

# TONIC

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## EDITORIAL

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As most readers will know, Robert Simpson resigned from the BBC staff in 1980. Shortly after this he was interviewed by Lewis Foreman, covering a vast number of topics, including his early beginnings and musical training, his thoughts on past and contemporary music and music-making, on well- and little-known music, on recording music, fan letters, sponsoring, the BBC etc etc. This interview remained unprinted until last year when it was published in the British Music Society Newsletter No. 106, June 2005, pp. 314–320, and No. 108, December 2005, pp. 379–383. Lewis Foreman has kindly looked through the publication and added an introduction and a footnote. Together with Terry Hazell, who also supplied a footnote, I have been able to delete most of the remaining printing errors, adding some editorial remarks of my own as well. Sadly, a few flaws have remained for which I must apologize but they derive from the original tape. We are very grateful to Angela Simpson, Lewis Foreman, and the editor of the British Music Society Newsletter, Rob Barnett, for reproduction permission.

It is somewhat surprising that again and again original contributions by Robert Simpson turn up. As long as there is no full biography, they provide invaluable insights into his life, works, and personality.

Jürgen Schaarwächter



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DR ROBERT SIMPSON AT CEDAR COTTAGE, CHEARSLEY,  
NEAR AYLESBURY, 3 NOVEMBER 1980  
INTERVIEWED BY LEWIS FOREMAN

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Lewis Foreman recalls:

In 1968 I persuaded Leslie Head to programme Havergal Brian's *Wine of Summer* at one of his Kensington Symphony Orchestra concerts. The concert ultimately took place in December 1969. To obtain the score, which was and is in the British Library, I approached the BBC Music Librarian, John Davies, who used his influence to get a microfilm from the British Library more speedily than might otherwise have been the case. It must have been John Davies who introduced me to Robert Simpson, easily accomplished as both their offices were in Yalding House in Great Portland Street.

Bob was very friendly from the start, unlike some of his BBC contemporaries at the time, and he seemed quite willing for this young unknown to spend time chatting in his office. The BBC layout for producers' offices then took the form of two large tables placed together. Bob sat at one of them, and facing him over her typewriter at the other was his secretary, Angela Musgrave (later Mrs Simpson). When the phone rang Angela would answer and would silently mouth to Bob the identity of the caller and if he shook his head she would diplomatically placate the caller promising a return call later.

That first Havergal Brian concert with Leslie Head was taped and I recently listened to the tape again and was amazed at the quality of the performance and the interpretation, despite a goodly number of rough edges from the largely student orchestra. Bob was there and after the concert he complained that it was not quite good enough. 'We did the whole concert on £150' I told him. 'Well you shouldn't' he retorted. This was typical for his uncompromising seeking for the highest standards. Nevertheless despite this we remained on good terms and more Havergal Brian ensued.

Over ten years later, the interview with Bob reproduced below took place at his home at Cedar Cottage at Chearsley, a village near Aylesbury. I remembering entering the house from the wide and open garden, the central feature of which was Bob's telescope which thus had a wide uninterrupted sweep of the southern sky, without street lights or the night time city glow of Aylesbury only a few miles away.

**LF:** Well, Bob Simpson, why do you compose?

**RS:** Impossible question. (laughs) I've always wanted to compose. In fact the only reason I can offer, if it is a reason, is that it strikes me there must be a kind of music which doesn't exist and so I want to fill the gap. I want to supply what doesn't exist. You know what it is like when you discover a composer you have never come across before - you suddenly find out it's marvellous. Like when I found Nielsen for instance, it seemed to me that I always knew that music existed. It ought to exist somewhere, and there it was. There is also a kind of music which ought to exist which you haven't really any hope of

finding unless you write it yourself, or try to. That, basically, is it I suppose.

**LF:** Is it a compulsion?

**RS:** Absolutely.

**LF:** What is the nature of the compulsion? What triggers the compulsion?

**RS:** What triggered it in the first place, what triggers any creative urge? Well, as a kid I suppose I must have been musical. The only thing that makes you want to compose is having heard music. If you've never heard any music in your life, if you were brought up deaf or completely isolated from any possibility of music, it is extremely unlikely that you would want to be a composer. It's very likely, for instance, that you would invent the idea of music. It seems to me that you become a composer because you hear music and you want to make some of that. And if you naturally have the talent you're drawn to it.

**LF:** Would you go along with Holst's idea that probably the majority of people could be composers but aren't brought up to articulate what they have innately?

**RS:** Well, I suppose most people are musical basically. That's why music appeals to so many people. Even the crudest kind of music appeals to vast numbers of people who therefore satisfy primitive musical urges. I don't mean 'primitive' African music or anything like that. I mean pop music, the most brutish kind of music which goes belting around commercially all over the world, and which is playing on the crudest musical instincts of people which is there. Just as all children are good at drawing and painting and it somehow seems to leave them when they become distracted by other things which seem to them more important. I suppose there are only a few musical people who actually become creative.

**LF:** More and more in fact. Is the sheer fact or numbers likely to conflict with them. It's estimated over 500 in the UK, several thousand in the USSR, the same in the States.

**RS:** You mean more and more are becoming composers?

**LF:** So many that they are now flooding the market.

**RS:** I'll tell you what I think is one reason. You might think this a cynical answer, but I think it's true that this is the first period in history when in order to be a composer it is not necessary to be a musician. This is true of any of the Arts. – In the old days you had to be some kind of musician. You had to know what you were doing. 90% of the composers in say Haydn's time are not worth much but they were all good craftsmen, all good musicians. They wouldn't have got a job if they hadn't been. Haydn only considered himself a craftsman; he didn't think very much about himself as a world shattering genius – he was just doing a job, the same job all the others were doing, only better. But now, since the confusion of the twentieth century, the speed with which things are continually changing and the enormous threats which hang over everybody's head – I think there's an anti-Art movement in operation in which, if you have expertise, if you have knowledge, if you've got experience, practical craft experience, then you're somehow suspect. In other words, the accent is on instinct – or rather on impulse more than deep instinct – 'Do what you like and see what happens'. Or even better: Get other people to do what they like and see what happens. You still collect the Performing Right Society money. This is happening on an enormous scale all over the west and it's creeping into the Communist countries now as their artistic standards are less rigid than they used to

be; in Poland, for instance. It's a great danger I think. Don't think that I'm being at all cynical in saying this: that this is the first time when in order to be an artist you don't have to master your craft. You don't have to master your materials. You don't have to understand much about them. All you do is something at random and you hope – you don't even hope, actually – you just see what happens. The idea of a 'happening' is now old hat.

**LF:** What you're saying might well apply to a lot of the avant-garde in fact.

**RS:** A lot of the so-called avant-garde – derrière-garde, I think they are. I've often thought of suggesting, when I was on the BBC Staff ... I thought of suggesting a series of programmes called 'Last Week's Composer'.

