

SCOTT CANTRELL: AN INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE LLOYD (1989)

SC: Ten years ago, a performance of a George Lloyd symphony would have been unheard of. Now there seems to be a tremendous interest in your music. How did this happen?

GL: In the 50's and 60's and well into the 70's everybody in the BBC hierarchy thought that anything written by somebody who was born before 1914 – well, you just couldn't listen to it, and so they were all thrown out. The same with the people in the Victorian era, but now it's all coming back again. People realise there were some good musicians; they weren't all totally stupid. So that's better.

There is really quite a revolution going on in England at the present moment. It hasn't gotten right through to the top of the hierarchy but it's getting there. What is happening is a ferment going on amongst the very young people – young students. Most of them simply do not want to have anything to do with serial and avant-garde music. They're in a terrible predicament, because all the professors and teachers have been brought up with those ideas and that's what they want to teach. I have had numbers of quite young students knock at my door – from far and wide – and say "Well, we can't find anybody to teach us."

Mind you, the people at the top are changing – certainly the people at the BBC, which is all-important for us. And now they do accept the fact that there is a lot of music about which is not *avant-garde* which people would like to hear, so they play it.

I mean, when they started to play my things again, the first thing was my Eighth Symphony, which was in 1977. Before then, for twenty years, if I sent a score to them it just came straight back. John Ogdon, the great pianist, was about the only musician in England who thought I could do anything at all. I lent him some of my symphonies, and, unbeknownst to me, he slipped one of them through the net in the BBC. They wrote to me and said they would play the symphony. It took them eight years, but eventually it was done. I had practically given up hope, but I had such an enormous response from the public. I scratched my head, and thought, "Good heavens – I had better do something about this." So eventually things got moving. But now the whole thing is very much freed up.

SC: It's interesting that something parallel is happening in this country. We don't have anything like the BBC as a central power in this country, but I think it's happening in the universities, which have been dominated by serialists. Again, there's a younger generation that couldn't be less interested in serialism. People in this country are talking about a Neo-Romantic revolution, and all of a sudden people are writing big tunes.

GL: Yes, it's curious. But, you see, the difficulty is they really need to be based again on traditional techniques, and then you can develop from that. It's the same thing that's happened in the art

schools. After the war they just threw out their plaster casts. They said, “We don’t want any of that old rubbish.” And so for thirty years that’s what went on. Then suddenly they discovered you could paint a portrait without putting the nose on the back of the head. They can’t find their casts now – they’ve got them down in the cellars, and they’re bringing them all up again. You get it happening in literature, in painting, in architecture. You get it in architecture now – they’re putting bombs under some of these high-rise things.

Music is really the last to change. Young students want to find a way of basing themselves on traditional techniques, and they can’t find people to teach them. A couple of years ago I happened to meet William Mathias, the head of music at Bangor University, and he said to me, “Look, I get about 100 music students, and seven or eight years ago they were all writing serial. Now, I haven’t got more than two students who even look at it. They just are not interested. They all want to write romantic pieces.” It’s an amazing change, isn’t it?

SC: And then there’s the revival of interest in some of the obscure works of Arnold Bax, for example. Things are coming out on records that no one would have listened to ten years ago.

GL: That’s it. I think that people must recognise the fact that serial music has had a very long exposure now. After all, it was in 1911 that Schoenberg’s piano pieces were published. All during the 20’s and 30’s there was any amount of really dotty stuff being played. So it has been going on for a good long time, and still the public can’t get anything out of it. Now, they’re beginning to say so, and critics are beginning to wake up. Ten years ago no critic would ever dream of criticizing an avant-garde piece of music – it was as much as his job was worth – but now they do.

SC: During this period when the serialists were in power, did you ever develop a complex about being out of step with the times?

GL: No, I didn’t develop that complex because right from the very beginning I studied composition with a very liberal-minded man, Harry Farjeon. I went to him privately, because I was basically a violinist then, studying with Albert Sammons, our greatest fiddler. I used to study all this serial business with him, but I just didn’t like the sounds. I didn’t like the basis of writing discords continuously. I went my own way. Basically the influences I had were the Italian opera writers.

For a time I got right out of the music world, partly through health and partly from the experience of putting on my opera John Socman. It was such an awful experience that I said I would never put my foot inside an opera house again, and I never did for seventeen years. By that time they were wanting serial stuff, and I just thought there was no place for me. I couldn’t teach, I couldn’t think properly. I just buried myself in the country, and for several years I didn’t write anything at all. So, fine, I just earned my living at market gardening and tried to write in my own way.

SC: Now you're being called a cult figure.

GL: Well, yes, that's what they have been saying in England, which worries me to some extent. I write what I feel, but I always hope it will have a wide public and say something. I don't want to just be for a small circle of people. But that's really one of the biggest problems for composers: how to write music which is something serious musicians can appreciate as good technique but which at the same time can have popular appeal. Verdi could write great music – some of the greatest that was ever written- and at the same time he was one of the most popular people. That seems to be so difficult now because of this division between popular music and serious music.

