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**Michael Nyman, London, 23 March 1983**  
interviewed by Virginia Anderson

**Virginia Anderson:** What brought you to composition?

**Michael Nyman:** You mean my rebirth as a....

**VA:** Your rebirth. Obviously you had designs on being a composer at one time.

**MN:** Can't remember why I first.... No, I won't talk about my childhood. I won't talk about all that stuff everyone else talks about to justify having been avant-garde, and then going back into their own juvenile dotage. Why I became a composer again consistently, i.e., doing it more than just once a year, was a practical project which started out of thing that I did from not being a composer to being a composer, [which] involved musicology and music criticism. I became a composer through musicology, but it was an odd piece of musicology. [In] 1976, there was going to be a production of a play set in eighteenth-century Venice by Carl Durning and the score that they wanted was a kind of street music. So Harrison Birtwistle, who's a friend of mine, said to me, look, go to the British Museum and check out street music, folk music of the time in Venice. Here's whatever—a hundred quid—to do the chart, present a dossier. So I dug out all these things and, in fact, discovered that there wasn't any folk music, but there were gondoliers' songs which had been collected in the eighteenth century, arranged [for] voice and piano or piano solo. I copied down all these tunes and the idea was that this would be the raw material for another composer.

**VA:** For Birtwistle?

**MN:** Well, no. I think they wanted to get Nino Rota or someone like that; [it was] a pretty high-prestige project. That fell through and it ended up that I did it. In fact, what it involved was merely arranging these tunes in a fairly simple four-part way. No real composition, but arranging them for this fictitious town band (which, of course, didn't exist). We thought that if there had been a town band in Venice it would sound a bit like this. It was a really bizarre combination of instruments. I don't think it had ever been collected together before: various medieval and folk instruments like a rebec, which is a little folk violin, shawms, soprano sax, sackbut, and banjo, which is a bizarre combination. But it did all the things that I wanted it to do—would have sounded out of tune, would have sounded very raucous, would have sounded pretty violent, and there was also drums as well, playing bass drum basically. So I arranged this stuff and it all sounded successful; very jolly and exuberant and rough! Then I got to thinking, well, this is a nice little ensemble. Why don't I keep it together and use it as a performance group. It would be the Nyman Ensemble, except that it wasn't called the Nyman Ensemble. It's really bizarre how it came totally out of the blue, because at no point had I sat down and thought it would be nice to write music; how would I get musicians together, where would I find it; when it came out of a totally practical situation of just having written for these instruments in a very banal four-part harmony way with very little need for any creative invention. There was one bass line I was rather proud of, but otherwise it was just straight harmonising, straight arranging. It was actually

an arranging job more than anything else. I thought, okay, let's get this together, so I replaced some of the instruments, I added a few more, got a seven-piece group together. I added a keyboard obviously, since I'm a piano player, and started trying to find a repertoire. So there was a three-pronged attack for the repertoire. One was actually making a concert suite from *Il Campiello*, hence the name of the band was the *Campiello* Band. Then, since there was obviously a sort of post-Scratch, post-Portsmouth Sinfonia [aesthetic], I rather liked this idea of making really bizarre arrangements of familiar tunes, pop arrangements of grand opera. I've got a really bizarre arrangement of "Il Miserere" from *Il Trovatore*, with the soprano represented by a shawm—an out-of-tune shawm—and the tenor represented by a rebec. Amazing! I wrote just an absolutely straight arrangement, a note-for-note arrangement for the available forces, but it had an element about "bizarrery" about it. Then, for the third component was my own music and I suddenly found that I was writing music.

**VA:** Out of necessity, mainly?

**MN:** Out of necessity, and there seemed to be this great wellspring of locked-up music. I had no idea before I sat down to compose, really; I mean I knew what area of music I would want to work in because I knew what I liked and what I didn't like and I already had a background in minimal music or whatever one wants to call it. But I had no idea when I started to compose, certain features would manifest themselves and would predominate over certain other features, because up until that point I had been the ideal music critic of mentally being very narrow-minded, but within that narrow confine of being very broad-minded, so I could like John White or Chris [Hobbs] or Gavin [Bryars] or Phil Glass or whatever, though I was beginning to get pissed off on Glass.

