

# The people's composer



## Interview

by Helena de Bertodano

Michael Nyman is our best-selling living composer, writing for films, advertisers and the Labour Party. He compares himself to Brahms; critics think he writes 'offal'. Who is right?

**T**HE unthinkable has happened. Michael Nyman has finally received a good review. "In the past 25 years I've had some of the worst reviews that any composer has ever had. I've been savaged."

He utters the last word with some delight, savouring the irony of being derided by the musical establishment while the public has elevated him to the status of our best-selling living classical composer. *The Piano Concerto* alone, an expanded version of music he wrote for the film *The Piano*, sold three million copies. Meanwhile, the critics have denounced his music as "tauntingly vaporous", "farting, belching fairground theme tunes" and "the musical equivalent of cotton wool".

But now the critical tide seems to be turning in favour of "my kind of bolshiness". His *Concerto for Trombone and Orchestra*, one of three concertos to be released by EMI Classics next week, has already been highly praised.

"Three critics gave me rave reviews and I felt I'd been accepted into the fold. But the next review was back to normal." He sounds almost relieved. Acceptance into the fold is not something Nyman craves.

"I won't become one of them," he says hastily. But he is clearly pleased to have broken down some barriers. Now 53, he has just written his first score for a Hollywood movie, *Gattaca*, starring Uma Thurman, to be released this month in the States. "Most of the windmills I've tilted at have gradually fallen to me."

He is not ashamed to write music on commission and has even written commercials for loo rolls, Milton Keynes and, most recently, for Mazda cars. The so-called Mazda concerto is included on the EMI album. Nyman does not see anything wrong with being paid to write music, comparing himself to Mozart, who happily received money for composition.

"I can't imagine there was a Mazda equivalent, say a horse and carriage company, which commissioned Mozart to write the 38th Symphony, but there would have been some patron. Now we have this cock-eyed attitude that you have to starve in a garret for real creativity."

We meet at his new house in north London and sit in his spartan sitting-room, while builders come and go. Apart from a grand piano, the room is almost bare and Nyman goes to find chairs from another room.

I had expected him to be edgy and difficult: people who work with him describe him as "gruff and cantankerous", but he is charming today. "I'm pretty laid-back and relaxed, although there must be something else in me, because my music has this incredible force and intensity."

He is dressed in black jeans and suede loafers, without socks, and wears a shirt with flapping cuffs. He does not like sitting still, and fidgets constantly, welcoming the chance to leap up and answer the telephone. "I could put the answer-machine on, but I'm bugged if I'm going to," he says. The veneer of charm is clearly not watertight.

Michael Nyman first came to public attention in the early Eighties after he teamed up with Peter Greenaway to write the scores for his films, including *The Draughtsman's Contract* and *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover*. The partnership came to an acrimonious end in 1992 with *Prospero's Books*, in which Greenaway "gratuitously trashed my music" — overlaying his original score with "cheap sound effects".

The pair have not spoken for the past five years. Would Nyman consider working with Greenaway again? "I will if he rings me." Why doesn't he call Greenaway? He looks as though the idea has never occurred to him. "Well," he stutters, momentarily lost for words, "because I'm like that."

Is he hard...? Nyman anticipates the rest of the question. "No, I'm not hard to work with, although Greenaway would say that I am." Why would Greenaway say that? "He would think that I am too protective of what is only one component of many in the film. Anyway, his films have come off the boil since then."

Because Nyman is no longer included? "Naturally I

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Musical barriers The Greenaway films were the making of Nyman, but they have also kept him out of what he calls 'the official composer's compound'

would say that," he says, grinning as he betrays his familiar immaturity.

He started working as a music copyist while still at school in Walthamstow and was writing music for performance in the early Sixties. But then he switched to music criticism, gaining a reputation as a rebel, coining the word "minimalism" in reference to music in 1968 while working on the *Spectator*. "I have to hand it to Nigel Lawson [then editor] for publishing my articles; he was either very broad-minded or he didn't care a s— about the arts."

When he returned to composition in the late Seventies, his work was instantly tagged as minimalist, sometimes to his annoyance. He was not popular in those days and was earning a pittance, while trying to support his wife and two daughters. "I was one of those blokes who would be on the Portobello Road at six o'clock picking up discarded lettuces and apricots."

Although the Greenaway scores have been the making of Nyman, they have also kept him out of what he calls "the official composer's compound". He gets no Proms commissions, no Bafta awards for his film music and is virtually ignored by Radio 3. "It used to rankle that I was only seen as Peter Greenaway's composer: I used to say to people, I do at best one

film a year, what do you think I do the rest of the time?"

The rest of the time he writes string quartets and concertos and tours with The Michael Nyman Band, conducting or playing the piano. He wrote an opera based on Oliver Sacks' *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat* and has been "tinkering" for 10 years on his pet project, an opera of *Tristram Shandy*, which he keeps trying to persuade English National Opera to take on. "They've said no, and I just find that offensive. Here is the greatest novel in the English language and a popular English composer who puts bums on seats. So poor old *Tristram Shandy* is suffering from the Nyman rejection syndrome."

Suddenly he stops himself mid-flow and groans: "I hope you're not going to write this as 'Nyman the moaner'. I'm always doing this, but I'm also very happy with what I am doing. We all want things we haven't got."

He has an appreciative audience for his football-inspired works such as *After Extra Time*, the initials spelling out the name of his Estonian wife, Aet. Nyman is at his most passionate when talking about football: he is an avid QPR fan.

Soap operas are his other great passion. "Seriously. I was the first person I know to discover *Neighbours*, when it

was shown at 9.05 in the morning. I'm a great *Emmerdale* fan. *Emmerdale* is like Fellini; it's wild."

