

Appendix II, Brian Bridges MPhil thesis: Edited transcript of interview with Rhys Chatham. Interview took place in Paris, 10th May, 2003.

Early Inspiration in NYC

BB: I suppose, just to go back to the start, you started doing electronic music and working with additive synthesis and overtones when you were in NYU.

RC: So, what happened was...I started out as a flute player, but man we're really going back to the beginning! I played Edgar Varese's *Density 21.5*, Boulez's *Sonatine* and Davidovsky's piece *Synchronisms* - I think it's No. 2, for flute, and I was just blown away, I fell in love with that music. I got interested in the whole Darmstadt thing. And I had this composition teacher, I was just thirteen or something...he was my theory teacher in a private music school that I went to, and he was a composer, and so he taught me how to do serial music and so I got my start doing serial music. And I met Morton Subotnick when I was sixteen and he was very kind and very generous and let me use his electronic music studio, and there was a Buchla 100 series, do you know what that is?

BB: Yeah, it's an early modular...

RC: Yeah it's an early...it's like there were two synthesizers on the scene, this was in 68 or 67 - there was the Moog, which was essentially a glorified keyboard, and there was the Buchla.

BB: That was a different interface, wasn't it?

RC: Well, the Buchla was a collaboration between Morton Subotnick and Don Buchla, and the philosophy behind it was that it wouldn't be based on equal temperament the way the Moog was, and so you had to tune everything with potentiometers, and it made for a different kind of music, but...as soon as I started working with that, I wanted to work with electronic music, that was it for me.

BB: And in terms of that, was it that that first sparked an interest in alternate tuning?

RC: No. The way tuning worked with the Buchla synthesizer was essentially through generating random patterns - it wasn't particularly in any tuning.

BB: It wasn't particularly reliable for exact tuning?

RC: No. But what sparked my interest in tuning was when I went to NYU I needed a way to make money. And my father is a virginal player, and we knew the whole community of harpsichord and virginal players, and I studied with an Englishman who'd been in America for years and years named Hugh Gough...He was one of the few harpsichord makers based in New York and he made beautiful instruments - one of a kind, based on Flemish instruments. After I studied with him, he sent me to William Dowd, who is the Steinway of harpsichord makers in America, in Cambridge Massachusetts, and I stayed in his workshop for six months...Not to become a harpsichord builder, which is a way of life, but simply to learn how to tune and regulate harpsichords. And I came back to New York, and my girlfriend thought I was drug dealer - she couldn't figure out how I was making money! Because I told her, 'It just takes fifteen minutes to tune a harpsichord', and I put myself through school. But, I learned to tune equal temperament, and to tune in equal temperament, you have to hear acoustic beats. And that's how I got into tuning. And then at NYU, working in the studio, was Charlemagne Palestine, Maryanne Amacher, Serge Tcherepnin - Serge Tcherepnin is the son of Alexander Tcherepnin - all of whom were working with music of long duration. And...I dunno, when I first started working in that studio I was primarily into post-serial music. But there was this incredible series that was happening in a place called 'The Electric Circus', which was on St. Mark's, between Second and Third - have you been to New York?

BB: I haven't, no.

RC: Right. And I heard that this composer named Terry Riley was going to be playing there. And I had seen this score of Terry Riley's in a book called *An Anthology* - do you know of it? It was put out by La Monte Young and Jackson MacLowe in the early sixties. And I saw a score of Terry's, and it looked a little bit like John Cage's *Variation 5*, you know, with lots of squiggly lines...it looked like it was going to be really noisy. I was into dissonance and I was into noise, at that point.

BB: So, even before the rock thing, you were into noise and dissonance?

RC: Yeah, and into timbre and, you know...a young man, you know, needs to make noise! What did Virgil Thomson say - when you're in your twenties you compose percussion music, and then you get into winds in your thirties, and when you're older, it's *strings*! I followed that model - at

least the initial part of it. Anyway, so I went to this concert expecting this great, noisy concert, and here was this guy playing this circus organ, with tonal music! And I was so pissed off! And I wanted my money back, I didn't want to hear this silly circus music, so I tried to get my money back - it was five dollars to get in, which was a lot of money back then, and they wouldn't give it to me, so I said, 'Ah, I paid the five dollars, I'll go check it out.' And by the end of the concert I became a Terry Riley convert, I mean that's what got me into minimalism, and I said, 'Man, I've never heard music like this', and became a closet Terry Riley player, the way, you know, trying to play those kinds of things. And Charlemagne, Serge, and Maryanne Amacher in particular, were all doing music of long duration, I think they kind of influenced me, and before long I wasn't using the sequencer on the Buchla, I was just using the oscillators just going through ring modulators, and using modulation, and working with timbre and music of long duration...

La Monte Young and the Theatre of Eternal Music

...And then I went to hear a concert of a man named La Monte Young, with Charlemagne, and both of us left the concert, [we] were so pissed off. I mean, this guy had been doing for ten years what we were just starting to do...You know, we thought we were the first! And Charlemagne was a bit older than me, he's a bit older than me he's eight years older than me, and the difference between twenty and twenty six is quite a bit...

BB: Yeah. And at what stage was this? When was this?

RC: This was in 1970. And Charlemagne was saying, 'Ah, I didn't think the intervals were really pure', you know, he was sort of taking this of tack, and I was going, 'Shit, this guy, La Monte, has just been doing this for such a long time.' And I went from working with ring modulators to just working with sine-wave generators, and started tuning things in perfect intervals. And at that time, I'd started up this place called the Kitchen, as you probably know, and I founded the music programme there, I think it was '71, and so I thought, I should invite La Monte to play, and so I went to La Monte's house, and he played me a piece called *The Well Tuned Piano*, this early version of it, which he played me on an upright piano that he had tuned himself, and I said to him, 'That's a very nice piece, La Monte, but, you know, I think I could tune your piano better.'

And, you know, he knew that I was scamming him for a lesson. So that's how I started to study with La Monte - I tuned his piano in exchange for lessons. And he taught me a system of tuning in just intonation; tuning in small intervals 63 to 64 and 80 to 81, and that's how I started working in just intonation...because of La Monte. And that system of La Monte's though, was taught to La Monte by Tony Conrad.