**VA:** Because of developments?

**MN:** Yeah. So I started writing music which combines traditional harmony with systems with recomposing classics with repetition with a certain kind of rock feel that you would have noticed from *Draughtsman's Contract*.

**VA:** Yes, I noticed. Also, did I see it wrong in a catalogue or did you play with The Flying Lizards?

**MN:** Yes, I did. Well, the background to The Flying Lizards is...let's face it, anyone could play with The Flying Lizards [laughter]! That's not quite true. The background is that David Cunningham, who basically *is* The Flying Lizards, was a student of mine and Gavin's at Maidstone College of Art. He was a student of mine for longer than he was a student of Gavin's because Gavin didn't teach there for very long. Then he became a rock star and he formed The Flying Lizards and had a couple of singles, had the hits, had the first album, and then started getting interested in what I was doing and produced my first album. Then on his second album we had this idea. I think it was my idea because he basically doesn't play live. We had the idea of me sitting down and transcribing everything off the album, which basically was a band who played guitars or synths or whatever and transcribing for the instruments in my band and having a rock band along as well and calling this The Flying Lizards. So I more or less forced him into doing it, so it's partly that material; partly a couple of songs by Patty Paladin, who was singing with The Flying Lizards at the time; plus a couple of my fresh material. There was one track of mine called *Bird List Song*, which was on my first album. I have three; it's really my middle album, but my first mature [one, the] first with the Michael Nyman Band album. David wanted to make a new track with Patty with a new vocal added and guitars and things, so basically I just gave him my twenty-four track recording and he recorded over it and added what he wanted to and deleted what he didn't want and made a very good Flying Lizards track. So I think I then said, well, I'd like to do it live and the whole thing developed from that. So as I say, I forced him into

it and did all the business. I haven't worked with him on any Flying Lizards projects since, but he recorded and produced [the] *Draughtsman's Contract* album.

**VA:** You were [saying that] this was your second album; your first one was....

**MN:** ...the *Obscure*, in which we were all involved. Interestingly enough, in '75, when *Obscure* was first mooted, there was a great sense of community amongst us. We were very suspicious of Glass and Reich because they were very competitive and they didn't wish to recognise each other's existence and they were very envious of each other's work and success. We saw it as being very unhealthy. We had a much more open scene in a way, which was like an arts scene. When I'd go to exhibition openings, the exhibition is A's exhibition and B, C, D, E, and F are all there participating in a way. I'm not bitching and I'm not being being envious of anybody else's success. So *Obscure* was, in a way, a very good snapshot of what was going on at that time. I played on Gavin's albums and we all played on Eno's albums and we played on other people's, so there was a pool of musicians who were basically the composers who were called upon at one point to provide music and performers and at another point to provide performers for other people's music. Certainly now that scene has become fractured. Chris isn't part of it any more and Gavin and John still work together. I mean no one knows what Chris is doing. I didn't until I spoke to him the other day, and I think Gavin knows more or John knows more. Since I've started writing music, the whole thing has become much more like the Americans, except there's another layer of New York music, which is much more community-based. Peter Gordon, Rhys Chatham, Glenn Branca [and others] are admittedly fighting for the same venues but they promote each other.

**VA:** To a certain extent.

**MN:** Up to a certain point. Rhys will promote these other people—obviously when he was at The Kitchen—and they use each other as musicians—Peter Gordon sits in on a Laurie Anderson performance and that kind of thing. It doesn't happen [here] any more; I feel partly because of the way the scene has developed and partly because of the way my music has developed. I feel very isolated from everyone else and very separate from everyone else; they may also feel separated from themselves. I know that Gavin feels very separated from me because his music has gone, as far as I can see, backwards in a particular crab-wise way and mine has gone sideways in a different way. He's not basically interested in anything that has anything to do with rock or popular music; he's into Berners and Grainger and Busoni. So I feel very much on my own and the sort of liaisons I make are more with rock people. [At] the time of *Obscure* we all liked Eno but we were all rather suspicious of him, rather prim about being associated with the rock world and we were associated in an indirect way and it didn't impinge on us at all.