**LF:** You wouldn't care to name any of last week's composers?

**RS:** No, why should I? They should be obvious to everyone. The trouble is people are afraid of saying 'This is rubbish'. Half the critics get conned by all this. This also has a disastrous effect in alienating the public from contemporary music, because the public rather tends to assume that if there's a contemporary work on the programme that it's going to be something like *that*. And so they just don't turn up in droves. In fact the contemporary composer is really stirring up apathy – to use a hackneyed phrase.

**LF:** Shall we resume your personal career. You were saying as a child – when did you first encounter music?

**RS:** When I was a boy my parents were in the Salvation Army. I found myself in a brass band at a very early age playing the cornet. I got very interested, naturally, in this. I went on playing in the brass band. I played every instrument in a brass band except the trombone and that was because I never really bothered to learn the shifts of the slide. All the others had the same three valves and they all worked [the same system], all you needed was a different embouchure. So I never actually got around to the trombone but all the other brass instruments I learnt, so I know quite a lot about brass.

**LF:** That's very evident from your brass pieces.

**RS:** And then I joined the school orchestra and played the horn and the trumpet.

**LF:** Which school was it?

**RS:** Westminster City School. It was an ordinary grammar school. It had a good orchestra actually. There used to be a competition for school orchestras every year. I don't know if there still is, but there used to be then. We used to either win it or come second every year. It was always held at the Queen's Hall's. I played horn and trumpet as required when numbers were a bit low, as they sometimes were. We actually broadcast once – my first time in Maida Vale Number 1 studio at the age of about 15 – and I played the horn and the trumpet in that same concert. In fact I was terrified because the concert started with the Trumpet Voluntary which I had to play right at the very beginning. Then I did a little bit on viola and cello just to find out how they worked. It was a bit too late to become anything of a player. Similarly, I came very late to the piano. So I'm not a pianist. I can just knock around on the piano for my own purposes but I wouldn't dream of letting anyone else hear me do it. So although I was really a very good trumpet player – I studied eventually with George Eskdale, I had quite a lot of lessons from him – my parents wanted me to be a doctor.\* I actually did the beginning of medical studies, at least,

\* Simpson's mother, Helena, was a trained nurse and his maternal grandfather had been a medical missionary in the Dutch East Indies (TH).

pre-medical studies. Then I found myself writing music during the lectures. In the end I had a glorious row with my parents and gave it up, and took to music. I had lessons during the war. I was a Pacifist during the war, so I was working on Civil Defence and out of the pay I took lessons from Herbert Howells in harmony and counterpoint, just so as I could take a degree because I was very anxious to demonstrate to my parents that I meant business, that it wasn't all a pipe dream. In order to convince them I had to get some sort of qualification, because that's all that really meant anything to them.

**LF:** So this was an external degree.

**RS:** Yes. I took an external degree when I was at Durham and then later on the D. Mus. For all the academic work I went to Hull. So I never really had any extensive composition lessons from him, it was all academic stuff in order to get through these hurdles. I, of course, showed him one or two tentative efforts at that time and he was very kind and helped me a lot. But I never actually had any lessons in composition as such from him, or from anyone else for that matter.

**LF:** What was your first work?

**RS:** The first work that was published was the Piano Sonata [in 1946]. It was the first thing I took at all seriously. I took it a great deal more seriously when it was published than I do now.

**LF:** Was there anything earlier than that, that you're willing to acknowledge now?

**RS:** Nothing. That's the earliest work I'll own up to.

**LF:** What sort of things were you writing before that?

**RS:** I wrote lots of things. I wrote four symphonies – so called symphonies.

**LF:** Nobody ever played them.

**RS:** No. They don't exist, now. I destroyed them. I wrote lots of songs at one time – I tried to. Mostly to German poems – I couldn't really cope with English poetry. I've always had a bit of a block with words. Then I wrote also chamber music of various kinds – all sorts of things I attempted. But none of it exists now, I got rid of it all.

**LF:** Did you have particular models?

**RS:** My great enthusiasm was always Beethoven. My first great thrill in music was Beethoven when I was about 14, except for the much earlier brass band type music. My first experience of serious music was Beethoven.

**LF:** It's strange. Some of the other composers I've talked to have admitted something I should never have thought they would admit to. They've had a great experience which was hearing a given work and that started them off. Tony Payne's great experience was Brahms 1st Symphony when he was about 14.

**RS:** With me it was the Pastoral Symphony – very similar I suppose. I don't know whether that decided me to be a composer. I don't think so because even before that I was trying to write music in a rather hopeless kind of a way. My first attempt at composition was Variations on 'Annie Laurie' for the cornet and I couldn't write an accompaniment for the piano because I just didn't know how. So I got a chap to play Annie Laurie by ear on the piano over and over again while I played all the twiddly bits on the cornet. I was about nine or ten then I suppose, I can't really remember. So I did really want to try and compose and then Beethoven hit me right in the midriff and I didn't know what had hap-

pened really. That really put me in a state of conflict because my parents had been continually saying 'you are going to be a doctor' and now I had this thing. I had accepted the idea that I was going to be a doctor, you know. But then I just found I was getting more and more involved, obsessed really, with music and it's never left me. I still am. I'm just as much obsessed with the urge to compose now as I was then. In fact I would say more.

**LF:** Is your career just the appearance of the works that we know, or was there more to it than that?

**RS:** I don't know about more to it. Every work is the final result of a rather complicated process which I couldn't really describe. I don't have many bosh shots these days, really. I occasionally revise things but there are only two cases of really drastic revision which I've done – or rather, which I want to do. One of which I've done: the 4th Symphony slow movement. I've revised that. It hasn't been played yet in that form. And I want very much to revise or even re-compose the fiddle concerto.

**LF:** I was going to ask you about that. I've been playing that over the last couple of days. I've got a tape of that Ernest Element performance.\*

**RS:** Yes, that's the only one. In fact my tape of it is not playable.

**LF:** I compare that to your Piano Concerto and frankly I think the Piano Concerto is the work I like least of yours. I don't think it works. But I think your Violin Concerto is super.

**RS:** Well I think that is my least satisfactory piece.

**LF:** Why?

**RS:** Well, that's something I can't really explain.

**LF:** Is it a formal thing? Or something to do with the orchestration? Or is it structural?

**RS:** Yes, it's the basic idea behind it – I don't think it works. I don't think I've extracted from the material what is in it. I think it's an entirely unsatisfactory piece. The Piano Concerto – I'm not all that happy about it myself. On the other hand when I look at the score of it I'm reasonably satisfied with it. And both times – it's only been played a couple of times – both times the orchestral contribution was very, very bad and I still have a feeling that it would come off if it were really well performed; that the relationship between the soloist and the orchestra would come off. But in the case of the fiddle concerto I don't think anything can save it except starting at square one again. And I think that is the only work of mine that I do want to get at. The others, on the whole, though I feel I'm learning all the time, on the whole I think they represent fairly accurately what I was like when I put them down.

**LF:** You're quite happy with them?

**RS:** Well I wouldn't say I was very happy ...

**LF:** It seems to me that there are two attitudes. You could be a composer who is only interested in the current work and really cringe when you think of some of the previous ones but you can't be bothered to think about them and they exist because they exist and that's an end to it. Or you might be somebody who sits back and is very proud of them and is happy to listen to them at any time. We had both reactions. Which is your position?