BB: Yeah, that's one thing I've been coming across is this whole sort of dispute between Cale and Conrad and Young...and one thing I saw John Cale say in his autobiography was they were giving some concert in Rutgers University...back in the early days when Young was still playing saxophone with them, and Cale had his amplified viola, and he started imitating what Young was doing on these really high harmonics on the viola, which were, of course, more in tune than the saxophone equal-tempered notes -

RC: - Which is why La Monte gave up saxophone.

BB: Yeah, yeah, and I was wondering if you have any idea if it was that which sparked a conversation between the whole band, and then Conrad brought this up.

RC: Conrad was the theoretical brains behind all these guys working in just intonation. La Monte, when he started out, was primarily interested in music of long durations. It was, you know, the sixties, the psychedelic era, people were opening up to meditation - and it was just in the air, you know. I don't know if he was specifically interested in working with pure intervals, he didn't start out that way, he was interested in long duration. But Tony had been working in violin with...well, there was this composer, I think his name was Martin Buber - he was this nineteenth century composer, and I think Tony was inspired by him, and started doing music of long duration in, I think, 63, something like that, with purely tuned intervals on the violin, which is easy to do because it doesn't have any frets. And I think La Monte was inspired by this, and switched from saxophone to voice, because he couldn't play the saxophone really in just intonation, but with the voice, course, you can sing in just intonation. I don't know exactly how it evolved between these guys, I assume it was organically. But La Monte is a person...have you met him? Well, he's a very sweet man, and he's very intelligent, and he's very sharp...but he does have a huge ego. And he's very concerned about his place in history. And I think he developed these ideas and quite honestly thought they'd come from him....you know how that

can happen sometimes? And this dispute Tony and John Cale and La Monte...I don't think it's so much about that...it's more about who the composer is on these tapes...

BB: And getting access to releasing tapes.

RC: Yeah, I mean, they approached it...I mean the idea of John Cale and Tony Conrad was it was more like and AC...not an ACM...more like a Musica Electronica Viva situation, where you have Chevsky, Teitelbaum, Curran, and another guy, and it was sort of like an equal collaboration, and they were viewing it that way, whereas La Monte had always viewed it as a La Monte Young concert, and I think he was the one that got the gigs. But I hope they work it out because the record that came out on Table of Elements Records wasn't the best example...

BB: Yeah, it's a very bad recording...

RC: Yeah, and musically it's...not as incredible...as the concerts are.

BB: Yeah, this is the pity - it's very hard to get hold of Young's music or any part of that collective music from that period at all.

RC: Right. I mean, essentially, the only way to hear it...I mean his saxophone playing was incredible, by the way, I mean, he played soprano saxophone and used circular breathing to articulate these lines that were going for ten minutes before he'd take a breath, and he was playing all sixty-fourth notes at a high tempo, this modal kind of thing...It was just beautiful. But he won't play it on the radio, he won't release it on record because of his copyright dispute problems, so the only way you can hear it is when he plays the tapes in a concert.

BB: Right. So I'll just have to get to New York sometime.

RC: Yeah.

BB: Around the sort of the mid 70s when you were exploring this whole scene, did you hear anything by the Velvet Underground?

RC: Well, I never heard them live.

BB: Yeah, well you wouldn't, I suppose, at that stage.

RC: But I'd heard their records, I mean they were an inspiration...but...funnily enough, in all these years, I've never met John Cale...we just never bumped into each other...We almost...I mean, I've a Welsh heritage...you know, 'Rhys', it's an old family name...and you'd think guy like me, guy like him, but, no...

BB: Yeah, I was trying to get hold of him for the thesis, but I'm still waiting to hear back...I mean it has to go through his management and all....

Early Mature Compositions: Gongs, Guitars and Combination Tones

But anyway, in terms of your early electronic stuff is there anything that had any great bearing on your later work...would you consider it to be mature compositions in your style.

RC: Yeah, there were two compositions that defined my style from the early 70s...they were ring modulator pieces, but somehow they weren't grating, they were very tonal.

BB: Was this after the Terry Riley experience?

RC: Yeah, it was just after...I mean they weren't pure intervals - you didn't know what the intervals were, but those electronic pieces were really the basis....Well, here's what happened. I started working with these electronic pieces, but then I got sick of working with electronics because I missed playing an instrument. So, I think around about 73 I gradually drifted away from working with the Buchla. And I was in...when I tuned harpsichords, I worked for a rental company...Harpsichords were really big, people used them to make jingles with.

BB: Really?

RC: You had *Secret Agent Man* with, you know, that scene, so all the producers wanted harpsichords in all their commercials. But, you know, every time you move a harpsichord, they have to be tuned, and so the rental company would send me out (because the digital tuner hadn't been invented yet), and I would tune them up. So I was in the rental company regulating an instrument, and I noticed how they had these large Chinese gongs...I don't know if you read about that in the book?

BB: Yeah.

RC: And, when I started working with two of them, it sounded like a lot of my electronic music compositions, and I thought, 'This is just great.'

BB: And was it, like 'This is something I can take out live and actually play something'?

RC: Yeah, there was this kind of performance aspect to it, rather than looking at a tape go round, and twiddling knobs. So I did that piece, and out of that piece came *Drastic Classicism*.

BB: And the intensity with which you struck the gongs varied the overtone content, so that was kind of related to your amplified music, was it?

RC: Well, the concert was amplified. But if you hit it softly one overtone level would come out - it depended on where you hit, it depended on how hard you hit it.

BB: Yeah, it's an amazing sound. When I was listening to it on the CD, it really did sound like a lot of the guitar pieces.

RC: Yeah, with *Drastic Classicism* I was overtly going, 'Let's do the gong piece'.

BB: Only with guitars.

RC: Yeah, what happened with that piece was I just wanted to make something really dissonant, so I took a guitar that was tuned D A C# D Eb High D - there's a fifth in the middle there somewhere, so it was fairly dissonant, although there were harmonic elements in it. What did I tune that minor second to? There's a way to tune, I think it's 48 to 49. If you do 48 to 49 it sounds like a minor second, but there's this area that you can hear it's 48 to 49 where a certain set of overtones stops beating, and then you know it's just right, so I tuned it to that, and then I tuned three other guitars in minor second relationships to each other. And, man, when we first played it, it was like there were choirs of human voices, it was just incredible.

