

Guy Woolfenden on Influences, Inspiration, and Productivity
Shakespeare's Tune Man

Interview by Bruce Wendell Perkins

Perk: If we take the compositional elements of texture, colour, and rhythm, is there anyone that you tend to stress, or pursue, or feel in tune with?

GW: I think you left one out, and that would be melody. That's the one I feel in tune with. Yeah, I'm a tune man, I think.

Perk: If we examined your earliest scores, what characteristics of your music today could we find germinating in them?

GW: Goodness me. I think it's the same thing, you know. I mean, ever since I was a choirboy at Westminster Abbey, I think I first made music by singing, and therefore, I think I go for tunes first, and everything else follows from that.

Perk: Do you think that your job is easier because of the strong literary content of your environment, writing for the Royal Shakespeare Company?

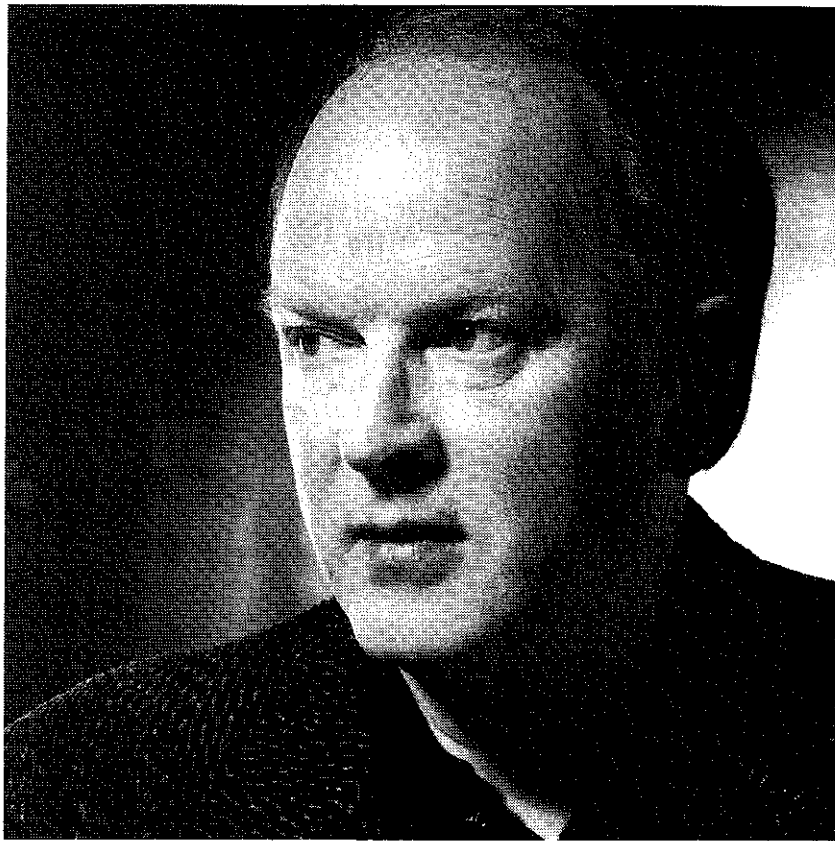
GW: It certainly can help, except that you find that it could be looked at as a sort of *of cul de sac* in that there are only 37 plays. I've done most of them three or four times. But, the styles in which the RSC choose to work are so varied you can have anything from prehistoric to electronic needed because of updates and backdates in our style concept. Most theatre companies are director-driven, and you find that the director has to be the boss, he gets what he wants in terms of design and costume and lighting and music. So I don't actually feel that I'm straightjacketed by Shakespeare.

Perk: But at the same time, a lot of your ideas or directions are within the context of a larger scheme.

GW: This is supposedly true of quite a lot of my wind band music. It's a sort of creative laziness, really. My music gets performed every night of the year, *somewhere*, usually in a theatre, and then suddenly it all stops. It's as redundant as yesterday's newspaper, or as ephemeral as yesterday's newspaper. And after a bit I started to think "Well, it can't all be bad. Some of it's worth preserving." And the way I've chosen to preserve it is very hard work. You don't just say "Oh, that was good, let's have that." You have to work at it, and extend things that directors have cut and chopped and hacked and rescored. So I've sort of recycled it to form a lot of the wind band music. But at the same time, last year I wrote a horn concerto, which had nothing to do with the William Shakespeare and the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Perk: What other sources beyond the literary world help generate ideas for you?

GW: I think like any other composer, I'm deeply moved and influenced by other people's music. I'm not saying I copy it, although one starts off by copying it, anything from Purcell to Stravinsky. I can be without any ideas at all and suddenly hear something on the radio or go to the library and play some music which I never thought of enjoying before. I find that it sparks something that you never



Composer Guy Woolfenden
 Photograph by David Popham

thought of. This happens all over the world. In England, and I suppose I know more about English composers than most others, it spectacularly happened with Tippett and Beethoven. He even quotes Beethoven occasionally. But he's a modern composer who stands on his own two feet. However, he's studied also Elizabethan madrigals, till he was blue in the face. Britten studied Henry Purcell, who is very much underneath, at the moment. I've just written a clarinet choir based on Purcell. I mean, it's *decomposed*—deconstructed Purcell. I called it *Gordian Knots*. Purcell wrote the music for some 14 or 15 productions towards the end of his life, and one of them was called *Gordian Knots Untied*. And this makes a start from the Purcell. And as indeed Benjamin Britten's *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* did. I don't call that a literary influence.

