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‘Filming the invisible’: Barrie Gavin in conversation with John Wyver

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ABSTRACT

Barrie Gavin (b. 1935) is a celebrated producer, director and writer who is best known for numerous programmes about music and musicians made primarily for BBC Television from 1964 onwards. He worked on numerous occasions with the conductors Pierre Boulez and Simon Rattle, and with them and other collaborators he has directed more than 90 films. In this conversation recorded in Leeds in June 2018 Gavin discusses with the writer and producer John Wyver his ideas about making music television, his innovative approaches to filmmaking, his profiles of composers including Luigi Nono, Karlheinz Stockhausen and Toru Takemitsu, and his working relationships with Boulez and Rattle.

KEYWORDS

Barrie Gavin

BBC

music television

screen performance

Pierre Boulez

Simon Rattle

Barrie Gavin (b. 1935) is a celebrated producer, director and writer who is best known for numerous programmes about music and musicians made primarily for BBC Television from 1964 onwards. His extensive filmography represents a lifetime dedicated to the creative use of moving images to respond to and interpret a wide range of classical and contemporary music. His productions across more than four decades for BBC Television, Channel 4 and others are among the most distinctive and innovative programmes about the performing arts to have been made for television in Britain and beyond, and as his

contributions in this interview demonstrate, this work has been accompanied by a rare degree of reflection about and analysis of his collaborative practices.

Barrie Gavin joined the BBC as an assistant film editor in April 1961 and started to direct studio broadcasts in the summer of 1964. He worked on numerous occasions with the conductors Pierre Boulez and Simon Rattle, and with them and other collaborators he has directed more than 90 films. He worked briefly for the ITV contractor London Weekend Television in 1972 and was Head of Production at the BFI Production Board in 1974–75. With producers Dennis Marks and Tony Staveacre he established the BBC's Bristol Arts Unit from 1978 and in 1981 he formed with Peter West and Geoff Haydon the independent production company Third Eye Productions to make programmes for Channel 4 Television.^[1] He has also directed more than 250 programmes for German television. His work has received numerous prizes including the Royal Philharmonic Society Prize, the Diapason d'or, and in 2009 the International Music Publisher Association award for Services to Contemporary Music. In 2017 he was awarded Honorary Membership of the Royal Philharmonic Society. At the time of writing he remains active as a filmmaker.

When Barrie Gavin began directing and producing for BBC Television in the mid-1960s the corporation had a clear and uncontested vision that, especially on the new channel BBC2, programmes that dealt seriously and rigorously with what was traditionally defined as 'high-brow' culture were central to its public service imperatives. This idea, which was extended and given a strongly contemporary focus by Channel 4 in its first five years after its 1982 launch, was increasingly challenged through the 1980s and 1990s as elitist and inappropriate for the output of a publicly funded BBC. The stable

duopoly of the BBC and the commercial ITV network, which had sustained traditional public service values across Britain television from the late 1950s to the early 1980s, fragmented as Channel 4, Five, satellite services from Sky and BSB and a host of other offerings became available. Ratings acquired a new importance as both the BBC and ITV sought to justify their funding, and support for minority programmes diminished. By 1995, a substantial BBC consultation exercise could reflect that ‘[s]pecialist producers tend to think of [arts programme production] as rooted in the cutting edge of artistic endeavor and the business of serious cultural interpretation and criticism’ (BBC 1995):

69).² This was undoubtedly how Barrie Gavin saw his work:

Although some members of the audience strongly agree, many others seem to regard the arts first and foremost as a leisure activity for which the prime requirement is a less ambitious sort of consumer information and advice.

(BBC 1995)

In the twenty-first century, while programme making of the first kind has continued, it is the second vision of the arts on screen that has underpinned the strategies of executives and schedulers. Against these broad shifts in the values and economies of television, and in amongst the cracks and contradictions of funding and exhibition, Barrie Gavin continued to find contemporary forms of music programming that developed the public service ideas and ideals of the 1960s.

The following discussion between Gavin and the writer and producer John Wyver took place on 8 June 2018 at *Music 625: The Performance of Music on Television, c. 1955–85*, a conference organized by the Leeds Arts and Humanities Research Unit at the University of Leeds.

The conversation, which has been edited for length and clarity, and within which are included comments from conference participants, was structured around seven extracts selected with Barrie Gavin from his extensive filmography. These extracts were from broadcasts and films produced for BBC Television as well as one from a recent film profile being produced independently by Gavin himself. The productions combine performance and documentary elements to explore the music of modern and contemporary composers. Each one represents an innovative attempt to complement the music being played with distinctive visuals. In different ways, the images challenge the conventional presentation of music and musicians of television which invariably aspires to direct, transparent and apparently unmediated access to performance in the studio or concert hall. Even when a performance has been staged specially for the cameras, the presentational model is that of an outside broadcast, directly relaying a live or ‘as live’ performance with minimal intervention or interpretation.^[3] By contrast, and as the extracts included demonstrate, Gavin’s programmes are often allusive and highly self-reflexive, insistently employing production technologies to prompt engagement and understanding in the viewer.