BB: And that sort of thing just wouldn't come out on the recording.

RC: It's hard to get it to come out. I tried to boost the harmonics so it would sound as much as possible like the performance.

BB: And would a lot of that be 'cause there were combination tones - sum and difference tones?

RC: It's the difference between playing something over a hundred watt system and a fifty thousand watt system! I mean, when you put something like that on a recording, you're making a representation.

BB: And there are certain things the ear does perceptually, like sum and difference tone effects anyway, and a microphone just isn't going to do that.

RC: The piece on that recording is more opaque than what we had in...

BB: Yeah I was wondering, because your description seemed to be...

RC: On the recording it was more like a wall of sound - in the live performance, I mean, you could hear it as a wall of sound, but...

BB: But you could hear the components...

RC: Yeah, you could hear the sum and differences...You know they had the subwoofers at Max's and CBGB's, and it made the composite sound more translucent.

Early Rock Influences and *Guitar Trio*

BB: And in terms of when you got into the guitar first, you went to a Ramones gig, and was it just a sense that you had this gut reaction that 'This is an instrument that I really want to work with...and I really want to do something with rock' and then the opportunity for the overtones came later, or...

RC: Well, I saw the Ramones play, and at first I thought 'This is *really* dumb', and then I thought 'this is *really* great!' And you know, the Ramones were working with more complex chord structures than I was...You know, they were working with I, IV and V, whereas I was only working with I! But, even so, I saw the music that they made was not dissimilar to the minimalist music that I was making, and I was thinking 'You know, I could get into this, and what would happen if we did it without the voice?' So, when I first picked up the guitar - do you know who Scott Johnson is? He's a composer in New York, and he's also a guitarist, and he had a Telecaster that he wasn't using, and so he lent it to me, and showed me how to play barre chords, and so I practiced playing barre chords for six weeks and had really sore fingers, but, you know, after six weeks you know how to play barre chords! And so, at first I made pieces that were barre chords, and playing them at Phil Niblock's - do you know who that is? He has a loft on Centre Street in New York, and it's a kind of underground...

BB: So they actually had all these gigs on in his loft?

RC: Yeah, well, he has a huge loft, it was very comfortable. And if twenty people came it felt fine, it could hold up to about 120, and...

BB: And they never had any hassle from the cops with these sort of loud...?

RC: Not down there, it wasn't a residential area. And so I did my barre chord piece first. And then I started, actually, a rock band, called the Gynecologists, with Nina [Chatham's former bandmate and sometime flatmate, Nina Canal] - I've known Nina for ages, it's very funny that she's ended up in Paris! And so, we were in a band together - just a straight punk band. I felt that I need experience as a rock musician, so I wanted to join a rock group, because when I picked up the guitar, I said, 'This isn't going to be any problem at all, guitar is an easy

instrument, I can count to four, and I can play Boulez's *Sonatine for Flute and Piano*, no problem' but then my playing was really stiff and I was playing like a classical musician, and I still hadn't completely broken away from the notion of playing music while reading...And so I realised that if I was going to make pieces in a rock context that wasn't completely about appropriation, then I should actually play in a rock band to see what it's like, so I did that, and it was a really good experience. And then Nina and I got married, this was in...76...and we'd rented a rehearsal studio, and I was just playing around with one chord making....generating overtones just from the E string ... the low E string of the guitar and Nina came in and said, 'Rhys, that sounds like *you!* You should do a piece with that!' And I decided that Nina was right! And that's how *Guitar Trio* was born.

BB: And it took that long for the guitar to bear that sort of fruit?

RC: Yeah, I didn't want to impose my ideas on the guitar, I wanted to see what it could do, and also, I needed to figure out what rock was because I had grown up with rock, listening to it, but my background, up to that point, was as a classical musician and my approach to playing an instrument was as a classical musician.

BB: And I suppose even listening to it is different from going to gigs and seeing...

RC: To getting into the experience, yeah. And then, I mean, this was a very, very exciting period in New York. I mean, CBGB's was just...at full blast, and there was Talking Heads and Patti Smith...you know, whereas, I mean, rock really took over New York in around 76, 77, around there and it took me over, too. And I wanted to embrace it, so I didn't think of putting my imprint on rock, at that point, I just wanted to...play in a punk band! And so that's what I did! But then the punk band...you know, I got married, and then, somehow or other, the band split apart, and she went on to form her own band called Ut and I decided that maybe I knew enough about rock, at that point, where I could make pieces that would be, you know, a real amalgamation between the rock music that I loved and who I was as a musician. And with *Guitar Trio*, it was the first piece that I made where I really managed to present everything that I was as a musician, you know - as a minimalist, and also, as a rock musician.

BB: It still has the real New York drum track on it!

RC: When we first did it, though - that was a later version - we had Wharton Tiers on hihat, you know, he just played hihat, and we had Nina play one of the guitars and Glenn Branca played another one and I was the other guitarist and we just played the E string...for about fifteen minutes...and then we'd play E B E for...fifteen minutes...and then we'd play *all six strings* for another fifteen minutes, and then we'd do the whole thing all over again, so they're really minimalist and slowly evolving. And we did that version for about six months and then the band changed, we added a drummer - David Linton who's the the drummer on the recording and so after I met David the drums became a more important compositional element.

BB: So, before the emphasis was more...

RC: The emphasis was completely on the guitars. And the hihat was basically keeping the beat.

BB: And did you still have the whole interlocking guitar sort of thing? The slight offset of the different guitars...kind of like, say, *Violin Phase*, where you hear the individual guitars slightly out with each other...the slight rhythmic offset. Was that there in the early version?

