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Hon President Raphael Wallfisch

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The Bigger Picture and the Building Blocks

The full interview with composer Colin Riley, October 2021

Colin tells us about becoming a composer, composing in general and *Stream-Shine* in particular.

Do listen again to the concert, which is still available on YouTube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GeQzeSuLN0A> (*Stream-Shine* starts 21:20 minutes in).

Colin, thank you for agreeing to this interview.

How did music come into your life? Did you sing or play an instrument as a child?

I grew up in a household where I heard the piano, played by my Dad, when I was going to sleep. It would be the early evening and my Dad might be playing after coming back from work. I remember hearing music in the house, even though none of my family were professional musicians. I particularly remember Mozart and Schubert being played. So I grew up with that sound, and I always wanted to learn the piano, so I did, from an early age. Then I got the opportunity through a lovely, wonderful scheme that was running in the state schools at that time to learn the cello, and very quickly the cello became my main instrument. Eventually in the sixth form, I went to a specialist school for music, Chetham's School of Music in Manchester, which was very intensive. After that I studied at York University, but gradually I realised that the real thing that I wanted to do was

compose music, not be a professional player. I think I knew that always, because when I was practising the piano, I remember when I would play a wrong note, I kind of liked it more my way, [laughing], than the way that Mozart had written it, perhaps, or Schumann or whoever it was, so I knew very early on that I enjoyed composing, and probably started composing about the age of seven, when I started first learning the piano.

So we know you were interested in composing from the start, and I read on your website that your interests from a fairly early age were in contemporary music, the new things that were going on at that moment, composers like Stockhausen, Messiaen, Cage and Boulez. Most people begin their life in music with either the classical canon, pop music or folk music or a combination of these. What was your route into this new music?

When I was seven-eight-nine-ten, all the music that I composed then, which I still have,

was small things that sounded like the composers that I was practising on the piano. So there's music that sounds a little bit like Händel, like Mozart, and gradually as I was learning larger pieces at eleven or twelve, it was sounding more like Chopin or Debussy, and then when I was about thirteen it started to sound more like somebody like Schönberg, because I was just discovering these people as I went on. And in tandem with this I was listening to a lot on the radio. My parents always had BBC Radio 3 on at home, and we would play this game where we would make a guess who the composer was. We would have to wait till the programme ended and then say, 'Rachmaninov!' or whoever it might be. I remember particularly getting more and more interested in the stuff that sounded like I had not heard music sound like before, for example Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*.

I think it just came at the right moment for a teenager. Discovering what was new-sounding music came at exactly the same moment that I was finding new things in life.

I didn't know it at the time, but that's what I think it was. And I loved finding something that none of my friends knew about. I'd have musician friends at thirteen and fourteen, and they'd be discovering things and I'd say: 'Ah, oh yeah, that's old hat; I've discovered *this ...*' and they'd go: 'Who's that? Never heard of *that*.' I enjoyed finding out something that I thought nobody else knew about.

It is also nice to have a group of friends to do that with.

Yeah, I was lucky to have a lot of people who did learn instruments. It seems to me looking back quite a golden period for education in the late seventies. I do remember a lot of my friends playing instruments, and I would be doing all these things, for example I formed a string quartet at school, and then I wasn't content with that so I founded a string

orchestra, you know, all these things that feel like quite precocious things now. I don't know what my non musician friends thought of me at the time [laughing], but I enjoyed it when I was doing it.

It just came kind of naturally.

Yes, yes.

For Stream-Shine, did you immediately know that it was going to be a violin concerto? Or could you have also chosen to write say a piano concerto or a bassoon concerto?

It was always going to be a violin concerto. It came about, as these things often do, through a set of different circumstances. I had a cd being released on the label NMC. They had a kind of launch party, and I was talking a bit about it and they had some music at the end, which was a violin duo, of which Philippa Mo was one of the performers. She had listened to what I'd said and had heard some of the music from the album, and I'd listened to her play and we both mutually enjoyed what we heard, so we got talking. After that event she played a solo violin piece by me [*The Blue Girls Have All Gone Away*] in some concerts and we got talking further. I think she may have asked, 'Would you like to write a violin concerto for me?', or I might have said, 'Do you want a violin concerto?' And in a further twist of fate, Philippa mentioned she had been working recently with a conductor called Steve Bingham, and I know Steve well, because we grew up playing music together - because he's my cousin! So that was very fortunate of course, so I said, 'Well, I'll email him and say that we are meeting and have got this idea and maybe he'd be interested.' He said he would, and that he'd got just the orchestra who might like to play it: Ely Sinfonia. That's how it started. It was always going to be - the short answer now! - [laughing] it was always going to be a violin concerto, yes.

