



Hidden City

Judith Bingham and Malcolm Crowthers

12 July 2006

Malcolm Crowthers (MC)

(To Judith Bingham): I cannot tell you what a pleasure it is to be sharing this platform with you on the eve of the première of your very exciting new piece.

I can tell you that it is very exciting because I was at a difficult rehearsal yesterday – difficult because the BBC studio that it took place in is incredibly small and everyone was on top of each other, so to speak, yet it sounded stunning. If it sounds amazing in a cramped BBC studio, it is going to sound utterly fantastic in St Paul's Cathedral. For tomorrow night, St Paul's Cathedral will resound, for the first time, with the voices of the BBC Singers in a brand new work devised specially for them by Judith Bingham, who was a member of the BBC Singers for 12 years and was, in January this year, appointed their Associate Composer.

Judith is rare among composers, in being a professional singer writing for professional singers. She is also rare in being one of only a handful of composers who make a living from just writing music. Her music for the church has become part already of the repertory of choral services at great cathedrals like St Paul's, Westminster Abbey and Westminster Cathedral, as well as many other choirs and places where they sing throughout the country. Over the last month, Judith has been working with postgraduate composition students at the Guildhall School of Music on a project based on her own City of London commission: 'Hidden City'. We are going to discuss this this evening. The students have been busy writing pieces for wind and brass, about things mysterious and hidden in the City of London, like ghosts in Mansion House Station and the gladiatorial arena under the Guildhall Art Gallery. You can hear their pieces at the Guildhall School of Music at 1:05 tomorrow, prior to Judith's own world première in St Paul's in the evening.

Judith, you have written for St Paul's three times already so you know in your blood its famously tricky acoustics. If you are writing for a specific building, is it possible to ignore that building when writing that piece?

Judith Bingham (JB)

If I know what I am writing for, I always take it into account, partly because it is a privilege, but it is also a great pleasure to know you are writing for a very famous building. I remember when I wrote my first mass, which was for Westminster Abbey. (I started at the top; you can only go down from there!) I remember going past it on the bus and thinking, "Wow! I'm writing for that building!" It is a terrific privilege just to take that building into account but, with a building like St Paul's Cathedral, you ignore it at your peril. It will defeat you if you don't take it into account. Is it huge. It is always at least three times as big as you remember it being when you go inside.

MC

It is huge – and you hide things in it!

JB

Yes

MC

That's one of the fun things! The English have always loved punning; they have loved playing with words, and Judith plays with the word "hidden" in her Hidden City piece. It is actually written in the score that it must only be performed in equivalent buildings where you can successfully hide musicians all around it. Isn't that what you have done?

JB

Yes, because you are always thinking, with a piece, about shelf-life. I am always wondering how can I make this piece easy to do more or less everywhere but, with this piece, I decided I was just going to think of St Paul's Cathedral. It would be possible to do it in a similarly huge space but, as you say, you would have to be able to tuck a lot of people away, because probably about three-quarters of the musical forces involved are invisible, including all the percussion and most of the voices. It is not just a spatial effect, but it's a kind of spatial mystery, because often you cannot really tell what the percussion is.

MC

So actually mystery is hiddenness, as God is hidden. It is truly, in a real sense - for the audience and the musicians - an experience of hiddenness, and I mention the musicians because yesterday we were all in a room, and they all could see and hear, all too well, what each other was playing, and that was the problem, because tomorrow will not, and that is the point, because the sounds have to come from different places. Isn't that an enormous problem for the musicians, technically? The practicality of getting them all together at the point when they should be together must be huge.

JB

Yes. There are going to be three lots of CCTVs around the building, just for the musicians, so that they can see the conductor, because they cannot otherwise. I hope it is going to work, but there is quite a big element of gamble in it as to whether it will work. We did it today in a much bigger space and it worked better almost, because getting that sense of the dimensions was better.

MC

In a lot of ways, just thinking about Hidden City, a piece of music in itself is often like a city. I mean, if you think of what is essential to a city and to the buildings within it, which are very often hidden until you discover them, they are like little phrases and little sections that you get within pieces of music. They are the buildings, and everything needs a sound foundation.