The conversation began with an extract from the *Workshop* episode ‘Pierre Boulez - Portrait Analysis Performance’ (1966).^[4] The focus is Boulez’s *Improvisation sur Mallarmé No 2* (1957), with soprano Halina Lukomska and The New Music Ensemble. The narrator and interviewer is Basil Moss; Barrie Gavin was the programme’s producer and director.

Clip: www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p09096t2

John Wyver: I think there are a number of astonishing things about that excerpt. One is the programme's expectation, given that no apology is offered, that the audience will go along with this complex work, combined with Boulez's relatively complex explanation. Another is the technological feat of the visualization of the music, which I cannot imagine how it was done in 1966. Let's start with your recollections of this production and what concerns you were engaged with.

Barrie Gavin: I'm not an expert on anything, and I was looking at new music, or so-called new music, simply because I was interested in it. But I was only about two steps, if that, ahead of the audience. So I was finding my way through this piece in much the way that I think the audience made their way through it.

I remember Humphrey Burton being very dubious about this programme.⁵ I said, let's try and find out how the music works. And this applies to virtually everything that I have made: How does it work and where does it come from? Not where is it going to, I can't predict that. I can't predict the future of music anymore than the rest of us. But I can try to work out why it is the way it is. Listening to that particular piece of Boulez, it's not that far away from Debussy, and the notion of a sort of crystalline texture.

As for the technical process, it was all done frame by frame, it had to be, and then sent off to a laboratory who frequently got it wrong. So eventually you've got the singer who, of course, is exactly in sync with the notes, which you can see. It wouldn't make any sense if it wasn't. The actual recording of the music was done in the studio, which was entirely white. A very bright white too, which was kind of strange. And we had to do it in one day. It was all shot in one day.

JW: You're starting out here on a journey of visualizing, as you said in the title that you suggested, of making the invisible visible, giving it some kind of visual form.

BG: I was involved in a series of programmes in Chicago with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Pierre Boulez, the first of which he actually conducted, which was *The Miraculous Mandarin* by [Bela] Bartók [1881–1945]. And we got him to do a kind of epitaph, a motto I suppose, that they put at the front of the programme. I can't remember the exact words, although it starts with the principle that music, it is said, speaks for itself. But, Boulez reflected, it speaks more clearly and with greater relevance and in greater detail if you know the social and historical context in which it appears, as well as something of the circumstances and the mental state of the person conceiving the music, writing it. That would be, I think, Boulez's fundamental principle, and if I may adopt it, it would be mine. I want to know, and I want to find out, the process of making music. I have never thought of myself as a missionary – I disapprove of missionaries really – but I have been ambitious to explore, to investigate, to experiment.

Early days at the BBC

JW: By the time you produced your first *Workshop* with Pierre Boulez you had been at the BBC for nearly five years. You joined to be an assistant film editor in 1961. How did that come about?

BG: A friend of mine gave me a copy of *Amateur Cine World*, and there were advertisements for trainees to come and work at the BBC, and he said you should go for that. I loved film and I was deeply involved in both film and music. But only as a spectator and a listener. With great trepidation, I applied and got the job. I worked, first of all, on *Monitor* [1958–65], which was where I met Humphrey Burton. The film editor

on that series was a man called Allan Tyrer, who was wonderfully eccentric, as editors frequently are. He was the man who really, in a technical and indeed in an aesthetic sense, held *Monitor* together. He was a brilliant editor.⁶

JW: How did you then make the move from being an assistant film editor to directing and producing music programmes?

BG: Well, one of the great things you find out in cutting rooms is how do you cover up mistakes? Because inevitably in the shaping of a film, they'll be things you miss – I didn't get the sunrise, I didn't get the horses running over the hill or whatever. How do you fix that? Editing is how you fix it. Persuading people that they've seen something which they haven't actually seen.

Anyway, Humphrey said one day, how do you fancy making music programmes? I said, I'm not at all a musician. He said, 'well I'm surrounded by musicians who can't make programmes, so maybe it will work the other way round'. The conversation took about as long as it's taken me to tell you, and that was the rest of my working life sorted. Then you start with little bits and pieces, very simple, baby's first steps. And by this time, with the arrival of BBC2, they were desperate to find things to do, which is possibly how I got the job in the first place.⁷ So you found yourself within two or three years of being appointed as a sort of junior director you'd done 30 or 40 programmes. What happens is, of course, that you've sometimes done two performances in a day, and the mistakes you make in the morning you cure in the evening, and you make better or more sophisticated mistakes in the evening.

JW: There was the necessity of a relentless production output, and you were just making a lot of stuff quickly. Was that productive? Because it presumably didn't give you a great deal of time for reflection and self-analysis. You just had to get on to the next thing.

BG: Absolutely right. I try to avoid generalities about what people should or should not do. But I think that sometimes not knowing what the limitations are, rather like getting the job in the first place, means that you just try everything and you invent things, because you don't know how to do it. Sometimes it's awful, just terrible. Next time, maybe better.

What I was doing very quickly developed into a whole series of recital programmes. We used the studio facilities of the BBC, which were meant to be used for live broadcasts, never really to record, to make piano recitals, vocals, string quartets.

