

# **An interview with Christopher Butterfield**

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## An Interview with Christopher Butterfield

*Mary-Ellen Rayner and Crystal Yang*

On November 14, 2011, we interviewed composer Christopher Butterfield in his office at the University of Victoria. He started his musical life at the age of eight as a chorister in King's College Choir, Cambridge, and decided he wanted to be a composer at the age of eighteen. He has always had an interest in performance, whether he was fronting a rock band, conducting, making performance art, or reciting sound poetry. As performers ourselves, we were especially interested in his relationship to performance and performers: In Montreal this fall, he reprised his acclaimed interpretation of Kurt Schwitters' *Ursonate*, and in May he will be giving a recital of Erik Satie's *Socrate* in Toronto. In addition to performance, we asked him about literature, his own compositional language, and specifically his 2009 piece, *Bosquet*, written for twenty-two flutes and one cello.

### **How does your background as a singer influence the way you compose?**

I can't say that it consciously has anything to do with it, singing with writing. I don't use it as a tool and I don't allude to it. But at the same time I can't ignore the fact that it is such a part of my musical life from childhood, that there has to be a whole set of responses there that come out of it. I suppose the allusion would be, when I was a kid I learned Latin for five years. And I don't think about it, I can't remember the first thing about it. And yet it forms part of the substrate of knowledge with which you go about doing other things. It's much like an early training in anything—it's there in spite of everything. Because I don't think these things particularly go away.

**Would it be fair to say your performing and composing identities are parallel existences that don't have a lot to do with each other? For instance, when you go and perform Socrate, you're quite removed from your role as a composer, aren't you?**

Well I'm trying to use it as an excuse that if you don't like what you hear, you can say, 'At least he's not a professional singer and he's just a composer.'

**So you can't separate them entirely.**

No, I wouldn't want to. There's a purpose in it, a little bit. But I don't have much of a relationship with performers. I don't work with them very often. I tend to do things that I think are very much within the capabilities of people. I'm told over and over again that the music doesn't *look* as if it's terribly difficult but ends up being rather difficult, for various reasons. Maybe it's neither one thing nor the other; it's not a super complex music and it's not a super simple music. It's a kind of unpredictable music that's somewhere in between.

**They're surprised by the language?**

They're maybe a little puzzled by it. Because it looks like it might be one thing, and it's not that. But that other thing, it's not that either. And that's not saying that it's somehow unique or different, it's just maybe a little bit unpredictable. I mean, until you actually assimilate it.

But I think the only thing I know about performers, which I get quite excited about, is that you have to make sure that you give them parts that are made up with nine by twelve sheets of 60-pound or 70-pound

ivory bond paper, bound in books with page turns that you could drive a train through, time-wise. You could write anything and as long as you gave them a good part that they could read, and turn the page on in time, and that they didn't have to screw up, or mess around, or pick up falling pieces of paper, you can do anything. Just don't do *that*. It's very simple. This sounds like a reduction to absurdity, but music is a simple business. It depends on these sorts of things. So if you ask me, 'What's my relationship to performers?' I say, 'Give them decent parts.'

**I read an interview with you online about your Schwitters performance where you were asked how Dada influences your own composition.<sup>1</sup>**

It's very difficult to talk about Dada music because I don't think it really exists. It's like talking about surreal music or something like this. It's at once too concrete and there's too much going on for one to ever be able to say, 'That's surreal.' Expressionism is a different thing, because we still talk about conveying emotions in music through extraordinary use of dynamics, and dissonance and so on. In that original idea from a hundred years ago of heightened states of mind—all right, music can reflect that quite well. But to talk about music that is somehow a mutation of reality, or something totally absurd, it's never worked very well, at least for me. It's sort of like the practice of Zen. In order to become Zen you have to ignore it

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<sup>1</sup> Isak Goldschneider. Interview with Christopher Butterfield, September 18<sup>th</sup> 2011.  
<http://innovationsenconcert.ca/zine/interview/avec-christopher-butterfield/>

completely. The moment you think you're Dada you're not. There's no doubt that I like to be playful in what I write; maybe sometimes it even comes off as humorous. I don't think that's intentional. Usually it's a byproduct of the way I structure things.