JB

I always think it is an interesting thing about the Fire of London: after the Fire of London, of course, Christopher Wren had this great scheme for creating a whole new city, with boulevards and so on; he had an amazing scheme. But all the landowners came back after the Fire, and just took back their plots of land, the dimensions of which presumably were more or less invisible, but they rebuilt London to its old design. The landowners refused to go along with Wren's plans. I always think that's really interesting. It is like trying to recreate something which had been there. It is like there was a spirit there. The spirit of the city was there, and you can still follow a lot of those patterns in the modern city, even though all the buildings are different. There is still this feeling of the pattern of the streets there, which somehow a spirit of London recreates. Of course that was one of the links with Japan in the new piece, in that of course if you were in Hiroshima, virtually all of Hiroshima as it was is not there, but somehow I imagine you are very, very aware of it. You are aware of what has gone, what is lost.

MC

Which is hidden.

JB

Which is hidden, yes.

MC

So the new city is actually built on top of the old one, in that case, devastated by fire, as was St Paul's.

JB

Yes.

MC

I think you said there were seven St Paul's Cathedral buildings in London so far?

JB

There have been a lot, haven't there?

MC

All of them destroyed by fire?

JB

Yes. All of the original Saxon ones were wood of course, so they all burnt down at some point, but then the great gothic cathedral, which was in any case falling in, was falling to rack and ruin. St Paul's escaped burning down in a great fire - that was the Blitz. So there has always been fire there on that spot. It is a very fiery spot in some ways.

MC

Fire quickly hides things. If I may digress for a moment. The Monument to the Great Fire is the tallest Corinthian column free-standing apparently anywhere. It is hollow, because Christopher Wren and Robert Hooke, who were great pals (and both were Gresham College Professors) set up a scientific laboratory underneath. They could see part of the sky, they could see stars, and they could hang pendulums down and do all kinds of experiments. It is so interesting, here we are, right in the heart of the City, none of us is actually aware that there is this hidden scientific laboratory, which is still underneath.

It is fascinating that the first analogy between music and a hidden city that I can find in literature about music is in the first great biography of Johann Sebastian Bach, written in the 1870s by Philip Spitta. If I may quote – he is writing about Bach's 48 th Prelude – he says: "There is a legend which tells of a city of marvels which lies sunk beneath the sea. The sound of bells comes up from the depths, and when the surface is calm, houses and streets are visible through the clear water, with all the stir and turmoil of busy, eager human life, but it is infinitely far down, and every attempt to clutch the vision only troubles the waters and distorts the picture. We feel the same thing as we listen to this music. All that stirred the soul of the composer, love and hatred, joy and sorrow, with their fortuitous and transient impulses, lie deep below the surface; faintly, remotely, we hear their echoes."

JB

It is a wonderful description. There are so many layers of things which are hidden in music. It is not just

about you as the listener discovering the piece of music, it is also what is hidden to the composer, because by wrapping up your thoughts in a non-verbal language, you can also write about things which may be you find too uncomfortable to think about in a conscious way. I think that is never more the case than in programme music, where often a composer will choose a subject that is like a mask for what he is actually writing about in himself. Tchaikovsky is a great example, because he so often writes about tragic women. You can just immediately lock into the fact that there was a man who was struggling with his sexuality, struggling with his feminine side you might say, and also had a very, very difficult relationship with his mother. So he is writing about things which are difficult for him, but because he possibly does not want to think about them too consciously, they get wrapped up in a story like Swan Lake or like Eugene Onegin or Francesca, and Romeo and Juliet and all these tragic women. That means he can actually help himself by writing, as well as the programme helping people to access that piece of what was then new music. So there is a huge amount that is always really hidden in music. Someone said music is the vaguest of the arts, and it is, because it can mean so many things to so many people. It is quite often that someone will come up to you and say, "I know just what you were writing about in that piece! You were writing about the stars and the planets!" You know, they will say something, and you will think, well, it's nothing like what you were thinking of, but they are having their own personal experience of the piece.