**VA:** [It] didn't influence your music?

**MN:** No, no way could it. I felt exactly the same way as Gavin felt about rock music. He probably knew more about rock than me anyway. But since I actually started composing, actually physically sat down at the piano and found a little piece of Mozart—sixteen bars of *Don Giovanni*—that I wanted to turn into a piece, and I started playing those repeated notes that are there in the middle violin part, I suddenly found that I did all this sort of rock and roll. I'd never thought about it, never done it, so that partly a kind of looking at material and partly, literally, a way of forming that material became the style that you heard in that *Draughtsman's Contract* stuff.

**VA:** Now, you've got this connection with rock. Outside of The Flying Lizards do you get any kind of direct...?

**MN:** No, you see, I'm sort of like an absent-minded professor. When people actually ask me about specific rock things, that's very apparent that I know very little about it; I don't listen to

very much. But I have a sense that there's something there and I do things that I think relate to it, but in fact they are probably totally imaginary.

**VA:** It's more about rock, than...?

**MN:** It's more about a general sort of language than any specific. There are all sorts of parallels apart from the rhythmic thing and the fact that I would use bass guitar that I would never have known about it, that it's not a classical instrument. There's a rhythmic thing, there's also a method of layering, which I consider to be parallel. Certain things happen in rock music: bass, middle voices and melody; very basic and there's nothing particularly crucial. Plus the way I record my albums—certainly the way I mix them—has more to do with rock than it does with classical music. I don't just go in there and record a concert, when one modifies the sounds of the instruments quite radically. I use 24-track technology in a way that rock musicians use it: I add layers and remove layers. So even though I might go in there with a complete piece recorded, if I can listen to it and hear that certain things need to be done or certain things need to be emphasized or whatever, another layer can be added, then I would do that in the way that classical straight composers don't normally do. The rock composers obviously were much more in that intuitive way. I do like changing things in that studio, so although everything is written down, in performance everything is fixed, in a recording studio one hears other possibilities. You are producing something that isn't just a reproduction of a concert performance, so I do a lot of overdubbing and things.

**VA:** When did the Michael Nyman Band in its present form take shape?

**MN:** I can't remember the exact date, but that is the *Campiello* Band that is the same band I got together.

**VA:** Same people, minor changes?

**MN:** Well, there were...I mean all the personnel. Nobody in that band that you saw remains from 1977, and the kind of orientation of the thing has changed, that originally there were a lot of medieval and folk instruments. The other difference between the groups that I have and that Gavin, say, has had—I mean, the ones that Gavin has had up until quite recently—have been composer-performer. John White, Dave Smith, Gavin all play their own and each others' music and I've always gone for professional musicians. There are two reasons for that. One is I've always felt I've got better performers; if you want a pianist or if you want a violin player, you don't try on somebody who is a composer and happens to be a violin player or happens to be a euphonium player. It also means I've been able to choose the instruments I want rather than be stuck with the fact that John White plays tuba and Dave plays tenor horn and Gavin plays piano and bass and whatever. So I've actually gone for the instruments that I want because I've basically been an employer.

**VA:** This seems to be a kind of complete circle from the Scratch [Orchestra] and their actual preference towards amateurism.