**RS:** I find I'm in different frames of mind at different times really. Sometimes if I hear a

\* City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Adrian Boult, 25 February 1960 (LF).

\*\* Sadly, the rewriting of the Violin Concerto never materialised (JS).



work like the First Quartet I really am astonished at how good it is. In fact I sometimes say to myself 'How did I manage to do that?' And another time when I listen to it I find myself picking holes in it. I think this is natural enough. You develop all the time; you change, you get new ideas and the past things seem to be merely a stage in a process.

**LF:** Listening to your series of quartets at Brunel – did you go to them all?

**RS:** Yes.

**LF:** I was in the States, so I didn't in fact go to any of them. Nevertheless I've heard them all except the second. You must have almost seen your career passing in front of your eyes.

**RS:** Yes, well, it was a rather fascinating narcissistic exercise! But I was very interested to listen to them in order like that because each time I said to myself 'What had I *not* learnt then'. And then the next one I said the same and when it came to the last one I said to myself 'What have I still not learnt; what is there left?'

**LF:** Is this purely on a technical level?

**RS:** No, this is on an artistic level. Basically I suppose, composing is trying to find out what is in the material you're using. A 'germ' – I'm a great one for the germ idea really. A few notes can suggest volumes, they can suggest the universe – if you can find out what's inside it. And the whole process is being able to find out. I suppose more and more you develop the ability to search the possibilities of materials. This sounds very dry but this intercourse is very exciting, very thrilling.

You can find out what a perfect fifth can do, what it can imply, what it can suggest to you. I'm becoming more and more interested in the simple intervals; in the basic content of the simple intervals – what they suggest, what they imply, what you can make them grow into.

**LF:** I'm interested in what you say when relating your own music, compared to the similes you use when describing other people's music. In that Sibelius and Nielsen booklet\* you're using astronomical similes. Is there any non-musical component or imagery in your work?

**RS:** Not deliberately, no. If there is, it occurs to me afterwards. The second movement of the Third Symphony for instance wasn't composed with anything in mind, but afterwards I recalled an experience of waking up in the morning and hearing life gradually gather itself together. The little birds singing and so on – the dawn chorus. And a sudden explosive feeling of vitality when I just couldn't lie in bed any longer, I just had to get up. And I realised that that was probably behind that piece. The only place where I had definite ideas – well there's more than one piece actually – there's a brass band piece called *Volcano*. Well that's obvious isn't it? You won't have to ask questions very much about that. The brass band people love things with titles and it means something illustrative to them. Then *Energy*, another brass band piece. Energy is a simple component of music, isn't it, a natural part of music? But the only case where I did deliberately set out to be descriptive in a way, was in the second movement of my last Quartet, Number 8, which is dedicated to one of the great authorities on the mosquito in the world. I found in his book on the mosquito listed among about 3,000 different kinds of mosquito one named

\* *Sibelius and Nielsen*, London 1965 (JS).

after him. So I wrote a little Scherzo in this quartet called that. And I didn't tell him about it, he read it in the programme at the concert. So that was in the way of a little compliment to a dedicatee and a joke. It's a short Scherzo which is very mosquitoish but I don't suppose I got the anatomy very well.

**LF:** So I take it you've never been tempted by background music for television, radio, film music etc?

**RS:** I've done some incidental music to a couple of plays. Again, that was when I was asked to.

**LF:** Which ones were they?

**RS:** One was Ibsen's *The Pretenders* which I did for the Canadian radio, and another was Milton's *Samson Agonistes* which strictly speaking isn't a play but was dramatised at Chalfont where, of course, Milton was born and I did it for that. But I don't know I would try to rise to any challenge that was offered me. For instance, I've never thought of myself as – and I don't expect anybody else has ever thought of me – as a ballet composer. But if I was offered the chance to write a ballet, say to Heine's scenario for a ballet for 'Faust' which is really very marvellous and not very well known, I would certainly have a go at that with enormous excitement.

**LF:** But to come back to the vocal thing, here's a tremendous vocal tradition and you seem to be the odd man out. Is that right?

**RS:** In a way, I suppose I am.

**LF:** Do you see yourself as part of a British tradition at all?

**RS:** No, not really. I'm only half English anyway. My mother was Dutch so I'm not really an ordinary Englishman in that sense. My feeling towards the English vocal tradition is one of respect towards it, rather than any desire to be part of it. I've great respect for words, for poetry for instance. If I read a poem which moves me very much and which strikes me as very perfect, I find I can't contemplate spoiling it by setting it to music. Schubert would take anything you know, and it just wouldn't bother him, but it worries me. And if the words don't inspire me to that extent, I don't want to set them anyway. This has always been a problem. The only vocal piece which I've done in recent years has been a Motet for the local choral society here [the Aylesbury Choral Society] and that was with wind accompaniment. I couldn't find anything that I really wanted to set, so I wrote some words of my own. Remembering what Nielsen did with the *Hymnus Amoris*, I had someone translate them into Latin. I was able to set that much less self-consciously. There's something very objective about Latin, so I was able to do that.

**LF:** What was the piece? I haven't come across that.

**RS:** It's a piece called *Media Morte in Vita Sumus* meaning 'In the midst of death we are in life', the reversal of the old burial ceremony 'In the midst of life we are in death'. I think 'In the midst of death we are in life' – in other words everything that we do, it doesn't matter how unimportant it is, is, in fact, very important. However unimportant it may seem, it is important because you cannot do anything in the company of your fellow men without creating an impression, without leaving some impression. So everybody regardless of whether he is a genius or an idiot or whatever, his existence in the world is enormously important. And when he dies, the impressions that he's left on the people who

have known him still exists. That's what I meant by 'In the midst of death we are in life' and not anything to do with life after death in the religious or mystical sense. Purely a simple, practical morality that whatever you do is of vital importance. So I just put these English words as succinctly as I could and got them translated into Latin, which of course is a very musical language to set. Another time I really do want to write a very large choral work with orchestra on a very large scale, perhaps on that theme expanded from some evolutionary idea of the evolution of the earth and the birth of life and intelligence and the dangers.

**LF:** Is it the sort of work that you've got half in your mind already? Do you know how it's going to start?

**RS:** No. It's just an abstract, just an idea which I would like to attempt one day. I might perhaps get someone to help me with the words, to help me find a way to organise the text in such a way that it's a complete developing growth in parallel with what it's meant to illustrate. Finishing up with a real warning about the obvious.

**LF:** We were talking about tradition and that you don't really see yourself as part of the UK tradition or British tradition, but looking at the scene here can you still see a discernible tradition now, or is it fragmenting? Or is the tradition continuing regardless?

**RS:** It's very hard to say because when you're very close to composers, the products of the present time, when you're very close to them it's hard to see them in the context to which they may actually belong. This is obvious isn't it? It's very difficult to take something unfamiliar and say that it's obviously part of the English tradition. If at one time you took ...