MC

If I may digress for two seconds, I had the privilege of photographing Aaron Copeland and he invited me to his house, north of New York. He was telling me about Appalachian Spring. "Oh dear!" he said, "Everybody got it wrong. It was not me that gave it that title, it was Martha Graham. She wouldn't let me go to her rehearsals, and then eventually she invited me along, and when I did go she said, "Oh, I hope you like our title. It's Appalachian Spring!" He watched it and he loved it and he said, "Please, Martha Graham, can I have the privilege of entitling in my piece?" He said, "Since then, I have received endless floods of letters of people saying, "I've just been to Appalachia, and your music just captures it perfectly!"

I think that it is now the moment to plunge into the sound of St Paul's Cathedral but, interestingly enough, you have chosen a piece which you did not write for St Paul's?

JB

No, this is a piece called Epiphany. I wrote it for Winchester Cathedral, which does have a big acoustic. It is a recording – this performance of it is actually recorded in St Paul's Cathedral by John Scott and the choir there. It is a piece I was asked to write for a service in which a bishop was being enthroned, and I was asked to bridge the moment between prayers and the actual enthronement, so it was necessary to have a piece which had a huge crescendo from a quiet moment to the highlight of the service, as it were. So the piece starts very quietly and then it works up to a massive crescendo at the end. I do not know whether you hear it so much on the recording but, when I was in the building, the last chord had about 12 seconds of echo on it. Whether they faded that down or not, I don't know.

[Music plays]

JB

I think ten seconds anyway!

MC

You are a visionary. You are like Blake – you envision visions! That has such an incredible atmosphere of mysteriousness. I am sure you hide things inside the music to thicken it up, a bit like you add cornflower when you are making a sauce or something. When you are cooking up pieces, if I may use the expression, do you actually use things like chillies, spices and things? What do you use? You are a chef!

JB

I think there is an element of cooking in it, because you always have a basic sound in mind, and then you play with that sound to enhance it in some way or even to just blur it. There are two things I do: one is I like to have trills.

MC

You do that in the Westminster Abbey verse.

JB

It is one of the things I think is effective. It sort of blurs the sounds; it makes it like a mirage. But the other thing is, if you're in an acoustic like that, one of the things you are getting is a lot of harmonics on the sound, and one of the things I like to do is to add to that, add so you are more aware. I add lots of hummed notes and high notes that are just slightly dissonant with the rest of the chord. In that way, it makes the harmonics louder, the natural harmonics, and that gives the sound a terrific kind of glowing; it vibrates like a mirage on the horizon.

MC

You vibrate with excitement when you talk about it too! I really get the impression, when I hear that music, and when I listen to you talking about your music, that you really hear what it is that you want before you write it down.

JB

I just always tell students you have to think about the quality of sound that you want before you actually put the chords down on the paper because, with voices in particular, but with anything really, but voices in particular, where you place the note in the voice, what register you place it, really, really affects the quality of the sound. You can soon create a very muddy sound by putting singers in the wrong parts or in the weak part of their register. If you want to create a certain sort of sound, you have got to think very carefully about where you are going to place those notes. It is true of everything, but singers more than anything. You can really ruin something. You can see students thinking, "Oh no, that's not how I meant it to sound at all!" They just want a big, bright chord.

MC

You also love big, brash chords! You are fantastically fierce with brass. Your brass is savage. It is like those tanks that roll in at the beginning. There is an amazing piece called Prague, and it opens up with the tanks rolling in, and you feel you are going to be ground by them! It is lovely, because the piece ends with the tanks rolling out again.

JB

Initially, when people listen to a piece, in those first few seconds, how they listen is just about sounds. That sounds banal, but you are sucking people in with the quality of the sound.

MC

Absolutely, and I have picked up on something. Now, that piece, it does something, you do something in it which you do very interestingly in your two Japanese-related pieces for the City of London Festival, is that in a very theatrical gesture, you raise a curtain at the beginning. You have, in this case, the notes of the organ opened up, and it was beautiful; just suddenly you were in this fantastic world.