RC: A slight rhythmic offset? Oh, I see what you mean. I had a kind of riff that I'd play, and so I would play that riff for the other guitarists and the instructions I gave them was 'This is the riff I'm gonna play, it's not gonna be exactly the same every time, but it's essentially [demonstrates riff from *Guitar Trio*], and I asked Nina to play something in counterpoint to that, and I asked the other guitarist to play something, sort of...with it, but not exactly the same...essentially they're improvising. And the way I chose the guitarists is that I'd audition with them, they'd play with this, and I chose the one who played with what I was playing the best! But I had to teach them how to hear overtones, you know, it wasn't automatic that they would hear overtones, so, I mean, for example, with Glenn and with Nina, you know, I gave them a crash course in what an overtone is - of course they already knew what an overtone is, when you play the guitar on the twelfth fret you'll get the second overtone so we'd start out like that, but I said, 'Just play the A string - here, if you do it like this, you'll hear one set of overtones, if you do it a little bit harder over a different fret'... 'Oh yeah', you know? And I said to them, 'Improvise with that. And we're just gonna make melodies with these overtones.' So we worked it like that! And the piece was in three basic levels: there was a section with just the low E string of the electric guitar, another one with the three low strings of the electric guitar - the E string, A

string and D string - tuned to a fundamental, fifth, octave, and, you know, the final six-string thing which was kind of an E minor sort of sound. And you were aware of the three different guitars articulating different lines in the one-string section, and, to a certain extent, during the three-string section, but when we played on all six strings it sounded like one guitar.

BB: Yeah. I'm just wondering about the actual tuning system then - I think I've seen a couple of conflicting things...is it just intonation and...

RC: It's the same tuning as a regular guitar, but altered because....it's standard tuning E A D G B E except that I altered that tuning so that there wouldn't be any beats, so when I took the A string - the A string is never played as an A, it's played as a B - I altered that so as there wouldn't be any beats. Now, the thing about beats and just intonation on guitar is it's sort of an oxymoron, because if you're playing guitar with any...

BB: You're gonna have to use a fret at some stage?

RC: It's not a question of frets...we don't use frets...

BB: I know, not in the early ones...

RC:Although with Glenn's guitar...I gave him a specially tuned guitar - it was four low E strings and two high E strings - it was like an overtone canon, and if he played over the different frets, where the nodes are, he'd elicit different overtones. Nina and I played on a guitar in a standard tuning, you know, in terms of pitch names, but were tuned relative to those pitch names in perfect intervals...Except for the A string. We'd fret the B, and then I'd tune that so it was in a perfect interval. But...if the truth be told, if you're playing the guitar with any hutzpa whatsoever, those strings are gonna go out of tune very quickly, and so, to heck with just intonation... I mean, we might have started out in just intonation, but I can't tell you how many concerts I've done where I've ended up playing *on one string*, and the audience going wild, going 'Wow, he's got one string left!' and I'm, you know, making a big thing of it and trying my best to break that last string. So sometimes the guitars went seriously out of tune. But...in respect to each other, man, you wanna talk about sum and difference frequencies, well, just...I'll end this by saying after playing *Guitar Trio* for a while, the next piece I did was called *The Out of Tune Guitar!*

BB: Fair enough! Just, say, in relation to stringing a guitar with a whole load of Es, did you have problems with truss rods and things like that?

RC: Not with *Guitar Trio* but with *Die Donnergötter*, those were tuned differently. We had three guitars in that piece that were tuned to four high E strings and two low D strings tuned up to an E, and then two guitars tuned to...what was it tuned to? ...Two low A strings tuned up to a B and four E strings. And then one guitar that was two or three low E strings and then three D strings tuned up to an E, and you had to be really careful, because if you just leave them like that, the necks can get warped, and various bad things can happen to the guitar. It's not a problem to do that for the gig, but you wouldn't want to leave your guitar tuned that way for a long period of time. We have a problem with Strats, though with *100 Guitars*, I tell 'em they have to take the whammy bar off, but essentially, I say, 'No Strats', because, I love Strats, and I love the sound, but the thing is, when you tune them in these weird tunings, they just don't stay in tune...

BB: The floating bridge?

RC: It just moves all over the place. I tell 'em, you know, use Telecasters, or copies, or , you know, anything with that kind of sound. And also, those fine-tuner things don't work either. With the strings...you know those fine-tuner things?

BB: Those sort of locking nut...

RC: Yeah. I tell the guitarists, you know 'Take them off! We don't want them.'

BB: Sorry, where was I?

RC: Well, we were on *Guitar Trio*...So, the final version of *Guitar Trio* was in..well, the piece was made in...the piece was made in 77 but it wasn't until 82 that it got finalised and the version that you have on this disc is the final version with David Linton on it.

BB: And were there any other unrecorded pieces knocking around at that stage with the whole guitar instrumentation thing...what were you doing at gigs - were you playing two or three long pieces and that was it, or what were you doing?

RC: Okay, I'll tell you, after David left the band - who played after David - Robert Longo was in the band at one point, and what we did, the longest time, was we just played *Guitar Trio*, you know, and if it was an all-night concert, then we played *Guitar Trio* once, and then we'd play it

again -once we'd do it with slides and once without slides. And finally Robert said to me, 'Rhys, you should make another piece!' And so I did, so I made a piece called *The Out of Tune Guitar*.

BB: Which is what you did after *Guitar Trio* at a gig, presumably.

RC: Yeah, right, it was a continuation of *Guitar Trio*. No, well, what we did was we just took our guitars and put them out of tune any old way, and jammed with it, and made a structure for it, and then we set an 'out-of-tune' tuning. And, I didn't have any sense of recording back then. I could have gone into a studio and recorded that piece, but, you know, I just didn't have a head for it. You'd think I would have, you know, with my background in electronic music, but it never got recorded well.

BB: Yeah, well I suppose it's different recording things with microphones in front of them as opposed to a pure electronic thing.

RC: Yeah, exactly. And we spent *all day*, like, a twelve-hour session, recording *Guitar Trio*, and then we spent two days recording *Drastic Classicism*, and I won't tell you even the...what did we take? We took speed, you know, all kinds of drugs, I mean the engineer was just in amazement, you know, he hadn't seen anything like that since, you know, the late 60s. And after that I realised, you don't do drugs...

BB: ...in the studio!

RC: Not in the studio, no! And it's not just a big party and I didn't learn how to record, really, until about...

BB: ...unless you've got a huge, big record company to foot the bill.