**MN:** Well, I don't have that any more since I've had this group together, although people would say to you if you talked to them in detail the band has always had a pretty funky tuning. It's partly because of the instruments; they're inherently out of tune. Rebecs are difficult to play; shawms and all that medieval stuff. You listen to medieval music, early music is always out of tune, partly because of the instruments, partly because of certain kinds of musicians. So given that, I've always been rather keen that you can write more professional music to be played more accurately for a wider range of musicians. Originally I wanted a loud band, but I didn't want anything to do with amplification because that smacked of rock 'n' roll. So originally it was just loud, loud instruments with no amplification and then I introduced the electric guitar, and if you have one

amplified instrument then everything else has to be amplified. I basically like the sound of amplified instruments.

**VA:** So that's why, for your recent concert, the sound was [amplified].

**MN:** Well, this is a great problem I have. Basically, I'd like to sound as loud as a rock 'n' roll band because I get a great buzz from that. I think that if I can leave a concert with literally my ears buzzing then I think that's great. I actually get a real physical high from it. We've done concerts where it sounds like chamber music and I actually think that, though the actual musical content is the same, it sounds diminished, it sounds very weedy as rock 'n' roll would sound weedy if it didn't have a good sound system and as Phil Glass's music wouldn't exist if it didn't have a good sound system. So gradually there were a lot of replacements so that at some point—I mean this is not definitely in any specific order—I would find that I would start using saxophones rather than shawms and I would use violins more than rebecs, because you could play them better in tune and because technically you could do more with them. Then I added a bass guitar and the whole thing just inevitably became amplified and now all the old instruments have gone. I've got this other thing: I'm not only changing instruments all the time as I discover instruments I never knew existed—I never knew the baritone saxophone existed until my shawm player brought one along and it's been there ever since—but I've also obviously found better musicians. I don't think I could improve on the two violinists; well, theoretically you can but I wouldn't try. The lead saxophone player is the best young classical saxophone player in England, so there's no way I'd improve on him. So the band at the moment is pretty stable in terms of personnel and instruments. Now, the question of how much amplification to use depends on who I get to do the mixing. Basically the players are upset if they feel that they're putting a great deal of expertise into performing and someone out there who's not actually a musician is controlling what they do; especially if it's very loud because they can't hear properly, so there's a balance between keeping them happy and keeping me happy. Also, the music itself—it's not complex music but it does deal with texture and specific timbres, like putting a soprano sax against a clarinet and wanting those two particular sounds to be audible.

What I do is very different from what Glass does, in the sense that his band is basically a monochrome sound—organs sound like saxophones, saxophones sound like organs—so I don't see the point of mixing them. But still it's more interesting to watch saxophones players stop playing and start again than it is to hear organ players playing continuously. What I do obviously is more traditional-type orchestration. If you do want to make these subtle doublings or whatever, if you do want to use an instrument creatively rather than to just create a kind of machine sound, then there is a possibility that if the amplification is too high, then you just hear a wall of sound, which is exciting in itself, but [you] lose all the details. There is a balance between wanting a great wall and wanting all of these fine details to be heard. It's really a question of time and money to be actually able to sit down in a space with the same PA as you're going to use and working out balances; but then you play in a different space, you play in that church, it's a whole different set of possibilities and problems so it's very difficult. Even Glass doesn't solve it and his problems are actually comparatively easy, but in different spaces it sounds good, in other spaces it sounds not so good.

**VA:** Is all your music repetitive now?

**MN:** Well, it's repetitive in the sense [that] if you can say that chaconnes and passacaglias and ground basses and traditional rock and roll is repetitive, then my music is repetitive. Here's my set of chords that I will build, there might be eight bars, eight chords that I will build a whole section or a whole piece just on those eight bars. So we're talking about repeating a kind of framework, right? So it's repetitive, isn't it? Is the Bach Chaconne a piece of repetitive music?