I don't know how many of you heard the Cruelty of the Gods, the piece for oboe and koto, which was done at St Lawrence Jewry last week? That opened up with plucked sounds on the koto, as the implacable

emperor about to send his poor old daughter into stardom, truly, he turns her into a star, but what happens is the notes rise up, and as they get to the top, one of the notes is taken over by another voice, and as the person's voice falls away, that note is hanging in the air. It is incredible! It is like you are there! It is like you are in a world that has already been; it is like it is already going on, and you just raise the curtain on it. It is fantastic! You do that in your two Japanese pieces. I heard it on the piano yesterday. It is not quite the same as a harp, which we are going to have in the middle of St Paul's. It did make me wonder: harps and fire; no relation to Brunhilda's Rock or anything?

JB

No!

MC

Your Festival commission is very specifically for that acoustic, for that place. It is very specifically for St Paul's Cathedral, and it was a very, very difficult commission in that it was a tough brief because it insisted on you making a link between St Paul's and Japan, and links between St Paul's and Japan do not spring to mind immediately, except perhaps the "Far East End"!

JB

I'm glad you said that and not me!!

MC

But you suddenly hit on a fantastic link.

JB

I didn't suddenly hit on it. This piece was commissioned nearly two years ago. A lot of pieces are commissioned a long time before the concert, generally to give people time to raise the money to do it, but this piece, it was nearly two years ago when it was commissioned. My initial thought was simply that there is no connection between Japan and St Paul's Cathedral. I went through a lot of ideas, I really did, before I got to the idea of fire, because I then just started thinking about St Paul's Cathedral and the idea of fire and the Blitz. Then I immediately thought Hiroshima, and it seemed very obvious, and I just thought that's an obvious link: fire. But, having just got to that point, you then think, what on earth am I going to use for a text?

MC

And that's when you found that remarkable book.

JB

Yes, that's when I found this book. Because then I got it in my head that it would be great to have an old description of Hiroshima before the bomb. I thought there must be a guidebook description somewhere. You set yourself these problems! One of the first places I went to was a bookshop in Bloomsbury which just does Asian books. I think it is called the Asian Bookshop. I could be wrong, but it's on Museum Street or nearby. I found copy of this book, which is Murray's Handbook to Japan. It was published in the 19th Century. The man in the shop, who was very helpful, showed it to me and I read it and I thought, this is just what I want, and then I looked in the front and it said £120, so I thought, oh no! I wondered if I could sit in the corner and just write it all out! I thought no, he will kick me out! So I went home and I did a big search on the internet. I went to abebooks.com, which is one of my favourite places, and I found there were only another four copies around the world. Obviously they did not print very many of these, because Japan had only opened up to the West in the 19th Century, so very few people were going to Japan. This was 20

shillings in the 19th Century, which was a lot for a book, so they must have only published a few of them. Anyway, eventually I did find it for a lot less.

MC

And then you opened it, and you looked up the index, and you found...?

JB

Hiroshima. What is brilliant about this description is that it is quite short. There was not very much to do in Hiroshima. It was just a little place. Because of the description of it, which is just a nice description, it is incredibly poignant. The person who wrote this could not possibly have known just how invested with poignancy this description would become. If I just read you the first little bit, it says – well, it recommends some hotels, and then it says: “Hiroshima: capital of the province of Aki, and seat of a Prefecture, stands at the mouth of the Otagawa in a fine position, protected by hills from the northern blasts.” Now, that just immediately is so poignant!

MC

So ironic.

