

Rob interviewing Carl Smith

Rob Millar (RM): Hello and welcome to a short series of conversations about music, about European music. And I'm here today with Carl Smith, who is a multi-musician, a conductor, and also a composer.

Carl Smith (CS): Hello, Rob.

RM: We're going to talk in a little while about European music, but perhaps we could just talk, to begin with, at least, about music in general. It's a big, big subject. Why do you think it's so important to us?

CS: It's a huge subject, but I think that if you ask any member of the public what music means to them, that probably the thing most people will say is that, well, it is a form of entertainment, it's something we listen to, it's on in the background when we're working or when we're at home. But I think music is a great deal more than that. It's all around us everywhere, all of the time: on TV, at the cinema, the theatre, the opera house, concert hall and so on – many, many places, even on the streets, and of course in our homes and work places very often too. But I feel that music is not just entertainment. It's an extremely important and very powerful part of our lives. And music of course takes many different forms, many different styles, and genres, some we love and some we hate. And, because we all have such strong likes and dislikes about music, and strong opinions, that actually, I think, demonstrates how important music is to us. I think music has a very powerful effect on our moods ...

RM: Absolutely.

CS: ... our emotions, and it also, of course, moves us not only emotionally, but literally. When you hear a piece of music ...

RM: You want to dance.

CS: ... we tap our feet, we want to dance, clap along, and whether it's a formal dance or something very informal, self-expression, we exercise to music – people love to march along and do their exercises to music, marching in a ceremony of some kind or a parade. It's a very, very powerful thing.

RM: I think all societies have music, do they not?

CS: Yes, of course they do, and from the very, very simplest and earliest forms.

RM: Yeah, and we're going to explore some of those early forms later. But still, it's around us all the time. We go to the cinema and we're – our emotions, our feelings are manipulated, kind of, by music, aren't they? At the opera or concert hall, the same.

CS: Yes, absolutely. Music is also a very shared, a very social experience, and we love to share music with others, and I think it is with us through the most important times in our lives, right from the cradle to the grave – parties, birthdays, weddings, many people have music playing when they work, when they socialise. Music can also be very nostalgic. Most people have a favorite song or a special melody that relates to a very important time in their lives. It reminds us of loved ones and people who may no longer be with us.

RM: You talked about births, you talked about marriages, but you didn't talk about the funeral.

CS: No.

RM: That kind of music is also very, very important, and somehow can summarise a person's likes during their life or something that sums them up.

CS: Yes, absolutely. And, very often, people will choose their own funeral music in advance ...

RM: Which they'll never hear.

CS: ... which they're never going to hear. But, nevertheless, it's really important to them and important to their family, and their friends to hear and to choose certain pieces of music that reflect and have some importance in the lives of that person.

RM: Music has been with us throughout history, hasn't it?

CS: Yes.

RM: ... Not only is it worldwide, but it's also in time. There's been music since man has been able to hit a rock with a stick, I imagine.

CS: Yes, yes, perhaps somebody dropped a rock on their foot and let out a high note.

RM: That was the first song.

CS: But yes, you're absolutely right. Man has made music in some form or another. And, also very often it's been to do with communication. So, communicating with each other over a long distance, for example, thinking of, perhaps yodelling in the Alpine countries.

RM: That was especially created in order to communicate across ...

CS: Exactly. Yes, across the valley.

RM: We'll maybe get to hear some of that another time. OK, yodelling, that's a particularly European phenomenon, isn't it?

CS: Yes. It is.

RM: Let's think about music in terms of history. I mean, who were the first people to commission music?

CS: Well, going back a number of centuries, music really has existed in three main forms. The first is church music, or religious music of various kinds, and that really started in the monasteries with the monastic chants, the Gregorian chants, and things like that.

RM: Which was done without instruments, if I'm not mistaken.

CS: Yes, yes that's right. It was very much just a solo voice or a group of voices singing the same notes together. But these chants were written down. When the majority of the public couldn't read and couldn't write, the monks would write down these tunes, these chants.

RM: Did they write them down because they were an elite, or was it because they wanted to be able to reproduce the same tunes, the same melodies, whoever performed them?

CS: I think it's exactly that: the monastic life was very formal, very set, very rigid. They wanted to be able to use these particular chants or psalms in the same way, time and time again. And, of course as time has gone on, church music has developed into music for worship, hymns of praise, psalms, music for religious festivals ...

RM: Communal experience is a factor again ...

CS: Absolutely. Yes, but very much tied up with the religious experience, the church experience. Going into the more recent history, music will be performed on a huge scale. Oratorios, works like "The Messiah". In the 19th century, you might have an orchestra of 200, and you might have a choir of 1,000 performing a work like "The Messiah". And, it's something which brought huge numbers of people together.

RM: So, the Church was very important in terms of creating or commissioning music.

CS: Indeed. Indeed. The second way that music developed was with the aristocracy, the wealthy patrons who would commission composers to write music for them. It was considered a great status symbol, if you had your own composer in your employ and not just a composer, you would have musicians in your employ, so you would have an orchestra, or a chamber group, or a smaller ensemble. As a wealthy person, you were paying someone to write music for you, and entertain you, and entertain your friends, and impress everybody. But again, this music tended to be very formal – very formal in the structure of the music, very formal in the ensemble of musicians that were used, and this music developed into what we now think of very loosely as "classical" music, very strict in form.

RM: Yes, with symphonies, with particular kind of tempos and moods, and so on.

CS: It was dictated how many movements a symphony should have, and there should be a fast movement and a slow movement, and a minuet and a trio. They're all very defined elements that went into these works.

RM: Now this is very, very different to folk music.

CS: Yes it is. It is. This music was all, again, written down, because if you think centuries ago we had no TV, no radio, no cinema, no recordings of any kind, and so the only way to reproduce the music was to write it down, so that it could be played again and performed at a different time. Whereas folk music ...

RM: Right, we're getting on to our subject now ...

CS: ... very often was not written down. And many people were unable to read or write, and so the music of the people – folk music, folk's music, if you like – that was handed down from generation to generation, and it was handed down by ear. So, people would play or sing and the next generation would take it on from there and continue the same sort of music that they grew up with, but of course, by doing it without having anything formally written down, it means that it evolves and changes all of the time, so each generation would add something slightly different to it, so the genre would spread in different directions.

RM: Well that makes it very interesting to think about the way that folk music in Europe has developed, because it's been changing, as you mentioned, and had lots of outside influences. We're going to go on and explore that a little bit in our next conversation. We'll listen to some music from Romania next time. And we'll play out now just now with a little bit of Romanian music.

Carl Smith: musician, composer and conductor, thank you very much for now, and we'll meet again to talk about Romanian music in the near future.

CS: We will. Thank you.