**VA:** So there's a difference?

**MN:** I think so, because I'm also fairly hung up about naked repetition, that if I repeat something a second time, it isn't repeated because it's varied. I might change the figuration [or] the instrumentation. I might put a melody with it; so if you mean is it repetitive in the sense that you can have a bar and I can put a "times two" by it, or a "times three", sometimes I can, sometimes I can't. Sometimes each bar is different; sometimes some players are doing that three times and sometimes they're not. For instance, I might have a piece that has a section that consists of eight repeats, and some [of] the melody are changing on each repeat or increasing on the notes of the melody, and all the backing instruments are playing the same thing. So it is and it isn't; if you say *The Draughtsman's Contract* music as being typical but not typical, because that's obviously closest to ground basses, because I *did* use ground basses.

**VA:** In your description of the work, you were talking about an alliance of some sort with systemic or repetitive music, or an influence of it. I'm not really clear; what's the difference between systemic and repetitive [music]?

**MN:** I don't know, ask Chris. I always learned from Chris that systemic music was music that was based on number systems, random permutations, or whatever.

**VA:** You don't have that.

**MN:** Yes, I do sometimes. Some of the early pieces I did with the band was set against this repetition system—I mean, this frame-layering thing—and, say, have five systems consist of five bars and each bar consists of three chords, so I would then have a repeat system. Then I actually took the numbers off the telephone directory, [only] from a piece of John White's. So it's a kind of repetitive music feeding on repetitive music. But then, what I would do—you know *Drinking and Hooting Machine*, right? I actually took figures from that. Totally irrelevant—the music doesn't sound like *Drinking and Hooting Machine*. You start with the ass part—dah, dah, dah, dah—and you'd have five sets of related chord progressions: two doesn't repeat one, and three doesn't repeat two, but we're talking chord progression sets, right? The rhythm is always the same. Then for the bass or for the second line you do the same without something on top of it and you have times three, times seven, times one, so it's exactly the same chord sequence going down that way. But all the repeats are changing and all the superstructure is begin add here all the time.

**VA:** So with varied repetition from the various layers it comes out different.

**MN:** Absolutely, so there are two sets of changes. Although there's always a certain consistency—one is always locked into a certain method of working—each piece works differently. So that technique I described to you is one technique, another piece would have a totally different technique., but there is.... I guess I was trying to think of other pieces that I've done that aren't [repetitive]; Well, there's one piece I did recently which has a sort of narrative thing to it because it's a setting [of] a text, which surprised people by not being repetitive. But I always have the problem of finding the next chord, so I very rarely do what Gavin does or, say, Chris does, of writing the kind of.... If I'm thinking harmonically I like a twenty-four-barred sentence, or what ever one calls them, in which there's no repetition. I make twenty-four bars out by having six lots of four and three lots of eight or eight lots of three, so it's not a continuously...well, it's not like real music. Apart from ground basses and variations, composers in the past haven't got locked into sets of chord changes in the way that I do. So in that sense it is, if you want to call it, repetitive.

**VA:** So the unifying factor is layering?

**MN:** The unifying is the layering, but then there's one piece that I was thinking about just now which consists of a melody: [sings] which is the beginning of the piece in unison. I mean that this is, in a way, a true systems piece because one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, because

after that we keep the same rhythm and then shift the notes along by one, so this becomes two, three, etc., etc. So the other thing that's consistent in my music is a kind of isometric thing. If I write eight bars generally, or sixteen bars or whatever, those sixteen bars will have a melody. The melody always has the same rhythm in each bar with rare exceptions; I mean, this is an exception. The harmony might vary but the melody stays the same and then I always use that. Then I might completely change the harmonic basis of the piece but keep that melodic rhythm. So there are also a lot of the very traditional [transformations], although it's not used in a traditional way like thematic metamorphosis, but always retaining, say, the same rhythm. So we shift this, the process of shifting is by adding another. Now you repeat that twice and by the third time you add another note and then you begin the rhythmic sequence again but shift it along again. The beginning of the piece is in unison and then at a later section it's harmonized in parallels and then the following section it's harmonized in a totally different way; sometimes a down will go up and an up will go down with a totally different chord sequence. The second section is that chord sequence without the melody and then it would be easy to show it to you. So that's a fairly evolved piece of music for me, but still I would say is it a set of variations, is it repetitive?