JB

It goes on just to describe simple things. There is a beautiful description at the end, where it says you can go up the hill if you want to, the hill rising immediately behind the castle. Some tea-houses stand on it; it affords a beautiful view. And then there is just a lovely description. It says: “To the left is the sea, to the right rises a conical shaped hill. In front is the long road running down towards the pine-clad islet in the harbour. Beyond all spreads the sea, glittering amidst rocky islands, chief of which is Mijajima, with its feathery peaks.” It really gets you just to read that! That was what made me feel that I wanted the piece to be about loss, and about what we preserve after great loss, what is important to us, what we want to keep. Because I thought I must have something in Japanese in the piece, to have that link between English and Japanese, St Paul’s and Japan, I thought I would put some really ancient haiku in the piece. Ian Ritchie, the Director of the Festival, was really pleased because they were actually featuring what is called tanka, the very early haiku, by the aristocratic ladies of the court in Japan. So he was very pleased that I was putting in these haiku, because they are all by women and they are all at least a thousand years old. There are three of them, and they are at least a thousand years old, and one of them is 1300 years old.

MC

Which we will hear in a minute. I discovered something very fascinating. I cannot help it, being a very visual person, I am always scanning for unusual things. I was in St Lawrence Jewry when Judith’s piece, the Cruelty of the Gods, was being rehearsed, and I was sitting next to the koto player, and there she was, plucking – it looks like a log of wood with strings down it, and they pluck them with little plectrums, and it made a twanging. That is why it is the “Implacable Emperor” – it did sound cruel. He turns his daughter and her lover into two stars because he is jealous of the intensity of their love, and throws them to the opposite sides of the sky, so that only on one day of the year can they ever see each other, for eternity. What kind of loving father is that?! I think there is a Greek equivalent. Any way, there I was, sitting listening to the koto plucking out those things, and I suddenly thought, “My God, that window over there has stars on it!” Here is the window. (Shows illustration) Of course, until you start to look really closely, you cannot see the stars. At the centre of it is a beautiful angel. As one started to realise, and got closer and closer, I could not believe what I saw! Not only were there the stars of Judith’s piece being done in St Lawrence Jewry, there was also the fire! There was London in the Blitz! There was London in flames! The stained glass window in this church is linking her piece for St Paul’s, and is linking the piece for St Lawrence Jewry. I thought that was very, very amazing.

There is a very moving and poignant link between St Paul's and Japan in a piece of writing, a very beautiful description, written by an American reporter called Ernie Pile, who was killed by a Japanese sniper on the island of Iwo Jima in 1945. He wrote one of the most sensitive descriptions of the Blitz in London in 1940: "The greatest of the fires was directly in front of us. Flames seemed to whip hundreds of feet into the air. Pinkish-white smoke ballooned upward in a great cloud, and out of this cloud, there gradually took shape, so faintly at first that we weren't sure we saw correctly, the gigantic dome of St Paul's Cathedral. St Paul's was surrounded by fire, but it came through."

JB

Might I say that this says so much about Malcolm's genius for the visual, because he took me right up to this window and he went "Look! Look!" I was like, "Look, what? What?" He said, "Look!! There!!" "Where? What?" Nobody had seen it. He was showing everybody, and they were going, "Oh, it's St Paul's!" because it is so tiny. You see it there. It is a testament to his skill. It is extraordinary that Malcolm's photograph can be enlarged that much, because it is just tiny.

MC

It is actually only about that size on the window. It is to the left of the high altar in St Lawrence Jewry. Here is St Paul's (shows illustration), another extraordinary spot, because it is remarkable these days – well, it is remarkable it has survived, but it is even more remarkable that there are absolutely no cranes, no high buildings behind, and I can prove to you this is not 'Photoshopped'! There is no trickery here. It is a colour transparency, and you cannot trick on those things. It was taken from a new block of flats right next to the Globe Theatre, very close to where Christopher Wren's house is, from which he saw it being built. It was completely fortuitous that the balcony from which I took this picture had bamboos and orchids, and that here today, there is this reference to the Far East; suddenly, here is Japan, orchids, bamboos. (Shows another illustration) This, believe it or not, is a photograph of Judith in St Paul's when she was last singing as a BBC Singer, singing in the première of John Tavener's Revelation and Fall, which opened the Millennium. It was the big Millennium première in St Paul's Cathedral. Can you spot yourself?