**What is your relationship to rules and structure in your composition?**

I surround myself with rules and always have. I would like to get out of it, but it's not easy. I'm not a terribly intuitive composer. I'm interested in music as a puzzle. You organize certain things and put them together in a way that is dictated by *something*, because you'd like to see what happens. It's always a problem to be solved. But there's usually a structure involved for me. In a funny kind of way, structure gives me freedom, because I do recognize that what comes out puts me in a place where I'm quite happily free. If I'm lucky. It doesn't work every time.

**In Montreal in September you performed three songs.<sup>2</sup> Were they on prose texts?**

Yes, They were just things that I'd found.

**How do you arrive at choosing texts? What are your thoughts on poetry?**

I'm not good with poetry. Unless there's a hook. And actually it's funny because I've found something that there is a hook to. It's kind of kitschy but I'll find a way to make it work. My father collected postcards and he had in his collection a set of postcards with

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<sup>2</sup> "Song About Ignorance," "Political Song," and "American Song" performed September 27, 2011 at *Innovations en concert*, Montreal.

the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*.<sup>3</sup> It was a set of six postcards from the twenties with these pictures of these romantic views, with this extremely evocative poetry on it. And then you turn it over, and it's a postcard from some guy in Belfast to his wife, saying, 'Did you get the parcel I sent you last week?' or something. It's completely mundane, dumb. So you have this on one side and this on the other. As a juxtaposition of texts it was very funny.

I tend to like things you wouldn't normally set to music. You've mentioned *Jappements à la Lune*.<sup>4</sup> Those were poems by Claude Gauvreau, a Québec poet who wrote, at the end of his life, a kind of complete nonsense poetry, sound poetry. It has no meaning at all. It's really neat setting words that don't mean anything because you no longer have words telling you what they're supposed to be. You now have vocal utterance. All we've got to go on is the flavor, or the character of the music itself.

### **And you're not bound to the meaning of the words?**

No, you can construct meanings. Not that one will ever get to a concrete meaning of any kind, one won't. But it's bound to happen because people want it to mean something. You mentioned the opera as well,<sup>5</sup> and the reason I did that is because the

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<sup>3</sup> Omar Khayyám (1048–1131) was a Persian poet. The *Rubáiyát* became popular in the West in the nineteenth century through translations by Edward FitzGerald (1809–1883).

<sup>4</sup> *Jappements à la Lune* (1990): Song cycle for mezzo soprano, piccolo, English horn, bass clarinet, piano, percussion, violin, viola, cello and double bass.

<sup>5</sup> *Zurich 1916*, on a libretto by John Bentley Mays, was premiered at the Banff Festival for the Arts in 1998.

language for that was this completely fractured, repetitive language that is close to nonsense. Which I then destroyed further by moving accent structures around, breaking things up, moving it about, and so it came out as a kind of salad.

**Did you concern yourself with ideas of narrative when you wrote it, given that it's a dramatic genre?**

Frankly, no. I have such a hard time hearing words and music on a stage. I hear the music, but the text I don't really hear. Unless it's extremely melodramatic, and grossly sentimental. If I'm listening to *The Dream of Gerontius*<sup>6</sup> and Gerontius is going, "Take me, take me away," I just dissolve. Actually I'm doing that right now just thinking about it. Maybe what I do is try to stay away from it.

**Maybe text creates a problem of what to do with a poetic subject.**

Yes, and that gets too complicated for me. That's why I like *Socrate*: because it's so dumb. It's so matter of fact. It gets more wonderful the more you do it.

**Ned Rorem writes that a person can sing through Socrate for years and never tire of it.<sup>7</sup>**

You'd get tired of it when you started, but the more you do it the more extraordinary it becomes. That's the way it's been for me. It becomes more and more

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<sup>6</sup> *The Dream of Gerontius*, oratorio by Edward Elgar (1900).

<sup>7</sup> "Socrate is one of the few pieces to which for two decades I've repeatedly returned without disappointment, the pleasures of anticipation always remaining fresh." See Ned Rorem, "Around Satie's *Socrate*," in *Setting the Tone: Essays and a Diary* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1983), 351.

perfect. It's very difficult to sing because you want to make a story out of it, and it's impossible to do that. It's having to take all those impulses and putting them away, so that you're almost making it up as you go along. There are various states of serenity that you can be in. That's probably the easiest way to talk about it.

**We've talked a little bit about literature. Does the idea of writing anything other than music appeal to you?**

I'm such a flake. I do things as they occur to me. I've done things with writing that have been part of installations in galleries. But I think I made a choice early on not to write words, because it was a little too exposed. Music you can hide behind, in a certain way.