Which would go out late at night. And that was a sort of regular part of the output.⁸

Gradually you begin to get your feet under the table, and eventually you end up perhaps collaborating, which is what we did with the Copland film, which is what Humphrey and myself did together.⁹

Tim Boon: Thinking about the musical notation process in the *Workshop* extract – was that done on film, while the sequences you see from the studio performance were shot using television cameras?

BG: But then transferred to film. Which you could do in those days via 35-mm tele-recording, and it was miles easier to edit. We provided the laboratories with a lot of work which they often screwed up.

JW: Speaking to that, one of the things I took away from looking at this, is how hybrid the process was between film and video. The dominant sense for the history, certainly for

theatre on television, is that there were studio programmes or outside broadcasts with electronic cameras, and there was film production.¹⁰ But actually I think what we're learning is that those two technologies, and the forms and techniques associated with both, were very mixed up and you were working with both in very interesting ways. In the writing of the history, I don't think we've really begun to recognize that that was the case.

BG: I think that's true. One of the things that happened to me, when I became a director, I thought I'm going to be stuck making films, but I was determined to train myself as far as possible to shoot with an [electronic] multi-camera setup. I thought at least I would have more varied things to do. And indeed that's how it turned out, so that instead of having one camera on one occasion, we had fifteen. More than fifteen and you're getting in each other's way. That elaboration which happens on the screen and in programmes, this is also happening to the makers themselves.

Working with Pierre Boulez

JW: One of your key collaborations with a figure beyond television was with Pierre Boulez, and we've seen the beginnings of that. Now we'll show two more clips from a film made by you to mark the composer's 80th birthday, which in fact was never broadcast. These extracts are from a slightly later period of performance than the previous *Workshop* extract, but like that they also begin to re-imagine both ways of working in the studio and the visualization of music.

Clip: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p09097cx>

Clip: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p09097kp>

JW: I think it's fair to reflect that there are relatively few programmes today that quote Theodor Adorno.^[11] Three pieces of performance, each really quite radical, innovative, distinctive in their visualization. Could just talk us through both the filming of Bartók's *Music for Strings* [1936], and then those two pieces from Boulez's *Le Marteau sans maître* [1955]?

BG: The Bartók was taken from a programme that I did with Boulez about the rhythm of new music, which was concerned with the contrast between rhythm slow, Bartók, and really fast, [Stravinsky's] *The Rite of Spring*.^[12] It was incredibly difficult to make those sort of shapes on the screen because they all had to be done optically at the laboratory. There was no way that you could in those days simply play around on a desktop or in a recording studio. So they've all had to be very precisely calculated, and in some cases miscalculated.

The other two bits of music which we saw came originally in a film which I made about *Le Marteau sans maître* called 'Tele-Marteau', where we were given – imagine this – four days in the studio in Germany, shooting on 35mm colour stock.^[13] I had four days to record the 34 minutes of music. And we devised a colour system whereby certain pieces had a red background and certain pieces had a white background and so on. It was hugely unpopular. The then head of music at the BBC was John Culshaw, and he complained bitterly.^[14] He said, we had an audience total which seems to have been only 85,000. And I said, well, that's the old Wembley Stadium completely filled. But there was always this problem. Can you possibly make it more popular? No, no.

JW: Where does that confidence in what would later be seen as an elitist way of making programmes come from? What's that grounded in at the point where you're working, in the late 1960s and 1970s?

BG: I'll quote you something that was said to me by a composer when I asked him whether he regarded his music as elitist. And he said, not surprisingly, no, it's just me trying to do the best I can. And that in a way, is something I recognize, that I didn't seek to be elitist, I was just I'm trying to find a way of making those adventures, those experiments, expeditions on film. Because I was finding out about the music along with the audience, or as I said, just ahead of the audience. It's just what I do.

JW: And you were given a relatively significant degree of autonomy to do what you did?

BG: Yes, wonderful autonomy. Because apart from anything else if one wants to be cynical, you could say nobody actually cared very much what we did anyway, so they just let me get on with it. I think Culshaw once said, having looked at one of these programmes: 'Hmm, I suppose we have to do one of these things once in a while', which is telling you exactly how important you are. So we had a lot of autonomy. Without getting into too much detail, the difference between broadcasting then and maybe broadcasting now was that the ideas grew as seeds do from the ground up. People came up with ideas that they wanted to do, and they were approved or sometimes disapproved. Nowadays they come from above, they float down, and someone says, we want a series on this or whatever.

JW: We've taken a vow for this discussion not to compare work from the period we're looking at with television today. That is a fruitless discussion, at least in this conversation, and so we're not going to continue that route. Let me ask you one more

question about Boulez and then we'll move on. Boulez, as we've seen, is a slightly tentative communicator in talking about the Mallarmé, but then he becomes much more fluent and fluid as a television personality. He believed in television – is that right? He believed that television was central to what, as a composer, conductor, proselytizer, he should be doing?