RC: Yeah, exactly! It took...by 1986 and 87 I knew what I was doing in a studio, but before that I really didn't, so I missed out on recording *The Out of Tune Guitar*. There are some tapes of it floating around, but the most accurate representation of it is *For Brass*, I mean, essentially it sounds like what we played.

BB: Yeah...Just in terms of the development of these pieces then, in terms of the development of *Guitar Trio* to its final version, and *Drastic Classicism*, did you find, then, that it was essential to have people who were rock musicians playing with you on this, was that completely essential?

RC: I didn't...yeah, the people who played this music best were rock musicians, because the approach of a classical musician is different from the approach of a rock musician; one isn't better than the other, it's just different. And, at that time anyway, there were very few people who were able to crossover. And also, I was playing in rock clubs, and I had enough problems being accused of being a...of posing, of being this composer who was appropriating rock music, of doing pieces that weren't really rock, and so I wanted to have people who were bona fide rock musicians playing with me, and they were the ones that played it best.

BB: Well, presumably you wouldn't have got gigs in the CBGBs without having...

RC: Exactly, I mean, I couldn't have played there if it wasn't rock...I mean back then, it was very similar to the way it was here. If the audience didn't like you, they spat at you, they threw beer bottles, with the beer in 'em, and...they did that anyway, you know, even if they liked you just to show that...

BB: That you had an impact!

RC: Yeah, just to show their love I suppose, but, I tell you, it was really great playing in those places, even with the beer cans coming and the spitting, because we took all of this energy coming out of the audience and we just gave it back to them, this sort of feedback circle was just created, and it was really wonderful to play with.

BB: Yeah, a friend of mine was an engineer in the CBGBs in the early nineties, and he said, even then, even maybe past its heyday, it was still a great place.

RC: Yeah, I mean, new generations keep coming there, and it's still a place to go, even today. It's incredible. I mean, it's a real dive, but it always had the best sound system in New York. And the sound people have always been nice there.

Performance Instructions and Development

BB: Just in terms of *Drastic Classicism*, then, in terms of how you structured it, did you, again, say 'I'm playing this, you find something to fit around this', or did you tell people what to do, more?

RC: Okay, well, in terms of the development of these pieces, I came into the rehearsal studio with the basic idea, and then we'd take this basic idea and we'd play around with it, and then we'd gig. And in general, what a band does, or did, in New York, was you'd play about once

every six weeks. If you played less than that, people would forget you, if you played more than that, you'd lose your audience.

BB: So there was only a finite number of places to play?

RC: Yeah, well, I mean, relatively speaking there were five or six places, and the nice thing about them was that, before there was only Max's and CBGBs to play, and because of that, the people who booked tended to be real assholes, and made it very difficult to get in there, and, I mean, we were so excited when we got our first CBGBs gig, it was, like, a real honour, and it's like, the badge of merit, you know, if you play there then you're on the map. But then a lot of other rock clubs started to spring up and there was this man named Jim Ferrat [?], who started this place called Danceteria, and his philosophy was that musicians should be paid, and if you were a band playing there, you made a thousand bucks. And then, all of a sudden, all the other clubs started paying that - not Max's and CBGBs - I mean, if you played there, it was, like, five dollars...I mean, we still played there for old time's sake and because the sound system was good, and, I mean, the sound people were really, really nice. But all the slick clubs started paying good money. And it was a nice period. Now it's 'pay for play' in Los Angeles, and, to a certain extent, in New York, I believe, but back then it was really great. So anyway, we played pretty much every six weeks, and we developed the pieces in a live context, and so we'd play out, and we'd say, 'This worked, this didn't work', and so the composition method became very similar to that of Philip Glass, who was an inspiration for me, he's like a big brother kind of figure. We lived in the same building in the East Village. And I just loved his music, and this was before I'd gotten into rock, but I noticed when he worked with his group, you know, he'd do his compositions, and he told me he ended up throwing out two thirds of it, you know, and he developed his music in a live context, you know, playing in lofts in SoHo, and tried things out and 'This worked, this didn't work.' You know, they didn't have sequencers back then, so you couldn't try your stuff out on a computer, so what you...So no matter how...I mean I've been trained so that...you know most of us who've been to conservatory can hear a melody in our head, and write it on paper, but no matter how good you are at doing that, you've gotta hear it, live. I forgot who it was that said that a composition isn't finished until it's performed. I think it was Cage who said that. But, well, for Phil Glass and for me, it was like, not even...performing it was

just the start. Terry Riley and La Monte really started this great thing, you know, the composer as a performer. And, I mean, before composers had to depend on classical musicians playing their work, and with Phil and Steve and, you know, that whole crew, they decided that 'We're not gonna depend on classical music organisations to play our stuff, we're gonna form our own ensembles and develop our music that way, and so I modelled my rock group on Phil.

BB: And that sort of model...

Die Donnergötter and Brass Pieces

RC: Like, Phil was working with the jazz instrumentation, but doing his own weird stuff, and so I thought, 'You know, I'll do like Phil, except that... jazz? ... I dunno, I think I'll embrace rock and so, essentially, I was trying to do like Phil did, except with rock music. And so we developed the compositions in the rock clubs and *Die Donnergötter* in particular, when we were first performing it, it did not sound like what it sounds on that record. First of all, there was no melodic line, just sort of like - what, now, is just the backup. And then we thought, maybe a melodic line would sound nicer with this. [Does a mock drunk voice] 'Uh, Karen, uh, could you play, like a *melodic* line over this? Maybe you could go a little bit like this...' So she would, and then I'd say 'Oh, that sounds good', and so I wrote it out, and I wanted to write that piece out before...In general, rock musicians don't read music and I really tried to avoid that [i.e. writing and reading music], and that's why I worked with rock musicians. You know, they were used to not reading music, and developing things from ear, and that's how I developed *Guitar Trio*, *Drastic Classicism*, *The Out of Tune Guitar*...

BB: And the sort of draft stage to *Die Donnergötter*?

