarlatti like. His Scarlatti sounds like Schumann and I like that idea.

All my compositions are arrangements to some extent. I became really interested in the grey area between where arrangement stops and where composition begins. In some pieces there is no way you can trace any of the references or

quotations. In others, they come up to the surface and disappear. In *Oxen in the Sun* there are three pieces based on Britten's oboes pieces *Metamorphoses after Ovid*. The first, *Pan*, is quite disguised; the second, *Arathusa*, is less disguised and the final one, *Narcissus*, is just a transcription of Britten's version, where the oboe does the reflections in the water. The idea was of Jonathan playing two guitars at once, and one reflecting the other.

*What commissions are you working on at the moment?*

I'm writing a piece for Xuefei Yang. She asked for something based on a Chinese theme. My piece *Yellow Earth* is based on a number of Chinese films, most of them directed by Chen Kaige, made in wake of the Cultural Revolution. I'm also working on something for piano and percussion for Graham Caskie for a South Bank concert next year. After that, I'm writing a work for the Hand-Dupre Duo's tour of South Africa next May, and then a large-scale work for the Gemini Ensemble. That will keep me busy until the middle of 2005.

*Website: [www.surrey.ac.uk/Music/Who/Goss.html](http://www.surrey.ac.uk/Music/Who/Goss.html)*

#### Selected Compositions

*Oxen of the Sun* (2003) for '16-string guitar'.  
*Spin* (2002/03) for six dancers, flute, soprano saxophone, piano, guitar, sitar, video and electronics.  
*Gnosstennes and Gymnopedies* (2003) after Erik Satie, for flute and piano.  
*Gnosstennes* (2002) after Erik Satie, for four guitars.  
*First Milonga, Last Tango* (2002) for flute and guitar.  
*Trumpets and Clocks* (2002) for four trumpets, two trombones and timpani.  
*An Ideal Insomnia* (2001/02) for solo piano  
*Cottleston Pie* (2001) for eight-part unaccompanied choir.  
*Lachrymae* (2001) for four guitars.  
*Tango* (2001) a piece for dance: for clarinet, accordion, vibraphone, marimba, suspended cymbal and double bass.  
*Looking Glass Ties* (2000/01) for solo guitar.  
*Carmen Fantasy* (1998) a fantasy, for four guitars, on themes from Bizet's *Carmen*.  
*Defying Gravity* (1997) for high voice and guitar.  
*Arcadia* (1996) for nineteen solo strings: nine violins, four violas, four cellos and two double basses.  
*E* (1996) an encore piece for solo guitar.  
*Dreamchild* (1994/5) a song cycle for soprano and large ensemble (flute, clarinet, soprano saxophone, alto saxophone, two trumpets, trombone, two marimbas, vibraphone, celesta, glockenspiel, untuned percussion, harp, piano, and bass guitar).  
*One-Nil* (1994) a fanfare for brass quintet.  
*Glassblower* (1994) music for contemporary dance scored for soprano saxophone and strings.  
*Tempo of Three Quartered* (1993) for three eight-part guitar orchestras.  
*Dances* (1992) for flute and guitar.  
*Saviour of the World* (1992) an English anthem for double choir and organ.  
*The Snowbeast* (1992) a music drama written by Amanda Brennan, choreography by Jane Turner, with music by Martin Jacklin and Stephen Goss.

*Three Welsh Folksongs* (1991) for voice and guitar.  
*Madrugada* (1991) for solo guitar.  
*Under Milk Wood Songs* (1991) for soprano and guitar.  
*Under Milk Wood Variations* (1989) for narrator and four guitars.  
*Variations for Solo 'Cello* (1986) based on the sarabande from Bach's Cello Suite BWV 1011.  
*Three Miniatures for Guitar* (1986) for solo guitar.  
*Hymnen an die Nacht* (1985) an orchestral song-cycle for solo Mezzo-soprano and solo Baritone.

#### Discography

*Carmen Fantasy* Tetra Guitar Quartet, Hallmark Music 30368 01532 (May 1999)  
*Stephen Dodgson: The Selevan Story* The St Levan Ensemble, playing the complete guitar ensemble works of Stephen Dodgson, ESG Records (1999)  
*Vivaldi's Four Seasons* Tetra Guitar Quartet, Carlton Classics 30366 000692 (May 1997)  
*Red Leaves: Music by Lutyens and Saxton* with the Brunel Ensemble, Cala Records CACD77005 (1996)  
*The Choirboy's Christmas* with Anthony Way and the St Paul's Cathedral Choir, Decca 455 050-2 (1996)  
*By Arrangement* Tetra Guitar quartet, Conifer Records CDCF903 (1993)  
*Songs from Britain and America* with Jenevora Williams, soprano, Tantallon Records 0031 (1993)  
*TETRA* Tetra Guitar Quartet playing new music, Tantallon Records CDDDB2 (1991)

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