BG: Yes, absolutely. And because of his wide general culture, by which I mean he was extremely well read he could he could say, well, it's like Proust or James Joyce or it's like Paul Klee or Mondrian or whatever. The references came from all sorts of places, and as maybe Ed was saying, the only way to really tackle music is by a process of analogy and metaphor.^[15] It's like this because music itself isn't there, but we don't appreciate it in that figurative sense. So it was being given that sort of leeway, and I think the right.

Luigi Nono and the avant-garde

JW: The next extract is from a film called *Vive a Venezia* with Luigi Nono.^[16] This was shown on 1 October 1978, when I had been a television critic for *Time Out* magazine for just about a year. And I remember turning this on at 2:45 on a Sunday afternoon, which is not exactly primetime, and watching this and being astounded by it. This one of those programmes that actually needs to be appreciated in full, but the clip gives some sense of that. I should also say that the stop-motion element in the interview part with Nono at the beginning is absolutely deliberate.

Clip: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p09099rr>

JW: Why did you want to make a film with Luigi Nono?

BG: In one sense, why not? He was at that time, in the 1970s, very much a composer who was much played, although less so now. And there's the factor of chance which comes in an awful lot in filmmaking. We had a film crew from *Omnibus* down in Naples doing a film about the religious processions of the city.^[17] I thought, well, they're out there, I'll fly out. And I spoke Nono on the telephone, and he said, yes. OK. By the time we got there he had decided he didn't speak English. He was going to speak Italian, which meant that we then had to re-voice him. The key thing which I wanted to have was this extraordinary mixture of violent confrontations, which happened very often in his music, with a very serene, lyrical, sort of rapt quality, which somehow went with Venice. He hated *Death in Venice* [*Morte a Venezia*, directed by Luchino Visconti, 1971]. He thought it was a terrible film. He said I want to be alive in Venice, which is the title of the film, *Vive a Venezia*.

JW: Much of it is shot by John Hooper, a great film cameraman.^[18] Part of all of this work needs to be about recognizing the extraordinary creative contributions of people like Allan Tyrer and John Hooper, who were absolutely central to this output. But it was also shot with and developed with Marc Karlin and Humphry Trevelyan, who were two filmmakers who were associated at that point with Berwick Street Collective, a radical avant-garde filmmaking group.^[19] That collaboration seems to me a remarkable and surprising thing. How did it how did it come about?

BG: For about a year I was running the Production Board of the British Film Institute.^[20] One of the films that we made was called *Nightcleaners, Part Two*,^[21] and I was so impressed by what they had done and the manipulation of imagery on this film that I went to them and I said, look I've shot this stuff, can we have a go at it? And they

collaborated with me on it. They were remarkable and I learnt from it. The great thing is to learn from everybody. If you're wise you learn from everybody, you learn from your editor or your cameraman, who offer all kinds of things, and even from the subject matter that you tackle. You come out of it knowing more, perhaps even feeling more than you did beforehand.

JW: Marc and Humphry came from a self-consciously avant-garde filmmaking tradition. Did you identify with the idea of the avant-garde within television? Was that a notion that made any sense within television?

BG: No, it made no sense at all. But I could identify with the idea. It seemed to me that the possibilities, not simply in the matter of subject matter, although the music was [avant-garde] and the composer was, but also in terms of how we look at imagery, that we had to import into public television some of these ideas that were being made in experimental form. And I wanted them to become part of whatever the mainstream is, if that's who we were, in the mainstream. Anyway, to join our tributary, and it was a very happy collaboration.

JW: The film also has a strong, explicit leftist ethics behind it. Is that a politics that you understand running through a lot of your work?

BG: Yes. Yes. I'm an unashamed leftist. The last one in captivity. I was always, and I know I achieved certain success because a man from Personnel once said to me, I think you choose subjects and collaborators because of their political alignment. I said, yes, of course I do. Why would I do otherwise?

Edward Venn (from the audience): One of the things that really interested me about the Nono film when I saw it, and you've explained some of that, is that he kind of recedes

into the background as a figure, his music remains and Venice fills that space. There was a very similar process in *One Foot in Eden* as well that you made around that time. Was that also a creative decision or did Max [that is, the composer Peter Maxwell Davies] bring that to you?²²

BG: With Max Davis, I suppose it wasn't a creative decision, but his manager said Max doesn't want to be interviewed. Right, we'll make the film without an interview, perfectly possible. He doesn't want anyone to see where he lives, because people like tourists might come and disturb him. Hmm, imagine shiploads coming to Orkney coming up to look at him. Anyway, it was in a sense forced on us, but then you have to think, you can make the film with what have got.

Karlheinz Stockhausen and *Omnibus*

JW: You worked with another major central classical composer, Karlheinz Stockhausen [1928–2007], on a profile that was shown in 1980.²³ The next extract is the beginning of that film.

Clip: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p09098gb>

JW: Can you talk about Stockhausen. Not an easy man to work with?

BG: No. The basis on which we could make the film was that he came nowhere near us. Luckily he'd just given a series of lectures at the ICA, very effective lectures, about his music, He was born a performer or shaman-like person. And so I bought the rights to that material, and then we made the film, which called upon all the sort of resources that the BBC film library had. We had to be not too inhibited to go everywhere to find things. Because you don't even know why they're there sometimes but they feel right. I can't say

more than that. And then we used one piece of music called *Stimmung* [1968]. And that becomes the kind of thread throughout the film and comes back again.