Perk: Your work for the ballet is well known. Can we look forward to more ballet for the wind band, something along the ideas of the success you had with *Illyrian Dances*?

GW: When you say that, I thought for a moment there was a ballet that I don't know about based on *Illyrian Dances*. I think it's a helluva good idea, but I don't know about it, neither does my publisher, who's my wife. Indeed, I've done four ballets, and I love both writing or arranging,

especially arranging, recomposing ballets. What we're talking about here, for people who don't know about my ballet work, are unashamedly popular, bums on seats, two or three acts, full evening ballets. And unashamedly on popular subjects, like *The Three Musketeers*, *Anna Carenina*, *La Traviata*, and recently one on a not a too well known story, *The Queen of Spades*. I have to compose all the bits that Tchaikovsky or Verdi forgot to compose, or orchestra chamber music and piano music. It's a helluva job. But when you see on the poster '*Anna Carenina*, music by Tchaikovsky', with small letters, '*arranged by Guy Woolfenden*,' you're really half way to getting somewhere. It's music that's being done all over the world, in Hong Kong and Japan, even in Santiago, where I've never been. I don't know too many ballets that are wind music only, but perhaps you could fill me in on that.

Perk: Well, now that's one that I'd have to research for quite a long time.

GW: Yes, well there may be one with the Stravinsky piano and wind *Concerto*, or *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*, or something like that. Actually, now you've reminded me, going back to your earlier question, I think I am influenced by physical movement. There's literary sources, musical sources, but "the dance" does fascinate me. Like most musicians, I'm an absolutely hopeless dancer myself. Probably because it's the other people doing the dancing and you're always playing.

Perk: Considering your rather high productivity, with several hundred scores to your credit, what can we say about the wind band's status that you've only given us a handful of pieces for that medium?

GW: You call it rather high productivity. I call it *very high* productivity.

Perk: There we go.

GW: Well, the truth is that when I joined the Royal Shakespeare Company, one of the reasons that I joined it was that it had a professional *wind* band. It could have been a professional string band for all I cared, although I am a wind player. I was a professional horn player, and indeed, Tim Reynish and I were absolutely together. He was a much better player than I was. I met him in the National Youth Orchestra before we went to Cambridge. We then went to Cambridge together, where we were booked as a pair of horns for the first amateur performance of *The Rake's Progress* by Stravinsky, and then preceded to play for absolutely every orchestra that Cambridge had.

Perk: Have you ever had to approach your writing by considering the limitations of the players, or do you just write it and then let them sort it all out?

GW: Oh no. I definitely come under the category of a composer who will carefully ask whoever is commissioning me to write something, who it's for? I don't think this necessarily applies to something of the standards of the Royal Northern College of Music Wind Orchestra. I think one should push them to the limits. I do write for particular people. There are not necessarily limitations in the same way that opera composers find the very ideal voice for the world premiere at least, or try to, and write to the strengths of a particular singer. Mozart was famous for that. On the whole, I am sort of sensitive to that, yes.

Perk: Do you think we can look forward to a Woolfenden piece for younger bands, in the hope of trying to increase the quality of music for younger ensembles?

GW: Well I do write for younger people, particularly where I come from, in Rugby. There's a wonderful institution called the Rugby Music Centre. They commissioned me to write a piece called *Suite Francaise*. It's for octet. I was asked by Val Brody, who's the Artistic Director of the Rugby Music Centre, to write an octet, and I said "Oh goody, goody. I hope the horns are good." And she said "Now hang on, there aren't any horns." I said "I can't think of writing an octet without horns in it. It just goes against my nature." And she said "Well you can't have the commission then. We simply don't have any good horn players this year." I really had to think twice before doing. I actually found myself writing an octet with flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons in pairs, but without any horns. So that's not only writing to the level, because I'm sure, on paper at least, none of them had to be beyond Grade Eight. So I did that, but then she asked me to write a children's opera. Then, unless you're really crazy, you don't write things that they can't actually get around. And you should never write down to them, you should push them to the limits, without that being the foremost thing in your mind.

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To me Guy Woolfenden has the easiest and hardest job in the world, composing for the Royal Shakespeare Company. The myriad of literary sources, ideas, and scenes that present themselves to him each day is almost unfathomable. And yet, he manages to not only make sense of them, but in doing so, creates textures and soundscapes that are identifiable to the layman and approachable for the serious musician. This collection of his wind works to date, and I do hope there will be more, provides us a chance to witness this master craftsman (for one does come away with a strong sense of the *craftsmanship* of his music) in a variety of settings. The first two works, *Illyrian Dances* and *SPQR*, both derive from his work with the RSC, and as such they are full of imagery and colour. Very fun to play, and enjoyable to listen to, with a gathered energy apparent throughout. The *Suite Francaise* is a collection of tuneful textures for a smaller ensemble, woodwind octet, and shows well his ability to control his resources and create an economy of materials. The *Mockbeggar Variations*, unlike the other works, has no grounding in the theatre, and is a delightful blend of textures along the tried and true method of Prelude, Theme and five Variations. I think this is the real gem of the disc, and I listened to it over and over again for new sounds and combinations of colour. *Full Fathom Five*, for brass quintet, takes its inspiration from *The Tempest*, and provides a rigorous test for that flexible ensemble. *Gallimaufry*, is perhaps the most theatrically based of the collection, but is still a genuinely clean sound, well-fitted, and devoid of gimmicks or tired ideas. It is perhaps his most rewarding concert piece, if less often played.

Bruce Wendell Perkins