**LF:** Tippett's the best example, isn't he?

**RS:** In a way, yes. But if you go back a bit further, if you go to the generation before that, well not the generation before but the stage before – if you take two contemporaries, say, Vaughan Williams and Holst. When they first appeared, they appeared much more different from each other and from their predecessors than they do to us now. So I think it would be very difficult to, say, take two composers of about the same generation, such as Maxwell Davies and John McCabe – they seem enormously different – but who knows if they will seem so different in a 100 years time. Assuming antiquarians dig up Maxwell Davies. Don't quote that!

**LF:** I know you have opinions on what shall we call the advanced part of the scene. Is there anything you would like to say about it?

**RS:** No, apart from what I've already said about the element of the con trick on the whole. The fact that people are taken in and made to fear to express an opinion. The critics are most of all conned in this sense.

**LF:** You referred to them once as 'the cretics'.

**RS:** That was a misprint I saw which I was quoting, actually.

**LF:** It was very good.

**RS:** But the poor blighters are trying to do their job. I don't think that it's a job that ought to be done. Their job ought to be really to write serious things about music, to interest people in music. To tell them for instance to go to a concert and hear this or that, rather than tell them afterwards what one person thought it was like. As for the avant-garde, I

would say this much, that I do believe that anything is possible. That, given sufficient imagination and skill and application, concentration on what you're doing, determination, literally anything is possible. So I would not rule out any idiom. It's ridiculous to talk about idioms and it's absolutely ridiculous to talk about an 'advanced' idiom. What the hell is an 'advanced' idiom – there's no such thing really. Only the thought is advanced, not the idiom. Shakespeare spoke the same language as everybody else, but what's advanced is not his idiom, it's what he thought and the thoughts that come out of his use of the idiom. So what your idiom is doesn't really matter. After 30 years work in the BBC, listening to all kinds of music, and reading scores of all generations and nationalities, I've come to the conclusion that what matters entirely is integrity, imagination and skill. I don't care two hoots what the so-called idiom is. It makes me very angry when idioms are excluded by certain people because they don't measure up to certain fashionable yardsticks. I would be as happy to include the most wild way-out avant-garde piece in a concert if I thought that it had the kind of integrity and skill and imagination which I think is necessary. I have heard pieces which impressed me that there may be something there. On the other hand, the vast majority of them are rubbish. Inevitably rubbish because the vast majority of people are not geniuses. That's all there is to it. But they're all trying to be geniuses now. All trying to baffle each other and the simplest way to baffle other people is to baffle yourself. There was a day in Wagner's time, in Beethoven's time when it was the genius who was baffling other people because he was disconcertingly different and unusual. Now they're all trying to baffle other people, be geniuses, be different from each other, and the result of that is that they are all the same. It's a curious thing that this present time, this present age, which started by being so individualistic is now turning into a sort of grey soup with very few live things actually swimming in it. I find this very saddening and depressing, but I wouldn't go along with your title and call it a predicament. It's not a predicament for me, I find I just go on and compose the kind of music I want to do. The real predicament is the human predicament, not the composers' predicament; particularly it's the artists' predicament.

**LF:** What I meant by predicament was the problem of becoming established and getting published etc., which we will move on to very shortly. Let me ask you one final question in this area. Do you dream music?

**RS:** No. I don't ever remember.

**LF:** What about your use of the keyboard in composing?

**RS:** If I only wrote what I can play it would be very simple stuff on the whole.

**LF:** But do you use it at all?

**RS:** Yes; I mostly keep away from it simply because I do believe very strongly, again this is another thing I've got about what's happening nowadays, I do feel very strongly that it's very necessary to hear mentally what you write. I've had too much of it. I've had so many composers come into the studios at the BBC not knowing what it's going to sound like. They come curious, wondering what it's going to sound like. Things go wrong and they don't even know. I do believe that it is essential that you do know what you are writing on the paper and that when you do put it down on paper, you can hear it in your head. Sometimes it's very difficult because you may find yourself running into complex-

ities which take quite a bit of sorting out. For instance, putting something down on paper that you've imagined is a process of analysis, then synthesis. You say to yourself: 'Well, what *is* that sound? What *constitutes* it? What are the *notes* in it? What are the *instruments*? How is the balance? What *exactly* are you imagining, in fact?' You have to analyse what you are imagining. Some of it's very very difficult when you're simply faced with paper, and then it is [up to] you to check up on it in a sense by turning to the piano.

**LF:** Is this harmonic checking up?

**RS:** Harmonic sometimes and maybe the lines – parallel ...

**LF:** It seems to me that the one area where a composer justifiably may run into trouble ... Take, for instance, that beginning of the opening of the Havergal Brian Second Symphony: flute triads and timps. You can end up with just a muffled soup. I can imagine what I think he *imagined* but to actually try to bring it off in a performance – I suspect he didn't mean quite the sort of sound it actually makes.

**RS:** Yes, but then you're thinking of actual timbre, the orchestral instrumental sound. But the first thing you try to get right is the notes.

**LF:** So you don't think straight into the full score.

**RS:** Yes I do and he did too. Well, he did in a way, but he wrote it all out in short form first. But you first of all get the sound. There's no doubt that he imagined in his head the pitches involved and all that. What he perhaps miscalculated, or maybe some performance one day will show that he didn't miscalculate, are the actual timbres and the balance between the various instruments.

**LF:** It seems to me that some composers compose in black and white and then colour it in and some compose colour pictures from the start.

**RS:** They do. But I have to compose an orchestral work straight into full score. I don't write a reduction first because I must hear all the instruments individually, and see them where they are and hear them together in my mind. It helps me separate out everything if I can see it before me on the full score and know just where the things are going. I tend to think rather polyphonically so I want to know where every line is going and if it's on a particular instrument I want to know where that instrument's going to take it, or whether it's going to hand it over to something else.

**LF:** And do you ever have recourse to players of the instruments to find out whether they think something is possible?

**RS:** Yes, I've often asked players whether this particular bit is possible, or asked them these general questions about technique. This is the way you have to learn. Although another way to learn is simply by listening. If you listen a great deal to players of instruments, you somehow instinctively get to know what's practicable. I've always found it works that if you can imagine it very clearly it'll be playable. It's when you can't imagine it played on that instrument that it's most likely not to be playable.

**LF:** I imagine long hours spent in the Balance Room help as well.

**RS:** Yes, years and years of it spent in the BBC, listening to all kinds of instrumentalists. Auditions as well; everything.

**LF:** Tell me about sketches. Do you use sketches at all? Do you keep a sketchbook?

**RS:** No. I usually start at the beginning. As Edmund Rubbra says: 'Start at the beginning

and go to the end', which seems to be a logical way of composing. But sometimes in the middle, or sometimes even at the beginning, when I'm not sure how to shape something either rhythmically or melodically. Composing is so much a matter of timing. Everything has to be the right timing. You have to hit the exact point at the right time. Sometimes the whole shape and organisation of the melodic line can land you in the right place or the wrong place. It's then I might resort to sketching in single lines on a piece of paper, which I then throw away when I've finished with it.