JW: So one of the things that intrigues me about that beginning, is you say you begin to hear *Stimmung* come through, but it's quite unclear what is Stockhausen's music and what is[...]

BG: The music right at the start was the beginning of a piece called *Hymnen* [1966–67], which eventually becomes a sort of collage of national anthems. The opening scene was shot in my office at Bristol, with my then seven-year-old son working the machine, he's now 47, and then taking off from there. The film is called 'Tuning In', but it could equally be called 'Taking Off' had there not been a Milos Forman film called just that.

JW: One of my interests is how much you as a filmmaker have to respect and serve what we could think of as the integrity of the music, and how much can you rework that or rethink that in the process of what you're doing?

BG: Well, you hope that you are not reinterpreting it, but that you are finding what is in there. It sometimes comes majestically unstuck. I did a film in 1966 about Gustav Holst and we wanted to feature a lot of *The Planets* suite [1914–16].^[24] No surprise there. But I did not want to see moons in space, and this was even before [Stanley Kubrick's feature film] *2001: A Space Odyssey* [1968] came out. We did a sequence for Mercury, which is a very fast-moving, very short piece, and we simply put together everything that moved quickly, birds, fish animals whatever and moving shots from a car. And we greatly upset the composer's daughter, who was still alive, Imogen Holst. But, my dear, she said, it's not about that. Well, in the film it is now. It's very difficult, this business of misinterpretation or what I suppose you can call misappropriation of a composer. But

most composers are astonished you should have found whatever in their music. It's rather similar to when you work with a really wonderful editor, for example, who comes to show you your work, and you had no idea it was so good, because they've found something in it that I, the director or producer, hadn't found or hadn't perceived in quite that way.

JW: Were there moments – and the most notorious case, of course, is the BBC's Ken Russell film, 'Dance of the Seven Veils' [broadcast 15 February 1970, BBC1], where the Strauss Estate from the transmission day to today have effectively kept that off any screen, have there been moments when you've not been able to access a piece of work because of publishing rights or where composers have objected to the way you work with them?

BG: If any of them have objected, they haven't objected to me. Maybe they have objected to management or to their publisher. But generally speaking, no. The only time that's gone wrong, not the only time, but one of the times, was when I made a film in Germany about a conductor for West German television, and he had the right in his contract to have the last cut on everything, not just the sound, not just the music. And of course, we ended up doing three versions of the film, after which I walked out and he finished it. Surprisingly, there was a little more of himself in his version.

JW: One of the great things about working for the BBC is that the BBC has it written in its Royal Charter that it as an institution must have the final cut of any and everything that is shown (BBC 2016). Producers constantly have recourse to that. I endlessly have the expectation from creative figures that they will be able to shape the final version, and you have to say we'll collaborate towards that, but the BBC must have the final cut,

because that's written into the statute. That's a really fundamental underpinning of a great deal of public service television.

One more question about this. The Stockhausen profile was made originally for the *Omnibus* strand, at that point being edited by Leslie Megahey. Leslie was the series editor from 1979 to '81.^[25] Which is an incredibly rich period for that strand. And Leslie encouraged a number of absolutely key filmmakers to find ways of engaging with the arts. But you had been the series editor before that.

BG: I was the editor from 1974 to 1977, And then Leslie came in after that.^[26]

JW: How did you understand your role as a strand editor and as a facilitator of the films of others?

BG: The thing that you needed to do was to have an open door. And being open and to also think, as I did, that the series needed to need some fresh air in it. So that the second programme that we ever did in my time at *Omnibus* was about [the composer György Sándor] Ligeti [1923–2006].^[27] And I remember watching Humphrey introducing it on screen, saying, do be careful, everybody, don't turn your sets off, give it a bit of time, which of course meant everyone turned their sets off. But we did it, with our second programme, and I thought: 'nail your colours to the mast'.

Collaborating with Simon Rattle

JW: The next clip is a piece from *Sinfonia*, a performance of Luciano Berio's work which Berio [1925–2003] wrote in 1968 [actually completed 1969].^[28] This was filmed in 1987 with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (CBSO) with conductor Simon Rattle. One of the other key relationships and collaborations that you've developed over the years is with Simon Rattle. Can you speak about Simon Rattle's interest in television?

BG: He had no interest in television at all. He didn't even like to see himself, he said I hate myself making those extraordinary faces. But he was interested in the notions of what we could do. He had this long relationship with the CBSO, and we became part of that. So we'd sit down and say, well, what are we going to do next? And then I would come up with an idea or he would come up with an idea and say, I know nothing about that whatsoever. Then if we interviewed him, he'd talk for 40 minutes brilliantly. So we just ranged around and we did groups of programmes. We did a series of programmes, all to do with the year 1911, all the kind of music that was finished or being written in 1911 or first performed in 1911, which meant music all the way from Schoenberg to 'Alexander's Ragtime Band'. Amazingly enough, that was written in 1911.^[29] We did a series called *From East to West* about how the music of Asia had affected the music of Europe, in terms of style, colour and so forth.^[30] But he never wanted to look at the films. There was no sense of collaboration in the sense that, well, I'll come and see it, and then maybe we'll change it. No, just do it. And then he would disappear. Which sounds wonderful. Except sometimes you just want someone to say: 'lovely'.