It is difficult even to make the composers realise that people want music that they can respond to. A year or so ago they had a seminar about concert music, and they were all groaning and moaning that they didn't get enough money and people didn't play their things. So many composers have the attitude that somebody else should subsidize them. They have a gift from heaven and the money has got to fall from heaven.

I don't take that attitude, and I don't think I ever did. Perhaps it's because I had to earn my living as a businessman growing mushrooms for 25 years. I have a fairly down-to-earth attitude about finance. You've got to earn your living. If you want the public to eat mushrooms, you've got to produce good mushrooms that they'd like to eat. I got up and said, "Are we going on with this 19th-century attitude that we are Messiahs that somebody's got to look after, or are we going to go back to the attitude of the 17th and 18th Century composers who were quite willing to write either for the church or the courts?" I said, "Don't forget, some of the greatest music was written under these conditions. If composers didn't write something that their public liked or appreciated, well, they were out of a job." My goodness me, that didn't go down at all. They didn't like that.

But I do honestly think there's got to be a meeting somewhere between serious composers and the public. You just cannot go on forever with composers writing for other composers or for critics and then saying, "You've got to learn my language."

SC: You were talking earlier about the influence on your music, and you mentioned Italian opera composers. What other composers do you think had an influence?

GL: When I was quite young Berlioz had a great influence on me from the orchestral point of view, because I loved the bright sounds. I was never attracted by the deep, rich sort of Wagnerian, Germanic sounds. The way I actually write for my brass, say, is basically as the Italians wrote, or Tchaikovsky, or Berlioz. You get these brilliant sounds, which are different from the Germanic.

SC: Any English composers?

GL: When I growing up we heard an awful lot of the Vaughan Williams *Flos Campi* sort of thing – you know, the violas going um-te-dum-te-um-te-dum-te – that folksong type of thing. I just didn't

respond to that. I wasn't unique in that way at all. That's one reason why Walton became so popular, because this was to a large extent a reaction against that folk song thing.

SC: In the recording of your Fourth Symphony the annotator suggests that somehow a Celtic heritage may be at work in your music.

GL: Yes. That was Ronald Stevenson, who is himself a Scot. I never thought about it very deeply, but possibly there is something there. And I think this is one reason I wasn't very sympathetic to the English folksong movement. I was born and brought up in Cornwall and my ancestry was Welsh to a large extent, so I was basically a Celt. And they are still very different – the Celtic mind is very different to the English mind. This may be one reason why I think composers should be writing something that the ordinary public can understand. Because the Celt instinctively wants to please the other person. The Englishman doesn't care if he pleases you or whether he doesn't. It's his way, and too bad for everybody else. But in some of the Celtic languages, there is no word for "no".

We're full of these funny little things in the British Isles. There's an enormous difference between people. Myself, I never felt particularly English and this is why I could never stand the typical university, public school English people who were sitting in the thrones of power in the BBC. Different culture.

SC: Do you consider composition more a matter of inspiration or of discipline?

GL: It's both really.

SC: In the case of the symphony you've just written, how did the process go on? Were you thinking about the symphony when you were approached about the commission?

GL: In actual fact, I had started it. That doesn't make any real difference. I never accept any commission until I've had time to think about it. I had actually started this one when they came along, and I was quite frank about it. I said, "Well, look, I have started a symphony." They said, "That's fine with us."

SC: Tell me about the symphony – how long is it?

GL: Oh, it's terribly long – very nearly 60 minutes. It has five movements, and it's a big orchestra – woodwinds in threes (actually four clarinets), four trumpets, three trombones, tuba, and euphonium. The trumpets are a little unusual: I have the little one – the E flat – and then two B Flats and flugelhorn. I have a big variety of brass – I've never used quite so many as that. Lot of percussion as well: four percussion players plus the timps.

SC: What are the formats of the individual movements?

GL: The first movement is big, dramatic, volcanic. The second moment is quiet: the opening part I just have very soft brass chords, and all the fiddles are playing in unison. They have *cantible*, *cantilena* phrases. The third movement is a brilliant *scherzo*, with not all the orchestra; the fourth

movement is really a funeral march. The last one I don't know quite how to describe. It's not really quite like anything else I've done. It ends in a blaze of glory – a big tune.

SC: When writing a piece such as this do you tend to have emotional associations with the music – any programmatic connections in your mind, even if you don't want to put them on paper?

GL: Sometimes I do. I usually see pictures when I'm writing something, and with this one it was more a question of colours that affected me. It's a purely subjective thing, that doesn't mean anything at all, really. It gives me something to go on. But there's no program in it.

SC: You're going to be recording the symphony with the Albany Symphony, aren't you?

GL: Yes, we're going to do it on the Tuesday after the concert. It's being done by Conifer. They've done my Second, Ninth, and Seventh. I should think this one will come out in June or July of next year.

Recorded in Albany, New York State. 1989