**VA:** That's a recent work?

**MN:** That's two or three years old. But basically the only way to do this successfully is to [look at] some scores. But they're very hard to come by, scores, because I generally don't write them. I do a piano score or work from a piano part and just write the parts and give them to the players. There's an orchestral piece, which obviously is fully scored. So [it's] difficult to locate.

**VA:** If Studio Vista, say, said, 'We want to put out a...?'

**MN:** The answer's no.

**VA:** You wouldn't?

**MN:** No, no way. Why should I? A lot of people ask me this and there are a lot of reasons for not doing this: a) it takes too long; b) it pays very badly; c) there's so much music since 1972 when I finished that book that I'd have to write about that it would be another book; and d) a lot of that music doesn't interest me, but for the sake of completeness and openness I would have to include it all.

**VA:** What really interests you? Who's really hot to you?

**MN:** No one, unfortunately. It's not arrogance, it's not saying my music is so amazing that nothing else touches it. I desperately go and listen to other music either to be excited, astonished, ravished, sent, or whatever by [something]; or, given that I have a particular orientation towards a particular type of material, method of working, something that I can lift from somewhere else to add to my box of tricks, because I do. Since I've been composing, for the last six years, I do actually see the building of a technique, of the invention of a bunch of devices, that each piece uses a different [technique] because the material's different. A different device either arises naturally out of the material or has to be sought to actually get, say, these four bars into four hundred bars. As I've done more and more pieces—and they've all been different because the material's always different—you can never repeat yourself, although I do, quite a lot. I see a bunch of techniques, of devices, and a particular device for your start. You think, well, how can I do this, and you think, well, maybe that device would work. Then, because you're using that device on a totally different [piece] and even a totally different set of chords, certain other things arise, so that it gives rise to another set of devices. There are certain devices that are constant; one is an isometric thing, if you want to give it a grand name. Another one is obviously these harmonic blocks; another one is that old Steve Reich thing of building up a melody note by note,

which I do [and] I'm still into. Another one is reharmonizing. For instance, the very last piece we played in *The Draughtsman's Contract*, the big long funeral march piece: [sings] with the bass for twelve minutes, and then it becomes a melody for the last few sections and there's a totally different harmonization of it. So whatever that is, I do that quite often. Layering, just increasing the amount of vertical information density. Apart from the stylistic things which are constant, consistent, there's always things like melody, always harmonies, always rhythm. Melody is always [important], and the harmonization always has a certain edge to it, both with the instruments I use and in the way I use them. You can invent other things.

**VA:** You were talking about noise and the huge sound level. You seem to like to stop and have grand pauses and big silences [as well].

**MN:** Yes, it does have a certain theatrical quality about it, which is not something that I strive for but which arises naturally. It's inherently dramatic in a funny sort of way. But I think that it's basically because I choose certain types of material; I don't choose them because they express this or they have this certain character, but there are certain things I like. If I wanted to use a section with a major chord followed by a minor chord, followed by a major chord, these materials have all these historical connotations and memories and whatever. I do two types of piece: one is a quick job like three-four minutes as a kind of snapshot, then longer pieces, anything from, say, twelve minutes to two hours. I like to have abrupt changes and abrupt surprises in them to lull the punters into a false sense of security—they're going along and there's a wonderful road and they're looking at the scenery. Suddenly you veer off into a little sidetrack which you didn't know existed and it is very unexpected, and then you verge back. So there's a piece that I did; it lasts two hours, it's a performance art piece, which is much more evolved. Basically there's a set of eight chords and some figuration. The eight chords are varying and there are replacements and changes in quality and lots of simultaneous sets of variations, but they're cut up, so it actually gives me great pleasure to interrupt the flow. This is the thing that pisses me off about Glass and Reich, that once they've started on this thing, you're there for twelve minutes. My stock answer to minimal music is that the definition of minimal music is a minimal amount of material going on for the maximum amount of time [laughter]! So, I'm actually very scrupulous about my material. Although other people might find it boring, I'm actually very concerned that you can't make a good piece out of bad material, you can't make an interesting piece out of uninteresting material. You *can* make an uninteresting piece out of uninteresting material, but I think the fault of a lot of even highly-thought-of minimal music—whatever you like to call that American stuff—is, I find, the material exhausts its interest after a very short space of time. Since the basic technique of Reich and Glass and me and [whoever] are pretty simple, I find the interest on that material is exhausted pretty easily, and no matter how one justifies putting it through this system or that system, basically we're all in the same boat, that technically we either are or choose to be [limited], in the way that Satie was or chose to be limited, but thank goodness it was. Our attitude towards our material—this arises from the Scratch Orchestra, Portsmouth Sinfonia—is on the one hand to distance oneself from it so that we do set up these systems, and in fact the repetitions, but on the other hand to be so close to it and fond of it that we actually don't want to distort it too much. So, if I write a piece based on Mozart or Purcell, I'll take it a certain distance from the original but then stop, because the reason I've used that particular model is because I like it, so if I take it beyond a certain point I'm destroying it. This is sort of what Stockhausen might do or Maxwell Davies.