JW: This is the third movement, or the beginning of the third movement, of *Sinfonia*.

Clip: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p09098wy>

JW: You are working with a different palette here? An electronic palette. And building up an extraordinarily layered and complex visual image, which is almost beyond the kind of possibilities of a small television screen.

BG: I hope so. Yes. The third movement of this piece is based on the third movement of Mahler's second symphony, and that's what's providing the pulse of the dramatic om-pah-pah. Onto which Berio has added eight electronically amplified signals. And the

piece is full of quotations, fleeting, sometimes you can't hear them at all. Bits of Berlioz, Ravel and very noticeably Stravinsky towards the end when *The Rite of Spring* comes in and somehow fits in with all of this. An extraordinary thing. And we had an amazing time doing it, because it all had to be edited afterwards, but we had two cameras rolling the whole time. They had nothing to do except to swing round this bubbling inferno. And then we added little bits on, like postage stamps, instrumental details, bits of Ravel whatever. That's probably the most exotic thing I've ever done.

JW: And it was shown at 7:35 on a Saturday evening. What did the great British public make of that at a 7:35 on Saturday?

BG: Well they either turned it off or they were intrigued by it. I hope they were intrigued. Intrigued is a good word. It's used sometimes rather pejoratively. But I like people to be intrigued, to look at things and think what on earth is that?

JW: I have two more clips. One is a contrast with this, a much calmer, purer filmic piece, from 'Thirteen Steps Around Toru Takemitsu'.^[31]

BG: There are all sorts of ways of starting to make a film. You can either prepare everything or nothing, and I have done both of those things in my time. So you start to wonder what on earth you are going to do, and what's the first shot? And there are occasions when that is not possible, and with Takemitsu, we had, I think, six days in Japan to shoot an hour-long film. Not quite an hour-long film, because the music had been recorded at the Warwick Arts Centre.

I thought that we had to know what we were going to do, or the rest of the days would fly by and we wouldn't get a film, or rather scraps only. The other thing was I had heard a radio broadcast by Oliver Knussen about Takemitsu, who was a big fan of his,

about how Takemitsu's music is discontinuous, that's to say it comes in little blocks, beautiful little blocks of sound with pauses in between.³²

We had chosen the piece we were going to do, which has the marvellous title of *A Flock Descends into the Pentagonal Garden*, and it turned out to be in thirteen sections. If you have a very simple mathematical mind, and mine is very simple, that means there must be twelve pauses in between the pieces. So the first twelve sections of the film are about him and him composing, thinking, talking, writing music for Akira Kurosawa.³³ These amount to twelve sections. And then comes number 13, which is a complete performance of the piece into which we have flashbacks of all the other things you've just seen. Surprisingly, it seemed to work. Sometimes you wonder. This one seemed to be, you know, there. What you're going to see is step 12.

Clip: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0909916>

JW: I particularly like that this made at almost exactly the same time as the *Sinfonia* recording, but it has a completely different aesthetic. So there isn't a sense in which you're imposing a particular aesthetic or a particular way of working on whatever subject you come you take on.

BG: No, no. The process of being a director, of directing, is one of learning. What is the music saying to you? What's it telling you to do? And usually it is telling you to do something. Whether you manage it or not, is another matter. But it is that kind of process. Also, I didn't always want to be making the same film. You know there are people are happy to make routine films. I didn't. With this film it was deliberately very still.

Executive producers can be a problem, I'm sure I was when I was one. And the man who was the executive producer of this film was a man called Dennis Marks, now

sadly dead.³⁴ He came to see the rough cut and he said, you're making a very slow film, I said that's right: Japanese artist, slow, contemplative, almost static, in contrast to life in the streets of Tokyo, which is absolutely not. He said there are only a few weaknesses in it, and they are always when it starts to speed up. Make it slower. That's really quite something for an executive producer to say, and I did, and it worked I have to say.

The other thing I wanted to say was that Takemitsu said to me once: 'When I write the piece, I think: "completely new direction". Then my wife, she hears it. She says, "oh, same old pieces every time"'. And actually we think that we're going to do something new, we think that we're making something new, and when you look at it later you feel: 'Oh God, here I go again'. Same old thing.

Making music television

TB: Would you say that the process of making music television is a process of television more than a process of music in a way, that actually you are supplying visual metaphors to go with the music? And so it becomes a thing in itself?

BG: Yes. I think so. I was only ever really interested in two things. But that was music and film, and by a happy chance, meeting Humphrey, we were able to put those two things together, so they are kind of woven rather like a rope together. The music tells me what kind of film I'm going to make, and the film in some senses tells me what kind of attitude I have towards the music. Which in every case is positive. I wouldn't make the film about music I didn't like. Such a waste of time and effort.