JB

I think I'm that blob there! It is extraordinary, because you never see the building in that way, do you? It is about its geometry, isn't it? You just suddenly see the geometry of it.

MC

One of the things that fascinates me about photography, particularly, are those lenses which enable you to see things in a way that you cannot normally. That shows you twice what the eye can see. You are looking straight forward and straight up at the same time. That is incredible.

Judith, that was your last performance with the BBC Singers. As I mentioned at the beginning, Judith is a professional singer. She has been all her life. She has sung since she was a little girl. Now Judith writes for professional singers, as a composer, she is very experienced, and she has set innumerable amounts of text. I overheard her, at the rehearsal yesterday, at Hidden City, saying, "But it's so difficult! Japanese is so difficult to set, because it has so few stresses!"

JB

Well, you know, we forget. In the Western language, it is all about the rise and fall in the stresses. You think of a language like Italian, it is all about the stress and the music of it – it is obvious. In Japanese, you do not get so many stresses. The obvious example is the word "Hiroshima" which we either say "Hiroshima" or "Hiroshima". The Japanese say "Hi-ro-shi-ma" – it is four equal syllables. My Japanese student said to me, "That is why Japanese music is the way it is, because it does not move around very much. It does not have these great moments of rise and fall in stress." That is just to do with the language, but it poses quite a lot of problems when you are setting it, because you naturally want to know where the stress

lies in the words. I do not speak any Japanese at all, and I was very lucky to have a Japanese student at that time, a composition student, and she recorded the haiku for me so that I could hear them. Shall we hear bits of them? I have her recording of them; just to hear her voice, which is so exquisite. One of the things about setting haiku is that they are incredibly short. In music, we get used to the fact that when you are setting, music elongates words, so that a poem of about this length can easily be three or four minutes of music. It would take you 30 seconds to read it, and maybe four minutes if it is set. But these haikus are 12 seconds long when they are read, so I had to think very hard about how I was going to set them, what I was going to do about that. There are three of them, and we might as well hear all of them, because they're so short.

[Audio plays – 3 pieces]

JB

The other thing about that is the way often the line ends quite abruptly, whereas we tend to let an end of a line just fall away. She goes “ka-ge” like that...it’s just “a-a”. I noticed that one of the lines in the very beautiful second one, she ends quite abruptly. I thought, wow, it’s just such a challenge to decide what to do!

MC

What does it mean? I am sure we would all love to know what it meant. Although haiku are alarming difficult to translate.

JB

They are, and especially if you try and keep with the five and seven syllable set-up. The first one is “Someone passes, and while I wonder if it is he, the midnight moon is covered with clouds.” The second one is: “Will I cease to be, or will I remember beyond the world our last meeting together?” The third one is: “Others may forget you, but not I. I am haunted by your beautiful ghost.” Exquisitely beautiful, and they are all just incredibly old.

MC

One of these ladies wrote the first novel, didn’t she?

JB

Yes, Murasaki Shikibu wrote a novel called the Genji: a very, very long novel, which is thought to be the very first novel in the world. It is a tale of passion and the supernatural – it has some great characters in it.

MC

It is often interesting how in novels, as in life, things come back full circle. Beware what you start. I am going to link to this by saying that it strikes me that there are a lot of non-musical considerations and practicalities which make up a piece, that define the nature of a piece, the shape of a piece, how it is, what happens in a piece. In a sense, it is like a piece of conceptual art, like Damien Hurst’s Shark...

JB

Yes! I’m just thinking, the word “shark”, it just made me think then. Do you know that thing about the Indianapolis? I just have to tell you this story, because of the word shark. I don’t really know very much about Damien Hurst, but if you believe in karma, as I do very strongly, there was a famous story. If you have ever seen the film Jaws, it is told in Jaws. The ship which delivered the heavy components of the

bomb to the aircraft carrier that was going to bomb Hiroshima, after it had delivered these parts, it set off back for San Francisco. This was before the bomb had dropped but they were just delivering the casing etc. On the way back, the ship was torpedoed and went down. There was some difficulty in sending a mayday, so the sailors were in the water for quite a long time. There were, I think, nearly 900 sailors who went into the water, and when they picked the survivors up, some six days later, about 600 of them had been eaten by sharks, and the rest were very badly bitten. It just seems like one of those karmic stories. Sorry, Damien Hurst!