RC: And the draft stage to *Die Donnergötter*. But, at that point, when I made *Die Donnergötter*, I wanted to...What had I? Yeah, I'd just gone through this period where I just...yeah, where I just played trumpet. I picked up trumpet in 83, and, I dunno why, why did I play trumpet? I felt drawn to it. And then I realised that it takes years to learn how to play trumpet. And so I started a brass band, and I was interested in getting back into notated music...I think this was in 83. Oh yeah, I'd written *For Brass*, in 1982, and I thought, 'Oh yeah, this is cool', you know, and I'd worked with non-notated music for five years from...Oh, for longer than that; from 73 until...83. That's ten years, you know, with electronic music and all the guitar stuff. And so, I

wanted to get back to it. And so, I wrote a series of brass pieces, *Waterloo No. 2* was one of them, and there were about six others that have never been recorded that we played also, and my idea of working with the brass music was that I wanted to make something as tough as the guitar music, but for brass and notated, and...it didn't work out that way. It wasn't tough enough! So I went back to playing....I reformed the guitar band with a different group of players, and ...but I wanted to keep the notated emphasis. And so, I wrote everything out, and we rehearsed it, in a rehearsal studio, and we made some changes. So it was notated from the very beginning, but, you know, for example, as I first said, we didn't have the melodic line. I didn't think it needed one. And so, we played it at this place called 8BC, which was this great performance-art place in the 80s in the Alphabet City, which is at the extreme east side of the East Village, and then we thought, you know, a guitar line might be nice, so we tried that, and then after two years, it was finished.

BB: And how do you feel that changed the way you started to work, then, the return to notation? How can I put this....What effect, musically, did this change in approach have?

RC: The non- notated pieces were more orientated towards performance, I mean, we were a rock band, and we performed like rock musicians. The performance aspect was highly important. If I broke all five strings, or all six strings of the guitar, people would cheer. You know, I tried to break all six strings. You know, I would be very happy when my hands were, you know, bloody, and there was blood spurting all over the place. You know, there was a real rock element to it, and we were very much into the performance. When you do notated music, you lose that performance element. It becomes a spectacle, it becomes one of an ensemble playing...How can I say that more elegantly?...The non-notated pieces were really rock pieces and the way we performed them was as rock musicians would perform them. The notated pieces were more like classical music, although almost...I still prefer that the musicians come out of a rock context, because...

BB: Because they wouldn't have to be too fluent with reading because they read it, learn it, and then take it to heart, sort of...?

RC: A lot of the people didn't read, but you don't need to read music to read music, at least the way I write it. I mean, it's minimalism, so how many notes do you need to read? It sort of

makes sense. And, I mean...the classical musicians, I usually ended up giving them the easiest parts to play so they could really just work with the overtones. For the people whose rhythmic expertise I needed, I tended to use rock musicians, because with all the things I wrote, they were familiar with them, from rock music, anyway.

BB: So, even with that, when you were starting to work on notation, you were still keeping this sort of rock, non-notated element for it, and rhythmic feel...

RC: Oh, for example, with the drummer and the bass player, I'd write them out a form, but if I work with a drum player, it's because I like the way they play. The drummer always composes all the parts, and the bass player, too. Even now, with *An Angel Moves Too Fast to See*, I don't tell Ernie what to play...

BB: Yeah when you have drummers with notated music in front of them telling them what to play, I don't think I've ever...

RC: Yeah, it really sounds different. And it doesn't sound as good. And you know, I might tell Ernie, you know, 'Play *more*, here', you know, or 'Play *other notes*', or something like that, and he knows what to do.

BB: So, after that, you took a break...

RC: With *Die Donnergötter*?

BB: You took a break from the guitar thing for a while.

Moving to France

RC: No, not after...I took a break before *Die Donnergötter*, I think it was from 83 to 85, and I just worked with brass instruments. And then I found I was getting dissatisfied, I mean, I like the brass stuff I was doing, I did martial music, primarily, I thought it would sound tough: it didn't! I don't know why. So I wanted to go back to guitar. And so we did *Die Donnergötter*, and sometimes I do *Die Donnergötter*, and then I'll play a brass piece, and then I'll end...I always ended with *Guitar Trio*. I mean, that's a signature piece. And...we still always end with *Guitar Trio*, even with one hundred guitarists! And then I moved to France - I did a few pieces that haven't been recorded, after *Die Donnergötter*: one was called *Untitled*, another one's called *Minerva*... another one's...three or four pieces. I'm gonna record them with this label, Table of

Elements records, just so they're out there. They're nice pieces. And then, 89 rolled around, I'd moved to France, and that's when we did *An Angel Moves Too Fast to See*.

BB: And, what did that come out of, people seeing *Drastic Classicism*, I mean how did you manage to get a commission for one hundred guitars?

RC: I needed to find work when I moved to France. I got married to a French woman, who's a choreographer, and she wanted to move back to France, this was in 88, and I thought it would be an adventure to move here. So I did, and it was! It was a real adventure, and I couldn't make any money! But some of the musicians I worked....I started up a band here. And, fortunately, I found a manager, right away, and the first few months were really rough, you know, in terms of money, but then I started getting work through this manager, Francis Falceto, and I put a band together, learned French that way, you know, from talking with the guys in the band, and he....finally, we'd done a number of *Die Donnergötter* gigs, you know, and *Drastic Classicism*, and, oh, I have some funny anecdotes with that. I did this gig in San Brieur [?] in Brittany. It's, like, a small town. And I thought, you know, we'll open the gig up with *Drastic Classicism*, and evidently...my manager was tearing his hair out - you don't do that in France, it's too aggressive. It's really different here. Because, my whole performance aspect was essentially punk, and, you know, I was really, really aggressive, 'cause, you know, the audiences in CBGBs were very aggressive, and you learnt to be...New York is an aggressive place, it's like this street, you know! And people aren't aggressive in France, and I didn't realise that, so there was a cultural problem for a long...so, we didn't start with *Drastic Classicism*, we ended with *Drastic Classicism*.

The French Music Scene

BB: And, also, did you find that people weren't used to [experimentation]...classical music, here, in a lot of senses, to my mind, to my knowledge, seems to be quite purist, and anyone I've come across who's come out of this intellectual culture, it's very purist and it's very academic...