**Words are so direct.**

It's very definite for me, and I'm not good with definition. I like to sit in a sort of fog. And music is quite good for that. I don't really know what any of it means, and I'm not particularly interested. One puts together sounds and sees what comes out.

**What was your inspiration for writing a unique piece like *Bosquet*? The instrumentation is interesting to me as a flute player.**

This is what I mean by problems; they called me and asked me to write a piece for eight flutes. There is an ensemble in Montreal that's eight flutes and one cello<sup>8</sup>—that's a standing ensemble. They called up and they said, 'Um, actually we'd like you to write a piece for *twenty-two* flutes and one cello. We'd like to add fourteen.' So you're presented this problem. Twenty-

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<sup>8</sup> Ensemble Alizé

two flutes? That's a problem. And then you add a cello, that's a bigger problem. And so really, this is just a kind of a response to a set of circumstances.

And my other instant response was that it would be really nice to have the players around the audience. Because the idea of twenty-two flutes standing all together on a stage is too awful to even think about. It's an awful lot of whistles on a stage. And it worked very well, actually. It's this kind of physical thing.

**How did you choose the pitches for your tone clusters?**

Well, it gets a little technical. There's a kind of a system that I've used for years which is a way of analyzing non-tonal chords. There's a finite number of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12-note chords. There are, for example, 19 three-note chords, 43 four-note chords, and 66 five-note chords and 80 six-note chords, and it goes back on itself. So what I did was take all possible 43 four-note chords and all possible 66 five-note chords, and say, 'the piece is going to be twenty minutes long and have equal distance spacing of 43 chords, and then equal distance of the 66 five-note chords.' So it's a ratio of 43 over 66, and then somehow, those chords all interact with each other. It doesn't have to make sense, but that's the way it's structured.

**At times, the piece gives a synthesized, electronic impression. Was it your intention to construct such an effect?**

Well, that's just the sound you get when you've got an awful lot of flutes playing extremely dissonant tones with each other. And if you're lucky it becomes something bigger than it should. So maybe I got

lucky, I don't know. But somebody might ask, just because of that response that you have, are you using spectral analysis or something to come up with these sounds? And I have to say, absolutely not. I'm just writing chords, I'm just writing harmonies with lots and lots of flutes. You voice a chord a certain way and hope for the best. It's quite something to have that many instruments of a single family at the service of one particular thing. I think also there was maybe a slightly perverse desire in writing the piece, that when people went away from it, they would never ever forget the sound of twenty-two flutes playing together.

**Is it intended as a duet between the cello and the flutes?**

The cello is not supposed to be a solo part. I finally hit on a kind of image for the cellist to think of, in the introduction: it's a bit like you've got somebody in the woods and they're moving in and out of a thicket. They're appearing, and going behind it. You've got the ensemble and you've got this voice moving through it. But the way it was recorded, it's like, 'Oh! It's Elgar! And these flutes are a really weird noise in the background.' It shouldn't be like that.

**What would you say that was the most challenging task in composing this piece?**

I'd say getting the concept right at the very beginning. Getting an image for the piece that you can see absolutely clearly. You've got twenty-two flutes, one cello. There's the cello, everybody else is all around,

and the thing will be a kind of continuous sound. And then you make your decisions about structure and so on, and as long as you feel confident about those you can say, okay fine, now we'll write the piece.

### **Did it come out the way you expected?**

I think it came out better. I'm not so good that I know exactly how everything is going to be. Most of the things I do are in some way quite speculative: let's try this and hope we're lucky. But hopefully you learn enough along the way that maybe your choices have a better chance of working than not, but nobody's saying that for sure. I was kind of shocked with the way it turned out.

It's very unlikely that one would get a commission like that. It's just odd, kind of a one-off. But it's funny how things work out like that. The other piece that I did at the same time, which is just as odd in certain way, was one that I was asked to write for two improvising sopranos. I'm not much of an improviser and I don't know what to do for improvisers. That's problem one. Second of all is they wanted a piece on the subject of public washrooms. That's another problem. I called it "Stall."<sup>9</sup> That was very interesting because it ended up being extremely structured as well, but it was for improvisers. It had to have materials they could use, and be able to move through freely, while still having a fixed structure of twenty elements, each one running for a minute. So that was another interesting problem. And now, life's beginning to get a little boring, because now it's just writing pieces for normal ensembles. ■

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<sup>9</sup> "Stall" was written for sopranos Christine Duncan and DB Boyko who form the duo Idiollala.