MC

Bombs! There is actually another very tragic bomb in your works.

JB

Is there?

MC

Yes, in the Secret Garden. You sent a bomb to the Albert Hall for the proms – the Iran/Iraq War.

JB

Yes, that is true.

MC

Right in the heart of your work.

JB

Yes, I wrote a piece about the Garden of Eden. There is a story about how the place that the Iranians believe is the site of the Tree of Knowledge was bombed during the Iran/Iraq conflict. They hit the actual tree which they believed was the tree, which was a eucalyptus tree.

MC

But it is interesting. You see, Judith writes her own texts. It amazed me. As a one-time critic, I read a lot of reviews, and I did think it was extraordinary that although Judith had written an immense poem for the Secret Garden, not a single reviewer commented on this fact. She was not just composer; she was also her own poet. She is a fantastic poet. In fact, I think you must be the first person to set the word “sphenopholis”?!

JB

I think I made up the word “sphenopholis”!

MC

I found it on the internet – yes, it’s in Google!

JB

That’s good. It is a word meaning “flowers which are pollinated by sphinx moths”.

MC

Hawkmoths. Sphinx hawkmoths.

JB

There is not a very good history of composers writing texts. Some composers have written texts that are worth forgetting about. Sometimes it is not so good – it is like composers doing their own vibratos. I suppose at the same time there is Wagner who I believe spent years and years just writing a libretto.

MC

We gave got something rather exciting under this table! There are some very unusual things in this piece about Hiroshima, and one of them is this. Judith, would you like to show us?

JB

This is a percussion instrument! I wanted to make the sounds of fire crackling, so I had this idea of buying glassine paper, and just doing [rustles paper to make noise]. If you do something like this in a big acoustic, do you think it sounds like fire crackling? Oh good! But it is now in this bag [shows plastic bag from the shop 'Paperchase'] because this bag sounds even more like fire crackling!

MC

I am sure Paperchase never imagined such a thing!

[Produces bells and rings them] These have a history.

JB

These were elephant bells from the Punjab. When I went to Sri Lanka, I noticed that the elephants, who just wander around of course – they are not in nature reserves or anything – all have bells on them. The farmers hate the elephants being in the fields because they do so much damage, so they like to hear them coming so they can chase them away! I bought these in Notting Hill Gate. They were probably banged up in somebody's cellar somewhere, but hey, I like to think they're from the Punjab – it's romantic!

MC

But actually, there is a moment in your piece where I am quite convinced you are trying to chase your audience away.

JB

There is a big moment with the tam-tam, yes, which is quite frightening.

MC

There is a famous story of James Blades, the percussionist – I am sure you all know it – when at question time, at the end of a talk, James Blades was getting fed up with all these questions, and suddenly somebody said, "Mr Blades, how loud is it possible to make a tam-tam sound?" He started, and before very long, people were getting up and they were pressing to get out of the door!

JB

Yes. My percussionist is wearing special earplugs that cut out a certain amount of sound. I remember James Blades talking about the thing that used to come up at the beginning of J. Arthur Rank films, the man with the huge gong. James Blades actually recorded that gong sound for Rank, and he said that if you had a gong that big, you would hardly hear it, because if a gong is that big, the sound just splatters over the surface and it diffuses it, so the louder gongs are the smaller ones, which is what he hit it on.

MC

You have created a sound that is so Oriental. I have been to the Chinese opera.

JB

That is a Chinese gong, yes. Those are the little ones.

MC

How does it go?

JB

[Makes sound] Like that!

MC

Incredible! You've got also some really evil things going on, because there are car brake hubs.

JB

Brake drums, yes.

MC

Brake drums out of cars, and they are hammered with great pieces of metal, and they sound absolutely frightening.