RC: Things are very boxed, here! The way the French educational system works is, you know, everything is on a track, and, you know, there's a certain way to do things. In New York, you know, you can be an actor who has his or her waitress or bar-tending gig. Here, you know, if you're a waiter, that's your profession. And you do one thing, here, and you have to have

exactly the right training...I mean, if you're gonna be a composer, you have to do a certain set of things, and have a certain set of diplomas also. [...] It's a different way of thinking, but it's that way with everything, here, and, for example, when I took my trumpet stuff to the French record companies, everyone knew who I was, I was greeted very politely, they'd say, 'Rhys, we like it, but we just don't know what to call it', and you know, French people are not very innovative. They're very good at technology, and very good at realisation, but...anyway, I took it to England, to London, and the red carpet went out and before I knew it, the crew from Coldcut said, 'Wow, wicked guitar playing, man', they thought it was a guitar, and they put it out! And, you know, you wouldn't have that happen in France, because, you know, French people, if they don't know what it is and they can't categorise it, then they're afraid to take risks. So, here, you have an interesting electronica scene which evolved differently from the thing which happened in the UK, but academic music is in this box! [...] The electro-acoustic music, on the other hand, you know, is more interesting, you know, and it's coming out of Xenakis's school, they're more open minded, they're still as elitist as the [...but]...I mean, the nice thing about going to a concert in London, for example, is you'll hear an electronica piece, you'll hear....you'll hear music from Pakistan, you know, all on the same programme! It's just great! But they don't think it's great, they think it's normal, over there, but, I mean, you don't get that in Paris.

BB: It's kind of strange, cause they were the first to take to the whole world music thing.

RC: Yeah, but it's boxed in. I mean, you can hear anything you want here, you know, including Phil Glass, but, you know, French music, I mean, wonderful realisations of jazz...actually, in jazz, you know, things are starting to look up: before, it was imitation of American jazz, but now it's evolved differently, but, how did we get into this? Yes, I agree with you, things are very much on a track here.

BB: I was just thinking, with the mention of IRCAM, do you know the French Spectral composers like Grisey and Murail, you know, the guys who take the Fourier analysis of the low E on the trombone, seems to be the thing...

RC: I've heard of that, I don't know the music so well.

BB: Yeah, I was thinking that, in some ways, they've got this fusion of timbre and harmony...

RC: Oh yeah!

BB: ...it really seems like they're almost doing additive synthesis with the orchestra, which also seems like what you're doing with the guitar, in some ways. Do you feel any sort of...

RC: I haven't heard it. I've heard of it. To quote Virgil Thomson again, 'Composers under thirty are politely familiar with each other's music. Composers over thirty are politely *unfamiliar* with each other's music!' And it's really worked out that way, in my case. I haven't really kept in touch with what's been going on at IRCAM...

BB: So, anyway, just coming up to *Angel*, then...

100 Guitars: *An Angel Moves too Fast to See* and other works

RC: Yeah, what happened was, I had wanted to do a hundred guitar piece in the early 80s. And, it was 82, I was on tour with a friend of mine, and I said, 'You know, it'd be really nice to take a hundred guitarists in Tier 3, which is a club maybe four times the size of this room [i.e. not very big], and then lock the door and call it *Torture Box*' and my friend said, 'Ah, you couldn't do that, you don't know a hundred guitarists', and so I wrote a list of all the guitarists I knew and I came up with eighty six! And she knew fourteen others. And so, we realised it could be done. But, you know, I didn't want to do it, then, because I didn't want to do a piece for sheer effect. But by 1980 I felt ready. And so I told Francis, my manager, about what I wanted to do, and he fell in love with the idea. And after a few false tries, he found a place in Lille, called L'aéronef [The Spaceship], and they commissioned the piece.

BB: And was it difficult, you know, with the 'boxed-in' sort of mentality of musical culture here, to get a piece like that commissioned.

RC: France has a rock scene.

BB: So it was commissioned out of the rock scene?

RC: Yeah. This was a rock...it was not classical music...this was a rock club. But it was a rock club that was supported by the city. And, as it happened, one of the guitarists in my band was the brother of one of the deputies of that region, who made sure that that place got money to put it on. And the place knew this, and took advantage of it! So it was expensive, you know! And it took...how long did it take to compose? I can't remember now, between three and six months. And I composed it, essentially for six groups of guitarists, and that way I could try it out with my

band. I tried it out with just six guitars, made some alterations, and then we tried it then with a hundred guitars, and it didn't sound the same with a hundred guitars, it sounded really, really different! *Really loud!* ...There were delicate parts, and there were some parts where I had them play really, really softly. And there's nothing like the sound of a hundred guitars playing softly. It's beautiful.

BB: Like the fourth movement.

RC: Yeah, it's like rain. But, you know, it's such a spectacle to see all those musicians there, and I don't know how many watts we used, but...

BB: You probably don't want to know!

RC: Yeah, you probably don't want to know!

BB: So, was this an indoor gig or an outdoor gig?

RC: Indoor. Yeah, it was in a big, indoor space. And, we've done it outdoor, but when we've done it outdoor...We did it outdoors in Palermo, and also in Dunkerque, and we had three thousand people each time. And that was a real thrill...I don't usually....usually my audience is something like eight hundred people. So that was fun. Oh man, and the gig in Dunkerque: a third of the guitarists are supposed to be able to read, because, frankly, some of that music is really rhythmic and much more difficult...I mean, you've heard it. And it's better if they read. You know how the piece works? I have a group of six guitarists, and they act as section leaders, and the hundred guitarists are recruited from the region for the production, and we teach the hundred guitarists the parts in four rehearsals.

BB: Only four rehearsals?

RC: Yeah, and a fifth general rehearsal, so it's five rehearsals of three hours each...

BB: These are long pieces!

RC: Yeah, it's, what? Seventy minutes. But it's doable. But in Dunkerque, we had three people...three(!)...who could read. And there's this one section that goes... [demonstrates the opening of the second movement, which is rhythmically complex and somewhat irregular]. And, you know, it's very specific. And so, the way the guys did it was they'd look at the section leader's hand, and when the section leader's hand moved, *they would move!* And three

thousand people showed up for this gig - I was never so scared in my life! And they were too. But we got through it.

BB: In terms of the content of it, then, I think you were saying it was going to be the culmination of your guitar work....

RC: Yeah.

BB: ...Well, what, the Prelude seems to be the extended time thing, and the last movement seems to be harmonic type chords and process music. Is that fair to say?

