

# Steelpan Concerto

## PERSONAL NOTES: A CONVERSATION WITH COMPOSER JAN BACH

*Sarah Bryan Miller, Chicago Reader, April 5, 1996*

Composer Jan Bach, a professor of theory and composition at Northern Illinois university and a six-time nominee for a Pulitzer, takes commissions only from ensembles he's never written for before. "I do like new challenges and live in fear - among many phobias; I really believe most composers are nuts - that I will repeat myself if I write for the same combination twice." Bach - no relation to J.S., he's constantly having to say - is a native of Forrest, Illinois, a farming town an hour from Urbana. He started writing music at an early age, and as a student at the University of Illinois, where he received a doctorate in composition, he tested out of a year's worth of theory classes. His teachers have included Aaron Copland and Thea Musgrave. He's had commissions from, among others, the Vermeer Quartet, the Chicago Brass Quintet, and the Indianapolis Symphony, and his works have been performed at the Aldeburgh Festival and New York City Opera. Bach writes for standard instruments - piano, flute, voice, cello, harp. But he also writes for exotic ones in exotic combinations - flexatone, steel pan. His Concerto for Steelpan and Orchestra, written for Liam Teague, a native of Trinidad and a student at NIU, premiered late last year in performances by the Chicago Sinfonietta. The audience responded to the work with far more enthusiasm than is normally the case with world premieres, and the members of the orchestra seemed to genuinely enjoy themselves. Bach bounded onstage afterward, beaming broadly, to congratulate Teague and the other players. "In the planning stages of my pieces I constantly keep in front of me the image of my musicians and their audience bored to death. So I ask myself, 'What can I do to make this 10, 15, 20, 25 minutes interesting to my public? When will their interest flag, and what can I do to restore it? What purpose will this piece serve which has not been fulfilled by several other pieces by other composers?'"

**Sarah Bryan Miller:** How did you become interested in composition?

**Jan Bach:** I started writing music when I was seven years old, which means I've been writing 50 years this year. When I was four years old I started violin lessons. When I was six I started piano lessons, and within a year or so I was "improving" the pieces that the teacher had me play - much to her consternation. There were places where I thought an augmented triad would be a lot better than a plain major triad, so I'd put it in the music and surprise her with it. Of course she always thought I was playing the wrong notes - she wasn't used to such modern dissonances. I gave up violin pretty early - I never got out of first position - but I stuck with the piano, and later I picked up French horn. The biggest thrill of my life was as a freshman in high school playing a piece I'd written for piano, trumpet, and clarinet with two friends of mine. I'll never forget the thrill of hearing instruments that I couldn't play playing music that I'd written. That got me interested in all sorts of things. My whole history of writing music has been one of gradually branching out into different instruments. I very rarely will write for the same combination twice - except brass quintets. For some reason I've written four brass quintets.

**SBM:** What has your progress been as a composer?

**JB:** When I was a young man I progressed through all the historical periods I'd write like Mozart, and I'd write like Beethoven, and I wrote like George Gershwin for a little while. When I got to college I

was immediately put on a kind of contrapuntal 12-tone method. For a solid year and a half I was on that discipline. As a sophomore, a trio I wrote won the BMI competition. I got a weekend in New York and got \$1,000, which was a huge amount of money in 1957. There was a luncheon in my honor and I came away with quite a swelled head.

**SBM:** What exactly is 12-tone composition?

**JB:** It's a matter of arranging the 12 notes of the chromatic scale in what Schoenberg called a motif. He thought of it being used melodically, primarily. You can take the motif and separate it into three-note or four-note clusters. As long as you didn't violate the integrity of the succession of those notes, you could write music that way. As the use of the [12-tone] row increased, people found that a set of numbers could stand in for these pitches. The numbers were used to reflect the different divisions of a piece of music, the range of a piece of music. If you assigned an instrument to each number you could use those numbers to refer to the succession of instruments playing a piece of music. I wrote a piece one time in which I divided the row up into a one-note motif, a two-note motif, a four-note motif, a variety of other motifs - and then put them through a permutation with the instruments I was using, so that by the end of the piece each instrument had a turn playing each of the motifs. I don't know whether the piece of music that came out was very good, but it was a kind of game for me - composers have always been interested in games.

**SBM:** The 12-tone system sounds as much mathematical as musical.

**JB:** Anything can be described mathematically. A computer can plot a picture of the Mona Lisa on the screen, and you can convert that to numbers. And you can do the same thing with Mozart. I saw an article a couple of years ago about a Japanese scientist who had found that a certain number of mathematical elements in the DNA chain could be converted into music that sounded very much like Mozart. Very, very strange.