JW: We're going to finish with the piece, as yet unshown and not quite finished, which is a profile of Brian Elias [b. 1948], which you've been working on over the recent months. Because the extraordinary thing is the latest of the clips we've seen is from 1987, but

actually in the thirty years since then, you've continued to make performance work, film operas and concerts, continue to make profiles of composers, engage with some of your other interests, like folk music, record unedited archival interviews with composers, and you continue to make film profiles of composers to this very day.³⁵

This is a piece from the latest film, from as I say a profile of the contemporary composer Brian Elias, which ends with an appropriate – if not exactly an epitaph, then a moment that we can also end this session on. So this is four or so minutes from *A Passage from India*.

Clip: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p09092px>

JW: The extract ends with Brian Elias saying: 'It may be that I'll drop dead in one of my fallow periods, but I'll drop dead still hoping to write another piece'. Barrie, I know you will carry on making films until the moment comes when you can't. We have just touched the surface of an astonishing career, incredibly fecund and innovative, rich, complex and always opening up new possibilities for viewers. I have learned, appreciated, enjoyed an enormous amount from your work over the years. And I know hundreds, thousands, millions have done as well. I just want to say, Thank you very much.

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Television Programmes

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Civilisation (1969, UK: BBC).

From East to West (1986, UK: BBC).

'Thirteen steps around Toru Takemitsu' (25 October 1986).

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‘All clouds are clocks’ (5 February 1976).

‘Tuning In’ (26 February 1980).

Sinfonia (1987, UK: BBC).

Sunday Night presenting (1965–66, UK:BBC).

‘Holst’ (13 February 1966).

Vive a Venezia (1978, UK: BBC).

Workshop (1964–78, UK: BBC).

‘Mr Copland comes to town’ (20 June 1964).

‘Pierre Boulez – portrait analysis performance’ (22 August 1966).

‘Tele-Marteau’ (20 October 1968).

‘The New Rhythm of Music’ (12 October 1969).

1. For the context of BBC arts programmes in the 1960s and 1970s, see [Wyver \(2007\)](#) and [Walker \(1993\)](#).

2. For a more extended treatment of the shifts in understanding of arts programmes in television across these years, see [Wyver \(2007\)](#).

3. For a statement in 1970 about the desirability of what he describes as ‘straight presentation’ of music on television, see the interview with John Culshaw, Head of Music, BBC TV (1967–75) in [Bakewell and Garnham \(1970\)](#): 123–26).

4. *Workshop* (1964–78) was a series, as the *Radio Times* billing for its first programme stated, ‘about the making of music’ (via the BBC Genome Project website).

Pierre Boulez (1925–2016) was the most French composer of his generation, a noted writer and theorist, as well as a celebrated conductor known especially for championing the work of twentieth-century composers. His first appearance on British television was in the monthly magazine series *Music International* (1965–68; 2 August 1965).

5. Humphrey Burton (b. 1931) is a television producer, director, producer and writer. He joined BBC Radio in 1955 and transferred to the television service the following year. He was part of the initial production team for the arts series *Monitor* (1958–65), an editor of the programme from 1962. In 1965 he was appointed BBC Television's first Head of Music and Arts, a position he held until 1967.

6. Allan Tyrer (1915–97) worked regularly with the filmmaker Ken Russell on his films for *Monitor* and was supervising film editor on the television series *Civilisation* (1969) and *America* (1973).

7. BBC2 was the second television channel from the publicly funded BBC which went on air across the United Kingdom on 21 April 1964. From its start it offered many more programmes about the arts and sciences, as well as educational broadcasts than were being shown by BBC1 and the commercial ITV network. It rapidly developed a reputation as a 'highbrow' channel and its audiences were consistently lower than its two more popular rivals. See Boon (2017).

8. Among Barrie Gavin's earliest credits as studio director are programmes for the *Midweek Music* series of recitals shown in the summer of 1964.

9. *Workshop*: 'Mr Copland Comes to Town' (20 June 1964, BBC) followed the composer Aaron Copland on a visit to London to premiere his composition *Music for a Great City* with the London Symphony Orchestra. The programme combined outside

broadcast sequences directed by Humphrey Burton with film sequences directed by Barrie Gavin; Burton was the producer of the broadcast

[10.] The history of the distinct strands of electronic camera production and of filmmaking to present theatre on television is detailed in [Wyver \(forthcoming\)](#). See also [Taylor \(1990\)](#).

[11.] Theodor Adorno (1903–69) was a German philosopher of aesthetics associated with the Frankfurt school of critical theory.

[12.] *Workshop: 'The New Rhythm of Music'* (12 October 1969, BBC2) featured the BBC Symphony Orchestra playing Bartók and Stravinsky, with Tim Souster interviewing Boulez; Barrie Gavin was credited as director.

[13.] *Workshop: 'Tele-Marteau'* (20 October 1968, BBC2) was a BBC Television-S.W.F co-production (the German regional public broadcaster Südwestrundfunk, part of the ARD consortium), with mezzo-soprano Yvonne Minton and Barrie Gavin as director.

[14.] John Culshaw was an influential classical record producer for Decca Records who served as BBC Television's Head of Music Programmes from 1967 to 1975.