**VA:** And you want people to recognize it?

**MN:** I want people to recognize it and I don't want people to say, God, he's clever! My piece, called *In Re: Don Giovanni* [has] got these sixteen bars of the catalogue songs. I want the people to say, and they do say, My God, I never heard *that* before! So in a way I was rescuing a piece of music, not from obscurity but from the fact that sixteen at a crotchet equals 120, or whatever—goes pretty fast. So, I, in my systematic way, extended it to three or four minutes, which is the

sort of thing John and Chris were doing in the PTO days. But a lot of what I do, I think, is close to PTO.

**VA:** However, your specific likes and interests make a difference?

**MN:** Oh, absolutely—my modes of thought and attitudes and methods of presentation are going to be different, but [it is close] in the sense of taking an object apart and putting it together again. What I did in *In Re: Don Giovanni* was, there are four sections and the first one just has the backing, which is the second violin part. The second section adds the melody part, which is in fact a loose imitation of the bass part, and the fourth section adds the melody that's sung in the opera.

**VA:** So that it's slowly revealed?

**MN:** Absolutely. So this is my method of rock, growing up in the backing to the melody and doing it in four stages; but it's also a comment on [the source]; it's taking an artefact to pieces and showing how it works and renewing it. You could actually intellectualize it any number of ways, but to me it was just a means of prolonging something that I thought was an amazing set of chord changes.

**VA:** You take various kinds of sources, but....

**MN:** Not always; quite often I use my own material.

**VA:** What do you like, or what wouldn't you take? What pieces wouldn't you use?

**MN:** Well, once I realized I had a kind of quasi-hit with *In Re: Don Giovanni*, I ransacked the rest of *Don Giovanni* to see if there was anything that appealed to me on the one hand, and on the other anything that I could do anything with and I couldn't find anything. That was just one of those really happy inspirations. What else have I used? I've used the basic rock 'n' roll I-VI-IV-I thing and overlaid 'All the Things You Are', the Jerome Kern thing, and arranged it in a really Steve Reich notes-for-rests [manner]. See, there you've got a triple cultural thing—you've got rock 'n' roll, repetitive music, you've got a [musical] tune. Basically there are certain archetypes, stereotypes and any number of tunes can be written on this [model] and have been. The fourth thing is [a] really late twentieth-century method of building the tunes from nothing to something, transforming-to-fifth thing, which is my piece. Not particularly intellectualized at the time, but when I have to give lectures.... Again, with *Draughtsman's Contract* music, the film told me we'd have to use something from the seventeenth century, so I had literally played through everything Purcell had ever written except things I could see weren't interesting. I'd come across a ground bass which I would think would be terrific. It's mainly harmony rather than melody. I can't do anything with melodies unless they're part of a harmony. So I find all this Purcell material; sometimes it would be three chords or two bars, quite often it would be the whole ground bass. Most of those pieces you heard were ground basses. Then I would strip off the Purcell or keep as much as I wanted to and start work as though this were my material. In those pieces there was a greater or lesser degree of Purcell or a greater or lesser degree of Nyman, so that the thing called 'Queen of the Night' [was] a fairly straight arrangement of Purcell even though I tinkered around with the melody and improved it. A thing called—whatever went [taps and sings]—had no Purcell at all in it apart from the bass line. The slow ground bass in E minor had the feel of Purcell's original and one melody line, the rest were me. So the people call this pastiche and parody, and it manifestly isn't either of those two things. I don't know how you'd define it.