**LF:** If you have a good idea you just keep it in your head, do you?

**RS:** Usually, if what seems to be a good idea occurs to me I let it simmer for a bit. If it disappears, it's not a good idea. If it stays then I can't get rid of it, so the chances are I shall want to go on with it.

**LF:** Lennox Berkeley's comment was that as soon as he gets an idea he jots it down, if only on a fag packet, because he knows he's going to forget it, and he just accumulates ideas that way.

**RS:** We're all different. Again he had the advantage of me in a sense because he's always been able to compose all the time. I've always been doing a full time job for the BBC and had to compose in my spare time. So I really haven't had the time or the means to jot down things any old where. Usually there are bits of music going on which makes it a bit difficult. I've always felt that if an idea occurs to me and it survives all that, then there may be something in it. If it doesn't, then maybe it wouldn't have survived anything, anyway. But now things are different. I'm going to work regularly.

**LF:** A full time composer?

**RS:** Yes. I might work differently perhaps.

**LF:** Have you got any works in progress?

**RS:** I've just finished a Sonata for 2 Pianos for Eden and Tamir.\*

**LF:** A big piece?

**RS:** Sort of 23 to 25 minutes or so. A one-movement thing, continuous anyway. Sort of fast, slow, fast.

**LF:** Is it inspired or prompted by their particular sort of playing?

**RS:** In a way. I know them well. They asked me if I would write them something. I know their playing very well. It always helps me to compose something for people whose playing I do know. It sharpens the imagination to be able to actually hear them playing it, rather than some fictitious or mythical player.

**LF:** Anything else in view?

**RS:** I've got to do another quartet for the Delmé Quartet which I'm very much looking forward to doing, and another symphony.\*\* That again is not a commission. But, as you know, it's the one that I might have written for the Proms under other circumstances. I'm going to write it anyway because I've got ideas for it and I want to do it. So they're the next jobs.

**LF:** Talking in terms of jobs, what speed do you work at?

**RS:** It varies. It varies considerably. Sometimes fast. Sometimes I get stuck.

\* Recorded at BBC studios in Birmingham on 2 December 1981 and first broadcast on 6 January 1982 (LF).

\*\* Simpson talks here about the *Haydn Variations* and the Eighth Symphony (JS).

**LF:** Two works a year? One work a year? How many pages a day?

**RS:** I haven't got yet into any kind of routine that I can describe, I tried all the time that I was working at the BBC always to try to produce at least one major work each year. On the whole, I succeeded. There are one or two gaps, but on the whole I think I managed it, and in later years more than one. Now what I want to do is to try settling down to composing regularly. Regular hour every day like Trollope did – so many hours a day and just see what happens. I'm not going to have any targets or anything, I'm just going to see what happens.

**LF:** You'll still be tied up with a publisher for them. What is the business side of it?

**RS:** Lengnick's have so far published everything up to the Sixth Symphony and the Seventh Quartet. And the Seventh Quartet and now the Eighth Quartet and the Seventh Symphony Scotus are doing.

**LF:** I don't know them.

**RS:** Edinburgh. Scotus doesn't actually refer to anything Scots, it's the philosopher Scotus, but they seem a fairly lively firm and they've done a lot of British music.\*

**LF:** How did you get introduced to Lengnick's in the first place?

**RS:** Back in the early days in the 50s – '51 or so – I met Bernard de Nevis who was then in charge of the firm, he owned it. He heard my Piano Sonata and wanted to publish it. Then he did everything else after that. Then he retired. Charles Avemore's in charge in his place now. He also did the same until this point when they decided to cut down on chamber music and I thought 'Well, no need to be tied to one particular publisher.'

**LF:** Who do you see your audience as?

**RS:** I've often thought about this.

**LF:** Are you just writing for yourself and go hang it, if they want to listen it's up to them?

**RS:** No it's not like that really. I do think music must mean something to ...

**LF:** Or are you just writing for a circle of friends, and the others just happen to listen.

**RS:** No, I'm writing something which I would like to think may mean something to a lot of people because what matters among human beings is what we have in common, not what separates us. That's what's most important about us. Therefore, I don't believe for instance that you should write down anything that doesn't give you that sort of spark, that thrill, that feeling of excitement. If it doesn't do that to you it won't do it to anybody else. But when you say, who are your audience, I just think 'anybody'. Anybody musical, and who has feelings and a certain amount of intelligence; because one puts a lot of one's intellect into composing. You try to get a balance between intellect and feeling, so much so that in the end they become the same thing. Anybody who really appreciates what is done – if you listen to the C sharp minor Quartet [Op. 131] of Beethoven, you get the feeling (I do, anyway) very intense. Or to a Bach Fugue, you get the feeling that emotion and intellect are inseparable. There's no analysing which is which. This is what one aims at and to get a response from anybody else is a marvellous confirmation, or at least what you hopefully imagine is a confirmation of what you're aiming at.

**LF:** Do you for example get fan letters after performances?

**RS:** Oh yes; I've got lots of letters from all sorts of people.

\* In fact Faber Music published Simpson's Symphonies Seven to Nine, returning to Lengnick for the last two (LF).

**LF:** Any in particular which have particularly struck you or which you are especially pleased about?

**RS:** I get most pleased when it's youngsters. I had some marvellous letters from a 14 year old boy in New Zealand and another 15 year old in Canada. They show remarkable insight, real musicality and intelligence – not simply because they like my music but in general terms. This is marvellous. And sometimes I get people who write to me who don't like it. It's all very ... you don't have to take too much notice of that because if you did you'd soon get thrown off your course. And also there's the person who'll say 'It reminded me of ...', and then comes out with some composer you detest, meaning it as a compliment! They might have something in that you know, because even the things you don't like can influence you.

**LF:** What about orchestral players? Do you find that they're pro or anti for one reason or another?

**RS:** They vary a lot I think. Orchestral players if they don't like it are usually much too polite to come up and tell you. If they do like it they come up and say, usually. Sometimes they go out of their way. On another occasion an orchestra can sit there and just sight-read – it might be anything in front of them. You can't really tell what they think, or feel.

**LF:** Does this affect the actual performance?

**RS:** Yes, sometimes it does. It's hard work for the conductor to overcome that.

**LF:** What about the rehearsal time given to your works when they are performed?

**RS:** It's very rarely enough. Chamber music is a different question because of course they rehearse in their own time and they do it to their own satisfaction.

**LF:** I was thinking of orchestral works.

**RS:** Orchestral works hardly ever get enough rehearsal, certainly not the proper kind of rehearsal. The usual kind of thing that happens if you have a new symphony ... the last one of mine that was performed for instance – the orchestra saw it for the first time the day before the concert. They read it marvellously well actually. It really was an astonishing achievement in the time, but it still wasn't my symphony. I don't really think how it can be – there's no time for anybody to get inside it, or get the feel of it. Just hanging on for grim death and reading and counting like mad and keeping in or avoiding getting out. And the conductor beating as clearly as he can and helping everybody.