[15.] Barrie Gavin has subsequently confirmed that he was referring to a recent conversation with Edward Venn; see Venn's article in this issue for a discussion of Gavin's composer portraits.

[16.] *Vive a Venezia* (1 October 1978, BBC2) featured the music of Luigi Nono (1924–90), as the *Radio Times* billings detailed, 'in the context of world events and of a Venice very different from the city of Renaissance art or of Thomas Mann' (via the BBC Genome Project website). In the film, Nono's statements are read by Alfred Burke; Barrie Gavin is credited as director.

17. *Omnibus* (1967–2003) was a long-running arts documentary series, broadcast mainly on BBC1.

18. John Hooper (b. 1936) is a director of photography who has specialized in arts documentaries, working regularly with innovative filmmakers including Leslie Megahey and David Wheatley.

19. The Berwick Street Film Collective produced a number of independent documentaries between c. 1970 and 1980. The group's work is recognized as exploring leftist politics and filmmaking techniques associated with the avant-garde. Key works include *Ireland Behind the Wire* (1974) and *Nightcleaners* (1975). Marc Karlin (1943–99) and Humphry Trevelyan (b. 1944) were founder members of the Berwick Street Film Collective.

20. The BFI Production Board, operational between 1964 and 2000, was a state-funded production fund managed by the British Film Institute which had a specific brief to support the work of new and emerging filmmakers as well as, in the 1970s and 1980s, the work of avant-garde film artists. Barrie Gavin was Head of Production at the Board in 1974–75.

21. *Nightcleaners, Part Two*, also known as *36 to 77* (1978), made by the Berwick Street Film Collective, focused on the impact on one participant in the 1972 industrial that was the focus of *Nightcleaners*.

22. *One Foot in Eden* (1978) is a film documentary funded by the Arts Council of Great Britain about the music of composer Peter Maxwell Davies (1934–2016); Barrie Gavin was the director. Filmed on the island of Sanday, Orkney, where the composer had

made his home, *One Foot in Eden* is available for free access in the United Kingdom via BFIPlayer: <https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-one-foot-in-eden-1978-online>.

23. *Omnibus*: ‘Tuning In’ (26 February 1980, BBC1), directed by Barrie Gavin, is a journey into Stockhausen’s musical world.

24. *Sunday Night presenting*: ‘Holst’ (13 February 1966, BBC1), co-produced by Michael Bradsell and Barrie Gavin, was a study of English composer Gustav Holst (1874–1934).

25. Leslie Megahey (b. 1944) is a British writer and filmmaker celebrated for his innovative film biographies of visual artists. He was the series editor of *Omnibus* from 1979–81 and 1984–87.

26. Barrie Gavin was appointed series editor of *Omnibus* in August 1975 and was responsible for broadcasts from 8 January 1976 to 30 August 1978.

27. *Omnibus*: ‘All Clouds Are Clocks’ (5 February 1976). The film was directed by Leslie Megahey with Barrie Gavin as producer.

28. The television broadcast *Sinfonia* (21 March 1987, BBC2) featured Simon Rattle (b. 1948) conducting Electric Phoenix and the CBSO.

29. *1911: A Year in Musical History* (12 May–2 June 1984, BBC2) was a series of four films featuring, among much else, the music of Sibelius and Mahler. Simon Rattle conducted the CBSO; the films were directed by Barrie Gavin. ‘Alexander’s Ragtime Band’ is a song written by American composer Irving Berlin (1888–1989) which was released in 1911.

30. *From East to West* (18 October–5 November 1986, BBC2) was a series of four films about the impact of the east on European music. The films featured Simon Rattle with the CBSO and were directed by Barrie Gavin.

31. ‘Thirteen Steps Around Toru Takemitsu’ (25 October 1986, BBC2) was the second in the series *From East to West* made with Simon Rattle and the CBSO, featuring the composer Toru Takemitsu (1930–96).

32. Oliver Knussen (1952–2018) was a British composer and conductor. He discussed Takemitsu’s music including *A Flock Descends into the Pentagonal Garden* (1977) in a radio broadcast that he also devised for the series *Music in Our Time* (23 February 1984, BBC Radio 3).

33. Akira Kurosawa (1910–98) was a Japanese director and screenwriter. Takemitsu composed scores for more than 90 films, including *Dodes’ka-den* (1970) and *Ran* (1985), both directed by Akira Kurosawa.

34. Dennis Marks (1948–2015) was a filmmaker and author, who was BBC Television’s Head of Music Programmes (1991–93) and general director of English National Opera (1993–97).

35. British television has not welcomed Gavin’s recent films, which instead circulate amongst interested viewers at music festivals and online. Until recently he worked regularly with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra on a series of films with the writer and composer Gerard McBurney. Among the subjects of his archival interviews with contemporary musical figures are composers Mark-Anthony Turnage, Nigel Osborne, Jonathan Harvey and Michael Finnissy, conductor Mark Elder and double-bass player

Chi-Chi Nwanoku. Many of Gavin's films about contemporary music are available for study at the Paul Sacher Institute in Basel, Switzerland.

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