Surprisingly, he is least passionate about his music, saying that he keeps a distance between himself and what he composes. "I don't emote — it's all up here," he points to his head and ears. His listeners feel otherwise. "When I

was a dyed-in-the-wool minimalist, a painter friend of mine said my music was too intense; it was almost like having a permanent erection."

Nowadays, he says, he allows himself to feel closer to his music. "I'm older and wiser and softer and smoother now."

He has just moved house

from Ladbroke Grove to Islington, adding to his New Labour credentials. It was his music that Labour used in that pre-election bulldog ad: Gordon Brown is said to be a fan. "I suppose I write what you would call New Music."

New Nyman, New Labour? "I don't know about that," he says, looking pleased at the idea. "It cuts through all the

categories and is just visceral. It is appreciated by a bunch of people who the following night may go and see Oasis or may just sit at home smoking a joint and listening to old Bob Dylan records."

He likes the fact that he appeals to a younger audience — his work is sometimes seen as the classical equivalent of rave music — and was chuffed when he heard that Paul McCartney had said he was "hip". He was even more flattered to be referred to as "the Liam Gallagher of contemporary music". The "bad behaviour" image, he hastens to add, is confined to the music. "I've never overtly behaved badly in anything other than in my music."

**O**NE OF his controversial devices is to plunder former composers, reworking their music to his own ends — "reducing Mozart to offal," as one critic put it. In one of the concertos on the new release, he tells me that he has "shoved a chunk of Purcell" into the middle. It occurs to me that he may be having a laugh at our expense; I ask him if he sees himself as the Damien Hirst of the music world.

"No," he says, without taking offence. "But there can certainly be irony." Listening to the CD later, I find the music jagged and demanding; although there are no words, it is impossible to work while it is on. At one point, I wonder whether he absent-mindedly recorded it while his builders were banging in some shelves; then looking at the press release, I see the words: "Only Nyman would dare to include a football chant beaten out on metal filing cabinets."

Strangely, it does seem to work. It may not be to everyone's taste and, although he has been "inundated" with Millennium offers, Nyman is well aware that his music may not survive the test of time. "In the 19th century, there were some very hip, popular composers who were not those who we now think are the masters of their age."

He looks glum at the prospect of his popularity dying out, then brightens. "On the other hand, I've looked around and asked myself, who are the masters of the age? I can't see them. Who is the Berlioz of the day, who is the Brahms? Who knows? Maybe it is me."

## Making a meal of old age

**A**S I WRITE, Giles is on his way back from his painting tour of Skye. "We'll be on the road for two days," he told me from the Talisker Hotel coinbox phone. "We clocked up 698 miles on the way up here, so it will be a proper wallathon of a journey."

"Well, you were wallies to drive," I said. "You thought it would save money, but it would have been cheaper to fly to Inverness and to hire a car. Look at what you'll have spent on petrol, travel lodges and unhappy eaters, to say nothing of the income you'll have lost during the four working days you will have spent just staring through a windscreen."

But it was 73-year-old Euan who had really wanted to drive to Skye for the 10-day soaking. "My dear girl," he told me. "It is of no advantage to the elderly to save time. What the elderly want is to find ways of filling it in. We like to make as much a meal out of our activities as is humanly possible."

As I have juggled 10 things at once over these last remaining days of single parenthood, I have been reflecting on his observation. Earlier this summer we had another example of it, when Giles and I went to stay overnight with an able-bodied couple in their eighties. Insisting that on no account would she allow us to help, the wife went into the kitchen to cook and, as befits an "old" man in both senses of the word, the husband did not help her but instead busied himself in filling up our glasses with gin and tonic.

For a full two-and-a-quarter hours we sat in the drawing-room listening to a



## Family Life

Mary Killen

stunning selection of sound effects from the kitchen: the clattering, banging, clanging, chopping and whirring went on for a startlingly long time.

What could there be left to clutter and bang? I was asking myself when we were called through to the dining-room and I saw what had taken so long. The *coq au vin* was supplemented by individual bowls of salad positioned at each place and each with its own individual bowl of dressing. There was a segmented stainless-steel hotplate, each of the four sections loaded to its brim. There were courgettes in batter, boiled and also roast potatoes, and carrots cut into tiny sticks. Also on the table was a glass jar of beetroot with a special silver beetroot-jar-extractor-fork which, no doubt, had been specially cleaned then presented on its beetroot-jar-extractor-fork stand, also polished for the occasion.

Next came stewed pears, then five different types of cheese with biscuits

dispensed from a gold-knobbed barrel. It sounds ungrateful, but we would really rather have had our hostess, whose company we enjoy, chatting to us instead of spending so long in the kitchen. When Giles, a "new" man, makes food for a dinner party, he bungs a roast in the oven then puts it on the table an hour-and-a-half later, having carried on with his normal life in the interval.

Not only do the elderly like to make a meal out of making a meal, the sound effects are integral. "Haven't you noticed," said Giles, "how they always bang drawers and cupboards shut and smash silver back into the drawer, and there's always a lot of heavy sighs." We agreed that this was probably part of the dramatising of the activity.

We had a few more laughs about the older generation — raking up leaves with tiny forks instead of using suction machines; removing burrs from their dogs' fur by hand having first led them through the burry ground; queuing in the Post Office for half-an-hour for one stamp; and, like one friend, spending all summer rescuing flies, wasps and bees from buzzing on window panes and putting them outside with the aid of a postcard and glass.

It's now only one-and-a-quarter days until Giles returns, and I am well prepared for what he usually says on these occasions. "Don't expect me to take over straight away. It'll be a few days before I'm on my feet again. As Anthony Powell himself said, 'Everyone knows you need a holiday to recover from a holiday.'"