**LF:** Does it affect the tempo? Especially in fast passages?

**RS:** Of course. It tends to get cautious. It either gets cautious or it goes too fast because they think they can get over it better that way. Sometimes it's easier to get over a passage by rushing than it is by playing every note clearly.

**LF:** That was at the Festival Hall, wasn't it?

**RS:** Yes, Number 6. I make no criticism of the orchestra or the conductor. It's just that in the time it could not be done.

**LF:** It seems to me that when your First Symphony was recorded, that established you with a grand gesture. Did you feel that, and do you feel that that recording is important to you?

**RS:** Yes, it certainly was a landmark in away. The odd thing about that First Symphony was that it was turned down by the BBC Panel.



**LF:** Do you know who the Panel were?

**RS:** No I don't. I can't remember. This was such a long time ago, it was 1951.\* Anyway, it was turned down flat, and I then sent it to Danish Radio to Launy Grøndahl, who actually did the first performance in Copenhagen.\*\* I wasn't there; I couldn't go because I didn't have any money. I couldn't get across to Copenhagen and then they sent me a recording of it ... 78 discs because tape was still not then really going. They sent me some acetate discs of it which I then sent to the BBC and they listened to it and reversed ...

**LF:** Did you work for the BBC then?

**RS:** I was in and out. I was doing a contract job analysing the first four years of the Third Programme. So I handed in these discs and they played them and reversed their decision. Boult did the first performance in England with the LPO.

**LF:** Certainly Boult came on the scene. And what was his attitude?

**RS:** His attitude was to do the very best he could whatever the work is and not to offer an opinion or criticism – Just to get on with it, and do it. He was marvellous like that And he would take enormous pains to get inside it. Not to criticise it but try to find out what the composer really wants. He did a marvellous job on it. It was really superb, much better than the performance I got in Denmark, actually. And then the British Council picked it up and recorded it.\*\*\*

**LF:** Was that the particular championship of anyone in particular? It must have been, I suppose.

**RS:** The first person to write about my music right out of the blue was Hugh Ottoway. I didn't know him and he wrote an article in, I think it was, *Musical Opinion* about my Symphony.\*\*\*\* I forget actually if that was from the studio BBC broadcast or about the gramophone recording. I've got an idea it was about the broadcast. But I don't think the British Council picked it up from that in any case. I think it was someone from the BBC who probably drew their attention to it. It may have been Adrian Boult, I don't know.

**LF:** Going on from there, particularly the 3rd Symphony being recorded by Horenstein\*\*\*\*\* and so on, have you seen recordings as being important?

**RS:** Oh yes, they are.

**LF:** It seems to me now that we have the situation where some composers can be artifi-

\* The panel which read the Robert Simpson (First) Symphony in July 1952 was: the conductor Clarence Raybould; the composer Gordon Jacob; and the critic Mosco Carner. Raybould wrote: '... sorry I can't find any interest in it from the prely musical point of view ... I fear it has no "life". I hope I am wrong, but I must say "no".' Gordon Jacob added: 'I find this too much contrived and manufactured in spite of its obvious ability. I agree with Raybould that it fails to give real musical satisfaction. In spite of its sound and fury (in places) it relies too much on mere cleverness and not enough on musical conviction.' Mosco Carner gave it the final coup de grâce: 'My impression is that this composer has not yet reached the stage of what I would call "symphonic maturity" .... There is little feeling of organic growth about this work and it relies too much on external effects ... shows talent, but too immature as symphony to be recommended.' (BBC Written Archives R27/624). I leave it to readers to assess the assessors! (LF).

\*\* 11 June 1953 (LF).

\*\*\* The recording is nowadays available on EMI British Composers 7243 5 75789 2 9, together with symphonies by Peter Racine Fricker and Robin Orr (JS).

\*\*\*\* Ottoway actually wrote thrice on the work: *Robert Simpson: Symphony No. 1*, in: *Musical Opinion* 78/926, 1954, p. 91; *Robert Simpson's First Symphony*, in: *The Musical Times* XCVII, 1956, p. 462-465, and *Robert Simpson, Symphonist*, in: *Musical Opinion* 81/961, 1957, p. 23-27 (JS).

\*\*\*\*\* Recorded in 1970, originally available on Unicorn-Kanchana but currently unavailable (JS).

cially promoted because perhaps they've found the money to pay for their own works to be put onto disc. Clearly there's an imbalance in the whole view of the scene coming in.

**RS:** There's absolutely no doubt that gramophone recordings make a tremendous difference to the dissemination of knowledge of a composer's work. They spread around all over the world.

**LF:** If you could choose one work. If I was to say 'Bob Simpson, here's £10,000, we're going to do one of your works' which one would it be? One that hasn't been done already?

**RS:** The Seventh Symphony, possibly. It hasn't been performed at all yet.\* Oddly enough, it was composed for a gramophone record which didn't come off.

**LF:** Really? What were the circumstances?

**RS:** It was RCA wanted to do it in conjunction with this Harvey of Bristol sherry business, you know, their sponsorship of British music, they wanted to do my Second Symphony. When we discussed it it was also agreed that I should write another symphony for the same sized orchestra, which is a classical orchestra, to go on the other side of the record. I was going to conduct these myself. Then somebody came over from New York and wiped the whole slate clean and it never happened.\*\*

**LF:** But you had already written it.

**RS:** The symphony was written, yes, but not played. So it's still looking for a recording.

**LF:** So that means you actually tailored a work to fit a side.

**RS:** Yes, in a way. It's a very good thing to set yourself limits.

**LF:** Walton has gone on record as saying that if he wrote a work to last 34 minutes he would jolly well revise it to go on one side of an LP. Certain composers I've put that statement to are appalled and horrified.

**RS:** I think that's cynical too. I think he meant it cynically because he is cynical.

**LF:** Or could it just be the practical outlook of a practical musician?

**RS:** In a way. But supposing the work was perfect and it came to that length, I don't know if he would really cut it. I really don't believe that. If it was perfect.

**LF:** Vis-à-vis the BBC and your criticism of them:\*\*\* could you recap your personal feelings of dissatisfaction and how they grew up?

**RS:** Not in terms that could be published. The trouble is, what I regard as the degeneration of the BBC is on such a scale and so widely diffused that it would be very difficult to criticise it without writing or saying a very great deal.

**LF:** Are you not in fact criticising the total scene, not just the BBC but everything? As you've already said.

**RS:** This comes into it, yes. The BBC is reflecting lowering standards all round and by reflecting them, is feeding them back to the people who are giving the BBC the lowering standards. So it's a horrible feedback effect which makes worse what is already getting bad.

\* Actually at Liverpool on 3 October 1984 (LF).

\*\* On the difficulties in this matter cf. Robert Matthew-Walker (ed.), *The Symphonies of Robert Simpson*, London 1991 (JS).

\*\*\* This aspect would require a lengthy discussion of Robert Simpson's disagreement with the BBC; eventually his short polemic *The Proms and Natural Justice* was published by Toccata Press which is more illuminating than any discussion to be inserted here (LF/JS).