**VA:** Are you getting that? Are critics stating that it's pastiche?

**MN:** Well, film critics do, but that doesn't mean anything. Oh, yes, pastiche and parody or Purcell itself, which shows that people actually don't know what Baroque music sounds like. I got rather scared at one point because I was a bit concerned that the 'Queen of the Night', the fact that it was a Purcell song, I was being a bit too close and plagiaristic. Then I just happened to switch on the radio and there was a guy singing it and it sounded a million light years away, because mine was more emphatic and the melody had changed, the instrumentation, so I don't feel at all guilty about that. But that was a job that I had to do for a particular reason. I don't think I ever would have on my own volition have used that material; no way it'd ever occurred to me of doing it.

**VA:** But you're happy now that you've done it?

**MN:** Oh, yes. Now there's another long piece—this is my one non-harmonic piece—where there's a ten-note kind of Conlon Nancarrow [motive; sings], and that's the sole material for the piece, which is a bass line for something else. The task of the piece was to discover as many ways of treating it as possible: a) that I could think of; and b) that interested me. So I found myself doing a whole bunch of things; it became a bass line again for some kind of material, then it was a Nancarrow-type melody with different punctuations, then it became transformed—it was originally in a minor key and then I did a major-key version of it, and that became the sort of Glassy-Reich-y backing. Sometimes I sit myself back from writing material and use it as a means of discovering things that I didn't know that I could do.

**VA:** Do you have some commissions coming up?

**MN:** Yeah. I'm fairly conscious of three or four a year. Last year I did this orchestral piece for Austria, which is basically an orchestration of some of *The Draughtsman's Contract*, an extension thereof. I mean it's bad enough writing for orchestra without having to invent new material! So it's a massive arrangement job, basically. Yeah, I've written pieces for the two violinists in my group and I just did this piece for Sing Circle with four amplified singers after the gamelan piece.

**VA:** How are you going to work that?

**MN:** Well, the fact that I've not written a note for about six or eight months. You see, the reason I did that [is] partly because it's nice to get money for writing music and the other thing is that again, as with this piece, which was just a melody line, if I use one of the tunings, the one that's less pentatonic, the one with the D# in it, there are not many triads and dominant sevenths you can fish out of that, so I'm going to have to think it in a totally different way. That's stimulating, except I don't happen to be stimulated to do anything yet. Plus, what else? Various dance pieces, more film work—the last film score I did was a kind of Michael Nyman-meets-Bernard Herrmann. There's some very, very Hitchcockian music, but done again maybe [with a] kind of systems approach. I'd have two chords, two bars, minor minor ninths. The first time they'd be repeated four times, then you'd have certain—one, two, and then one, two, three times, and then you'd have three, four—two new chords four times, then you'd have one, two twice, then you'd have three and four three times, then you'd have five and six three times, so each time a new pair of chords came in you'd repeat them four times and then after one repeat the next time they came back they'd be three repetitive devices. And the nice thing about that is that whereas you think this is going to be nice, rollicking sort of [thing], it actually kind of throws you; so though it's a regular three in a bar, you're not sure when the next repeat is going to come. This is what I'd call my systems; the whole piece in fact. I'll come and show it to you.