JB

But you would be amazed what they sound like in St Paul's, because we tried them out, and they sound quite a lot prettier in St Paul's. There is something about that acoustic – it creates a tone in the sound.

MC

I wondered if it was to evoke people like this? [Shows picture]

JB

[Laughing] Yes! Isn't he wonderful? He's the Kabuki actor. I love the blood flecked eye. I had things like this in front of me when I was writing it. I love that gestural quality of Japanese theatre.

MC

You surround yourself always?

JB

I do, I like visual images when I work.

MC

Every time you write a piece, you surround yourself with new different things relevant to that piece.

JB

Well, you know what it's like, because when you sit down in the morning, it immediately zones you in to the world of the piece. It is like a radio frequency. I find that, years later, if I look at a picture that I used with a piece, I would never be able to use that picture again. To me, it is just completely allied to the piece that I was writing.

MC

I must admit, it is fascinating, looking through Judith's works – I told you I was scanning for the unusual – I mean, how about a stage direction: "Moggies appear"?! Moggies? And then, a few pages later, "The devil appears disguised as moggies," and I thought, "Are these the meowing kind?"

JB

I'm just cat mad, you know!

MC

Well there is one very securely hidden in one of Judith's works.

JB

The moggies are not cats. Moggies are kind of hairy monsters from Essex! [Laughter] Essex always gets a laugh! You only have to say the word "Essex" and everybody laughs!

MC

And you know how to conjure up wild music to evoke those warrior gods of ancient Japan, don't you? You have got the basses growling away – they growl like organ stops.

JB

I like theatrical things. I did a lot of acting when I was in my teens. I did lots of youth theatre and lots of amateur dramatics and all of that and for a long while I thought I would be an actor and a composer. I had already decided when I was small that I was going to be a composer, but I thought I would be an actor as well. Actually, I didn't have what it takes at all, in any way, but I loved doing all these stage productions. I have never lost that stage-struck quality, especially about the theatre. I just still love what actors do. I'm so admiring.

MC

I really think it is your reward that "Moggies appear" must rank alongside Shakespeare's stage direction "Exit, pursued by a bear"! Thinking about firsts, sphenopholis, there is another first. You surely scored another first in Westminster Cathedral in your mass?

JB

What was that, tell me? [Pause] Oh yes, I did the Sanctus in rounds, yes, yes. I was trying to evoke a kind of French/medieval/out-of-doors feel to it. Also, they wanted something very, very short because the choir do not generally sing the Sanctus there. It is generally sung by the congregation. So they said, well, you can do a Sanctus, but it must be very short, so it is just like this very, very short round, just a minute long.

MC

Have we got time to hear it?

JB

I should think so, yes.

[Music plays]

MC

Do you think it is important to respect the spirituality of a place like Westminster Cathedral or St Paul's?

JB

Yes, vital, vital. I have quite strong spiritual beliefs, but I think even if you don't, you must respect it, yes definitely. I think every sacred building has its own particular spiritual feel, and I also think you can tap into that. Somewhere like King's College Cambridge is very, very different from Westminster Abbey. Every place has its own particular kind of spirituality.

MC

Do you feel you need to have faith if you write religious music?

JB

Well, sometimes they say atheists write the best music, don't they?

MC

Peter Maxwell-Davis, the Master of the Queen's Music, wrote a mass for Westminster Cathedral, and I distinctly remember him saying on the radio, when he was asked as a non-believer how could he be writing a setting of the mass for Westminster Cathedral, he said, "But religion is the highest form of art. The trouble is when people start believing it."

JB

Extraordinary!

MC

Thinking about beliefs, I would like to read a small section from "The Ivory Tree" which is a beautiful tapestry of 12th Century England in five dreams, conjured up by Judith for St Edmundsbury Cathedral, Bury-St-Edmunds.

Into the mouth of her ivory carver, you place these words: "My imagination is like a tree. Its roots reach down into the earth. Its boughs reach up to heaven, where angelic birds make their nests. The soul in my body is like the sap in a tree and my mind its bursting fruit." I think that is very much you.

JB

Thank you!

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