**LF:** You wouldn't regard this as democracy at work?

**RS:** No, I would regard this as a form of decadence. I am a Democrat; I am a Socialist. I'm not at all a sort of far right winger who bleats about decadence. But this is a different kind of decadence. This is the decadence of standards, an actual decadence of intelligence I think. The West is declining and it's like the Roman Empire, it's getting worse. And whereas the Roman Empire got swamped by the Barbarians, I think we are actually turning into the Barbarians and we're going to blow ourselves to pieces. There's not going to be anything left when it finally comes to the crunch. I look around me and see children playing in the street and I think to myself: 'I very much doubt whether they'll reach adulthood'. I feel very strongly about this. And the degeneration of the BBC I felt was contributing to this. I also felt the BBC Management consisted of people who I could no longer respect, who I could no longer acknowledge as bosses or superiors in the usual hierarchical sense of the word. I could no longer accept their authority, as I said in *The Times*, without shame. So I felt I had no alternative but to leave the place because I wanted to be free to say anything I wanted to anybody at any time.

**LF:** Is this widely felt? Are there others who feel the same?

**RS:** Oh yes. I had tremendous support from inside. When I finally did resign I had notes and letters from my colleagues from all over the country - from Glasgow, Manchester, Cardiff, Birmingham, London, everywhere. A lot of them obviously wished they could have done the same thing but it's harder for a lot of people because they've got mortgages, families and children. Not easy to just step out of a good job. In my case it was easier because I was due to retire next year and I was faced with a choice: either I leave quietly and in a rather sort of vapid way next year, or I throw a bomb now. So being a sort of natural bomb-thrower I threw one.

**LF:** Were you surprised at the reaction?

**RS:** No.

**LF:** I mean, *L'Affaire Simpson* is something which is obviously long going to remain on the horizon.

**RS:** I was surprised at the intensity of the reaction certainly; internally and externally. I got lots of letters from outside, from the public too, from all over the place. And also, rather touchingly, from some old colleagues, old retired colleagues, who'd seen it from outside and been watching things happening - or worse still, not happening. So I was surprised at that; not at all surprised at the BBC Management's reaction.

**LF:** The BBC has grown to such a point where it is just a vast bureaucracy. So it acts like a bureaucracy and is no longer a lot of individuals, which presumably it was when you first went there.

**RS:** Yes it was. It was very exciting because the Third Programme was still fairly young then and everything you did was an event. It was marvellous. The rot started I think when they started making the Music Programme last all day and it turned into a production belt and sort of high class aural wallpaper. Then the Music Division had to be enlarged and the load was enormous, producing all these programmes. Of course gramophone programmes came from another department, they're not together. This really meant that things were becoming devalued. A Music Programme, although it may very

much have interested some people, or the producer himself, may have been a very good, a very important programme, still lost a lot of its effect as an event because it was only part of a great stream.

**LF:** It also seems to me that, given the number of hours of music that goes out, it's most peculiar how the BBC still manages to steer clear of an awful lot of repertoire. By and large a lot of Scandinavian music is missed out, they very rarely touch the Commonwealth composers. Some European composers – Dutch composers never get a look-see. Only certain Russian composers get a look in and the whole of contemporary Russian music is not represented at all, I suspect because people don't know it at all. Lots of it is on LP; they could play lots of this. The evaluation of Socialist Realist music through what's been put out on LP to find the 5% that's worth listening to, would I have thought been a reasonable thing for the BBC to attempt. What's your position on that, having been one of the people who were putting it out?

**RS:** I would say this. One of the ways in which the BBC Music Division is run is the fact that the idea always has been to try and get a number of different producers with different enthusiasms, different interests and hope that you'll cover a pretty wide spectrum by giving them a reasonably free hand. Now, obviously, to fill up all those gaps by that method you would have to have a very large number of producers – more than the BBC is ever likely to have. So you are to some extent limited by the enthusiasms that actually exist. It is also a producer's job to look out for and find things that are interesting to do and try to do something about them. I tried to do this, according to my own lights. But again, there's a limit to what one person can do. I don't know really how far any attempt has ever really been made to make the BBC music output a kind of compendium of what exists. I agree with you in a way. I think there still is a lot of stuff that they could still explore, although I must say all the years I was there and the effort I made looking at Dutch music and Canadian for instance, has turned up very little.

**LF:** The current 'in' thing is the neglected composer. You must be the chief architect of the Brian revival, and there are other composers who would claim to have been neglected. Clearly you must have a sympathy in this area. Or would you say that the ones who are 'neglected' are justifiably so?

**RS:** No, no. I've never automatically said that. I've always contradicted this with some vigour. How can people know, if they're neglected, whether they're deservedly neglected? You can't tell until you examine them or hear them. When I first joined the BBC, one of the things I did was to look up all the neglected names, particularly of British music, that one knew but had never heard. I got hold of masses of scores, piles of them, I was nearly up to my neck in them: Cyril Scott, Bantock and Holbrooke and Brian – all those people. Out of them all, Brian was the only one to strike sparks out of me. I thought 'I can't really lay my hand on my heart and say I've got to make a crusade on behalf of, Holbrooke say'. But Brian, I did feel, was something astounding, and not merely because of his guts in carrying on in spite of everything. I still think he's an incredibly uneven composer. Some of his music I think is really bad, terrible. But at his best, he's got tremendous originality and that's what I was looking for. It's no good waxing enthusiastic about every neglected composer because you lose credibility.

**LF:** I appreciate that. Do you feel about the ones you have done that you were entirely justified, or do you feel that some of the dirt has rubbed off on you?

**RS:** I'm still convinced that I was right about Nielsen.

**LF:** With Nielsen you can't go wrong. But the fact that you were pushing Bruckner when he wasn't well thought of here is the same.

**RS:** I feel I was right about him. I feel I was less right about Mahler, I was pushing Mahler at one time like mad, with Bruckner, and Mahler hasn't stood the pace like Bruckner; hasn't stood the test of time for me like Bruckner has. I can't live with him any more, although I turn to him occasionally because he still fascinates me. He was such a fantastic musician. What he knew about the orchestra was nobody's business. And sometimes he can be incredibly gripping, especially those scherzos – marvellous scherzos. But I can't really take him as a person any more. The reason these people have lasted is because I didn't do anything about them until I was totally convinced.

**LF:** One question which has been raised by several people and I'm sure the readers would like to hear your comments on, is the supposed or mythical BBC black list. Several of the composers I've interviewed have felt that there's been some kind of vendetta against them, that the BBC did have a black list and these people were not to be broadcast. This is particularly in the Glock era, and may have been in earlier eras. My personal view is that it was probably a group of people with similar views who, by the nature of their views, automatically excluded people. In other words, it was an unspoken black list. What *is* the truth?

**RS:** I can assure you there is no black list. There never has been a black list. There's no such thing. I've never seen one and never had anything to do with one and I don't know anybody who did have anything to do with one. Anybody who feels excluded, or has been excluded, or neglected has been neglected because either somebody has not been interested or may positively have thought that they weren't worth troubling about. Anybody who has been played a lot may have been because somebody was enthusiastic.