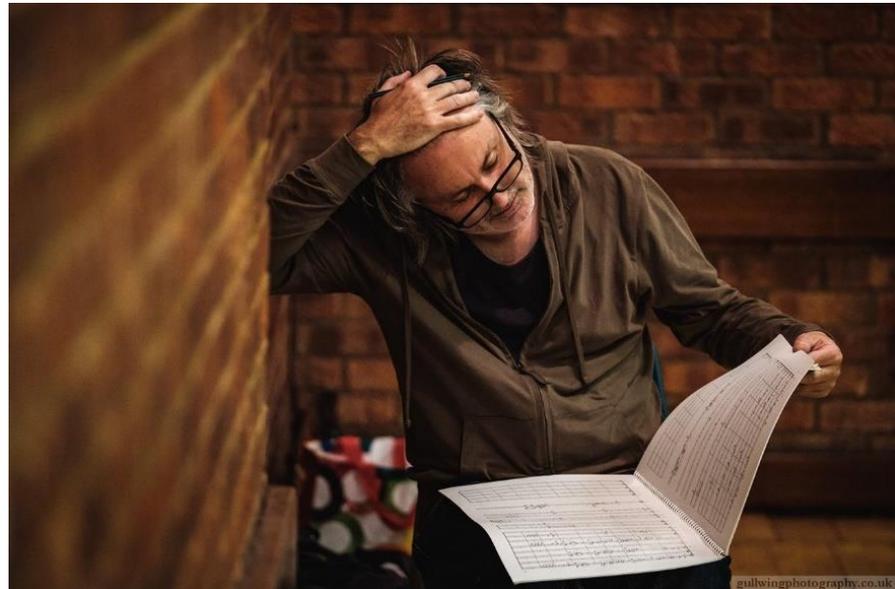
Would you say you generally have an inclination towards stringed instruments, or just any instrument really?

Yes, well possibly, an inclination to string instruments. I have written another concerto, which is actually a concerto for two cellos [*Warp and Weft*, for Guy Johnston and Gabriela Swallow] but I am currently writing a piano concerto, so it's not that I would prefer strings. I'm happy with strings because I feel I can understand when it's going to be hard or easy, and how the mechanics of say double stops or crossing strings work, so I feel at home. And sometimes that's nice but sometimes it's also really exciting to be composing for something you don't know as well, you know. So yeah, I think I write strings OK, but ... ***but we might expect other things also?*** Yeah.

In your programme note for Stream-Shine you wrote that some of the inspiration came from the sense of wonder invoked by the beauty of nature, and a particular description of sunlight and water in the poetry of Thomas Hardy. Is it important for you that the audience knows that, or can they just listen and discover?

It's both I think. I do believe that for someone coming to a piece of music for the very first time, and maybe never hearing it again – you've just got that one listen to it - it can be extremely helpful if they have a few 'ways in' to the music. I try my best to create the sort of music which will grab them in some way and take them through the music so that they have forgotten that they are actually listening

to something new. How can I describe this? If we're watching a film for the first time, that film carries us through with a story, and we forget we are watching something new, and we don't mind. But with music, I think most



Guy Carpenter, Gullwing Photography

people's listening attitude is slightly different, and they do like to hear something that they probably heard before because they get a little more out of it. I think a composer is faced with a hard job, because they want someone to enjoy it, but ideally it might grow on a listener by someone listening to it a couple of more times; with just a single listen, a programme note is often hugely useful.

But, that said, *Stream-Shine* is not the sort of piece which is specifically about one thing only. If you didn't have the programme note you might listen to it and think, 'There's some really bright sounds... there's some really beautiful elements to this... and it feels very organic and flowing.' Or you might think it's about water, or sunlight on water, or that it's about the sky and clouds. That doesn't matter to me, the very specific nature of it. I think it's just helpful for people to know what was part of my process. It's not like music that goes with a particular film and has to be just for that.

Emotionally, one part of *Stream-shine* is meant to be very beautiful, as if you were meditating perhaps and just enjoying sunlight on your face, as much as looking at something on the water. And then later, as the piece develops, there's a sense of a feeling that makes you want to dance, maybe makes you want to forget what age you are or where you are, and in a childlike way just enjoy being in that moment. A lot of the music is very playful, it is almost innocently childlike at times, deliberately so: it invokes that sense of



Colin Riley and Philippa Mo
Guy Carpenter Gullwing Photography

just losing yourself. And then at the end of *Stream-Shine* I come back to the beginning, so that there's a clear shape. This 'sitting down moment' of reflection, or of looking at water or sunlight, makes you feel childish perhaps and innocent again, and then it folds back at the end. The whole piece is really a sort of celebration of something that we all can do. You see it on lots of levels, I suppose.