RC: Is that the one that sounds a little like church bells? What do you want to know about that one?

BB: Was that a real sort of process music...

RC: Yeah, that was interesting. I wanted...way back in 68, Morton told me about what one of his teachers did. You see, the way the Buchla sequencer worked was you had a sequencer in sixteen stages and so...it was sixteen potentiometers, three rows each...and so you could have the potentiometers controlling any parameter of the music you wanted; the first one was frequency/pitch. And say, on the sixteen stages I'd have the one, five, seven and nine, and on the other sequencer I'd have fifteen stages, I mean you get this kind of repeating thing. Or, you do it with seven and eight. I mean, I never told anyone this, you're the first person I told this to, but essentially, that section is a Buchla synthesizer piece, with how many sequencers? Six! And so, I was able to get those relatively complex rhythm by getting them to play only one or two notes, which is doable...

BB: Whilst still maintaining that sort of rock feel...

RC:Which is provided by Jonathan and Ernie! [Drummer and bassist respectively.] In writing that piece, I really had to keep in mind that I was going to be teaching it in five rehearsals, and that a lot of people were going to be amateurs, so I really had to make it doable! And that seemed like a really good way to make it doable. And it turns out, that's my favourite section, because it sounds like church bells.

BB: Yeah, there's a lovely sort of ringing-out...

RC:And it's beautiful because, I don't know if it comes out on the record so much, but you hear the pitches coming out of the different sections. Don't forget, you've got all of these...we

ask the people to bring fifty watt amps. 'Don't bring your three hundred watt Marshall amplifier', you know? (Some of them do!) But we have a sound person that really regulates each of them carefully. But the actual amps that people bring are an important component of the sound. And so when we do this, you can actually hear the sound coming out of the different places.

BB: And how long does it take to regulate the levels of all the amps, or do they blend well enough anyway, because there are just so many of them?

RC: We have a person working on it full time. And the sound check, in fact, takes all day. And the sound people regulate it before the guitarists get there. And the sound has to be good with just the amps, before we can put it through the system. If it's too loud, we can't put it through the system.

BB: So it's actually miked up and going through as well.

RC: Oh yeah, primarily what's coming out of the system is the drums and the bass. But we put a little bit of guitars through it just to make it sound cohesive.

BB: So you have a few mikes at a fair old distance?

RC: We have mikes on each of the section leaders, and then we have general mikes on each of the sections.

BB: Right, so you can have the really clear section leader sound, and then the ensemble...

RC: Well, if the ensemble fucks up, then we turn up the section leader! We give the sound person that possibility.

BB: So, what, you've written three more...

RC: Oh, yeah, I wrote another piece, called *The Heart Cries with Many Voices*, it was commissioned by the Strasbourg Musica Festival - it's a classical festival. But, you know, some of these classical people have open minds. And, you know, at the time, his name was Dominique Marco, he was bringing people like John Zorn, David Linton, and so he figured he'd do me! People like to do this piece because it's not just about me - it's really good publicity for their venue, and people from the region are playing, and all their parents come, and it's got that whole element.

BB: Art in the community.

RC: That's it. And I had written a much more complicated piece for that, in terms of melodic complexity. We did a version of that, in fact, at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, with just my band...The lead guitar player, whose name is Karen Haglof, a really good guitarist...I found out through a friend of mine was going down the piece cursing me out, 'That damn Rhys, he gave me such a hard part!' And if Karen has a hard part, and if Karen has a hard time playing it, what's it going to be like for an amateur? And so it was really too hard for them, and I learnt a lot from doing that piece.

BB: That's for guitar and choir, did I read that right?

RC: The version we did at BAM was for a chorus, right. And I just did a couple of sections, the hardest sections from *The Heart Cries with Many Voices*. So we did a bastardised version of it, with the choral ensemble doing *Die Donnergötter*, and then I did a third piece that was for a theatre piece, that was going to be done in a bullring in the French town of Arles - that piece was simpler - I'd learned my lesson from the second piece, but it never happened, the funding fell through, not for my commission, but for the guy, and it's too bad. By that time, I was starting to have problems with my hearing. I was doing a gig at Marne-la-Vallée, at La Ferme du Buisson, and I was doing a sound check, and all of a sudden I heard a very pure sine wave at 440 cycles a second, like around that area, and I looked back at Pascal, the sound director, to see if he had put a sine-wave through, and he *hadn't*! And that was the first sign. And then it went up to a frequency of around 15,000 cycles...How old are you?

BB: I'm twenty six.

RC: Can you still hear a high frequency coming out of a TV, when you turn a TV on?

BB: Yeah.

RC: You can hear that? Well, you'll lose that soon! So I sort of freaked out, and just then, I'd been playing trumpet for ten years, which is what it takes. So I started coming out on trumpet....So I'd had enough...when was the last guitar piece? 96 or 97, in Lisbon (it was *Angel*, because *Angel* was the piece that worked), and it felt like time to retire, and for me to focus on my trumpet stuff. But now...this has come out, this record, so we're gonna revive *Angel*.

BB: How much does it cost to put on?

RC: I'm not sure. It's definitely around...when all is said and done, total cost...I'm not sure so don't quote me, but I think some guy told me including PA system, his fees, our fees, etc., it was 200,000 Francs, so I think that's...I would say it's around 30,000 Euros, including transportation and all that stuff. That's not our fee, that's what it cost them out of their pocket to put it on.

BB: Do you plan to record any of the other pieces, in the '100 Guitars' vein...

RC: No...I mean, I don't have plans for it, I mean they're nice pieces...I mean, never say never, but I think what I'd rather do is write another one. I mean, I need to write a new guitar piece. You know, I'd focused on trumpet for a while, and I didn't think I'd want to go back to guitars. And I'm not sure that I'd want to do that specifically, I mean I didn't become a composer just to write guitar pieces, but I love the instrument, and...we'll see what comes out of this...and, I mean, we'll do *Angel* [Chatham, after a hiatus, is now back with Francis Falceto, the manager with whom he first implemented the *100 Guitars* project and is planning on touring it again], I mean, it's a good piece, and if something comes out of this, we'll do another one.