**LF:** There was never any kind of Royal College of Music establishment position was there?

**RS:** Not that I know of.

**LF:** It seems to me that looking at the papers, that at some stage, perhaps in the 40s, there may well have been a position where they were all RCM people, and the prejudices which some would say were typical of that sort of establishment were reflected in the BBC at that time.

**RS:** I was never aware of anything like that. On the other hand, I never really asked people about whether they went to the RCM or the Royal Academy. It never interested me because I never went to either, so why should I concern myself about that?

**LF:** While we're on the subject of the musical establishment, what's your experience of it? Festivals, how festivals work, the Arts Council, the BBC – if you want to say anything more about the BBC?

**RS:** The only thing I really know about is the BBC because I've been actually involved in it. I've not had much to do with the festivals like Edinburgh or Cheltenham.

**LF:** I mean getting your own music played.

**RS:** I've never thought about it. I've never tried.

**LF:** So any performances which have happened did so because people have approached you.

**RS:** Yes. I can honestly say I have never approached anybody in a festival to try and get one of my works performed. If it happens I'm pleasantly surprised.

**LF:** What about with new works now? It seems to me on the London concert scene that there are so few British works being performed. Do you think that the Orchestral Concerts Board should not dole out money unless X% of British works are performed.

**RS:** Certainly I think so. I think it's particularly horrifying when a firm like one of those big tobacco firms have given £600,000 to the Philharmonia. When you read all their programmes, they're all box office programmes which don't need subsidizing anyway. So it looks to me as if the sponsors only want box office programmes; they only want full houses because otherwise not enough people see their names. So it's a vicious circle. You get no real advantage to contemporary music from these huge subsidies for public concerts. If people really want to appear civilised and get prestige, they should be subsidizing what is a little bit of a risk. Certainly gramophone records, which some of them do of course. But why should Legal and General, the insurance company, sponsor yet another set of the Beethoven Symphonies with the RPO and Dorati? Very nice for them, but surely not really a great gap in the record catalogues. A lot could be done to improve matters if commercial sponsorship is involved. I'm against commercial sponsorship on the whole because I think that any civilised country ought to support the Arts.

**LF:** I was going to ask you about state subsidy. How do you see us vis-à-vis the Eastern European system?

**RS:** I think it should be a state subsidy without political strings, implemented in such a way that political strings would be impossible. And I think this could be done. It's all very well to say you'll get one government and it will suddenly turn it into a form of pressure, but there are safeguards against that, as has been applied in all sorts of other fields in this country. I don't see why that should be an objection. But the trouble with commercial sponsorship is that it does put pressure of the kind I've been describing and certainly the wrong kind of pressure in most cases. Harvey's have been sponsoring recordings of British music, which is an excellent thing, but I haven't seen much of it for some time. The one that they were going to do of my music with RCA seems to have disappeared now and whether there are any more I don't know.

**LF:** They've certainly been issuing them. There's been Elgar and Vaughan Williams.

**RS:** Yes, again they're not really things that need doing.\*

**LF:** Let's go on to a related topic and that's the whole mechanism whereby things that aren't commercially recorded get into circulation - i.e. the private tape underground. It seems to me that there is a measurable market of people who just take things off the radio. They're not doing anyone out of anything - no fees are being lost. As a composer you're almost certainly gaining as you're getting free promotion.

**RS:** If they're being circulated.

\* Here Robert Simpson was somewhat mistaken - also recordings of works by Bantock, Bridge, Rubbra, and others were subsidised by Harveys of Bristol. The scheme however came to an end around 1980 (JS).

**LF:** They circulate them to their friends, they send them to their friends in the States and you get known. Now the Musicians' Union in particular would be very anti this and particularly with the new copyright law coming up, I wondered if you have any thoughts, as a composer who is doubtless being circulated in this way?

**RS:** I can see that there are two points of view here aren't there? The MU point of view is reasonable because in America in particular a lot of recordings are getting pirated.

**LF:** Let's forget they were pirated. Let's just assume that they've come out of being circulated by somebody who genuinely wants to hear it.

**RS:** The MU are concerned about the danger of piracy and quite justifiably. So are the copyright people. On the face of it, it is a good thing if comparatively little known works are circulated and people get to know them. A marvellous thing and I wouldn't be against that at all. But I don't know really how far it really does influence performances. I don't know, for instance, how many performances of my works have resulted from tapes being circulated among all sorts of people in America and Canada, Australia, Germany - all sorts of places. I'm not exactly conscious of a rash of performances as a result. On the other hand, you get known by these people and that's only good. I can understand the fears of the musicians and the publishers too. I don't know what the answer to it is, and I don't know what the way out is. It's going to be very difficult.

**LF:** You can't prevent it. You can only encompass it within the law. Either by charging royalties on the tape, or in some other way.

**RS:** On the price of blank tape, yes. I don't know really what the rights and wrongs are of that.

**LF:** One thing I would like to end on. I was playing your First Symphony the other day, the record. Something I didn't really notice before: it seems to me there are lots of Nielsenian mannerisms in it. Am I right in that? It sounds - not like Nielsen through and through but just the inflections. On the second side ...

**RS:** Yes, it's true. But I hadn't heard any Nielsen until I got to the end of the second part. That slow movement ... that slow movement I'd written before I heard any.

**LF:** I had worked out a hypothesis which clearly wasn't true. That I had thought Simpson found himself by investigating Nielsen.

**RS:** In a sense it was true. If you think I found myself in the first two-thirds of that work, which I think I did reasonably well, then it was without Nielsen and that merely shows that I had something naturally in common with him, I suppose. But when I got to the end of the second section of that, the slow part, I heard the *Espansiva* for the first time and the Wind Quintet. The first movement of the *Espansiva* knocked me cold. I just thought 'Well, there it is. I knew that existed', and I was hoping I might write something like that. It stopped me dead in my tracks for about six months, I couldn't write any more. Of course, inevitably, when I did get back to it, it shows, I think in the last movement, but not in a way I'm ashamed of. I don't think one should ever be ashamed of influences. That last movement is still organic to my mind. It's still growing out of the rest, the thematic material and everything. In the way it develops it all grows quite naturally. I had got a bit stuck just there, as a matter of fact. This Nielsen stopped me and at the same time started something simmering inside and it came. But I certainly don't think one should ever deny

influences or be ashamed of them, because as I said earlier, if you never heard any music you would never want to be a composer. It is what you've heard that makes you want to add to it, or supplement it, or fill in some gap that you're conscious of. So negative influences are valuable as well as positive ones. I mean I have a fascination but no love for Stravinsky. I think he is a cold reptile of a composer really, but he fascinates me in lots of ways and I feel I can learn a lot from the way he handles instruments because he has a wonderful ear, a fabulous ear, a very accurate and precise ear. One can learn a tremendous amount from that. I dislike Schoenberg, I have a great dislike of Schoenberg's personality, his mentality, his whole psychology. I wouldn't want to be with anybody like that, but I can still learn. Those influences are just as important to me as Beethoven or Nielsen or Sibelius, and people who really do fire my enthusiasm. You can learn from anything.



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