So to my last question: you have been a composer for fifty years and a lecturer at Brunel University for twenty years, so you have been in the middle or at the forefront of everything new that is happening. Can you say that during your life as a composer and your years as a teacher, that there is a general direction, or movement or style,

that contemporary music is taking, or are there too many directions and are we too close to see that? Or do you think that that is actually not important?

That's a wonderful question. It's very hard. I'm in a position where, being a composer myself, making music, making art, and also teaching younger generations of composers, it's very difficult to pinpoint what is really happening, and what I think. But I will say that at this moment in time, there are so many

ways that somebody can create music; we are in an age of a kaleidoscopic nature, and I don't think that's going to change. You know, a hundred years ago - what would that be? 1921 - there were sort of stylistic confinements, where if a composer was composing music it would sound to a certain degree the same as other composers who were composing. Whereas now, not only have we got huge stylistic variations, we've got

hugely different techniques that people use to compose music, and as it's recorded, there are also different ways of recording it. So you can have one extreme where somebody's making music purely electronically, and then at the other extreme somebody else who is using old instruments, or somebody who is using voices, or somebody who's using jazz-inspired music or jazz itself, or heavy metal, or experimental stuff or stuff with folk traditions, I mean it's all there. And I see that in my students, or when I listen to the radio or when I'm online on Google finding out about some new music: there's a tremendous amount of music out there. It's quite a difficult job at times to find a way to teach when there are so many approaches. And sometimes it's a bit bewildering when you think you're going to compose a new piece, because there are so

many options. The only way that I can advise anybody is that they try to find something that they feel is about them, about how they feel about life and to try to find a way to create something new which they think they're going to enjoy listening to and that they think that other people might enjoy listening to as well. That's all I think you can do.

Because if you try to follow a fashion, you might not be following your heart, if you see what I mean. But if you try just to follow your heart all the time, maybe you just come out with the same thing every time. So you have to be quite playful with how you think about creating your next bit of music, because you might have to trick yourself into doing something, or work with somebody new, or use a new instrument you have never written for, or do something in a new way. I think that is quite important, because you owe yourself to change a little bit, to develop and have a bit of variety rather than putting the same thing out each time, just a different order of notes.

So you find new things by exploring and doing things?

I think so, yes, and listening to what other people are doing, and listening back to old music, and new music. I think I'm not in favour of one or the other, I don't necessarily have a tribe which says these things are nice but these aren't. I think it's important to absorb as much as you can.

You've answered it partly already, but can you describe, when you begin a new work, if you first think of a motif, or a melody, or rhythm, or of the colour or texture of a sound, as in which instrument, voice or material you can use to make that sound?

Yeah, I think that's a good question again. I know the answer though. Very often when a new piece is developing, brewing, [laughing] I know the very general things about a piece first. For example with *Stream-Shine*, I knew that I wanted to explore very high sounds on

the violin, so that meant that either I would be asking Philippa to play high up the fingerboard, or I might be trying to explore some of the harmonics that the violin can do. And I knew that I wanted this piece to feel as if a violinist comes on stage and literally just tries out a couple of notes, and sends them into the air. And then it's as if they're conjuring up, like a kind of magician, the music, and gradually forming it. The bow is always a bit like a wand, a magic wand, and so that is what the first two minutes of the piece is also trying to do. It's quite dramatic, and I knew that's what I wanted it to be. And Philippa said, 'Are you sure you want me to start with these harmonics?' Because it's quite an odd way of starting a concerto, and it's really tough, you know. Well I do, that's the only thing I knew I wanted it to do, I wanted it to start like that, because I thought the audience might be intrigued. 'OK that's one note... two notes... what's the next note going to be...?' I thought that was a really nice way of beginning a kind of story, if you like, or a narrative, even if it's an abstract story, that would lead people on. That, in different ways, is how I would approach all my pieces. There's something very definite that I want: if I stand back at a distance, I know that's what it will be.

But then you have to go to the tiny building blocks, to the notes, and find some of the things that this music might become. For example, a typical way that I might compose will be at a piano, where I might just be finding two or three chords, or combinations of notes, that somehow provide the mood or the sense of emotion that I think I want to encapsulate in the piece overall. And then I will come back to those and look how I made those chords, and try and make perhaps some more, like an artist would find a few colours, and then mix a few complementary colours with that. Gradually I build a page or two of possible chords that I can then come to and use in some way. I think I go to chords quite

early on. There is this big picture of what I want it to be and then I have to go into forming some building blocks.

It's all very interesting. We've already talked twice as long as I estimated! Thank you very much for your time.

Well I hope it's of interest to the Friends of the orchestra!

It definitely is. Thanks very much.

For more by Colin Riley, have a look at these links:

Colin Riley's new album: [Isolated Pieces](#), with plenty of interest and lots to listen to. It raises money for the charity Youth Music.

And his blog: [Riley Notes](#), about composing, teaching and creativity.