**SBM:** And the other Bach certainly used mathematics in his compositions.

**JB:** Yes! He used numerology in a religious sense almost - "magic numbers." And I've known composers who've used these magic squares - where the numbers in the box add up to the same sum no matter whether you do them across or obliquely or whatever - as a basis for composition. You can write music that way. Whether or not it'll come out sounding like something people will want to listen to a second time I don't know. I worked in 12-tone for another three or four years. I was very uncomfortable with total serialization. The last serial piece I wrote won the Koussevitzky Award at Tanglewood, which I shared with Roger Reynolds. Then I withdrew the piece. It was very impressive on paper - every bar was a different meter. I was calling on the instruments to do every special effect they could. But I really didn't like it. Right after that I came down to the real world. I got drafted. Very luckily, because I was friends with the local recruiting sergeant, I was able to turn that two-year draft hitch into a three-year contract with the army. I went to Washington, auditioned, and got into the Army Band. I spent the next three years there. During that time, because I didn't have a professor looking over my shoulder, I decided to write what I wanted to write, and I ended up going into a much more tonal kind of music again. There were a lot of really good musicians in that band - this was the beginning of the Vietnam war. I found that I enjoyed working with performing musicians, and I think that's probably what's shaped my music ever since. I like being able to make use of the peculiarities of a particular instrument. And when you take composition away from the domain of mathematics - which is what serial composition is all about - then it's no longer wrong to change a couple of notes. If I find that a clarinetist, for instance, can't play loudly enough in the weak part of

his register I can change the notes. But if you change a couple of notes in a 12-tone piece you destroy the whole structure.

**SBM:** Was it hard to go against the academic flow and change things?

**JB:** I think what got me used to the idea was writing a couple of one-act operas. When you get into opera and you're working directly with the performers - "I need another measure of music here, because the performer can't get across the stage quickly enough," or "I've got too much music here," or "There's too long a period where there are only two performers on the stage, and the audience is getting bored silly" - you just have to fix things.

**SBM:** It often strikes me that too many composers today don't know enough about the instruments for which they're writing. Do you have to learn to play an instrument before you can write for it properly?

**JB:** You have to put yourself in the position of a player. For instance, with the steelpan concerto one of my biggest concerns was whether Liam would develop tendonitis from some of the things I had him play. I used to make the point that at least composers can't kill their performers. A lot of the woodwind players at Lyric Opera, for instance, complained about their parts in Satyagraha, the minimalist Philip Glass work. I thought the effect of all those huge arpeggiated woodwind figures was marvelous - but they were terrible for the musicians.

**SBM:** It was a killer for the voice too. A lot of singers were eager to trash Glass.

**JB:** I call him a minimally competent composer. I think that somebody like John Adams knows a great deal more about what he can ask the instrumentalists to do. But Glass was basically writing parts that were an extension of his keyboard technique, and you simply can't do that for other instruments. So I need to know enough about the instruments to know what the players are going through. One of the things I've had to watch very carefully is to be sure to give wind and string players enough rests. I know I'm in trouble if I can't find a couple of measures' rest for them to turn the pages on their parts. When that happens I've written too long and too hard. Generally you don't want to write for all the instruments all the time. Contemporary music never gets enough rehearsal time anyway, and when you get a scruffy performance you never know if it's simply lack of rehearsal time, or poor conducting, or just ungrateful writing for the instruments.

**SBM:** You're married to a singer [mezzo-soprano Dalia Bach]. Do you run your vocal writing by her?

**JB:** I haven't done a lot of vocal writing lately, but she's been very helpful, particularly with the relationship between the words and the height of the note. I'm always asking, Can the singer sing this note? Can the word be heard in this range? She's particularly helped me by suggesting, for instance, that I can make a high note easier to sing on a certain vowel sound by putting a lower note first.

**SBM:** An awful lot of contemporary composers write exceptionally poorly for the voice.

**JB:** Part of that is the university system. Most of the schools can only afford to teach one class in instrumentation and nothing in writing for the voice. They never talk about such things as the masking effect of instruments, they never get into the fine tuning.

**SBM:** What's the masking effect?

**JB:** I believe it was Rimsky-Korsakov who said you never should have string basses playing in an opera orchestra when a soprano sings a solo, because there's something about the overtones of the bass that wipes out a lot of the beauty of the soprano voice. Yet I see Tchaikovsky and others violating that principle all the time, so I don't know to what extent it's valid. There are a number of masking effects. If the timpani are rolling a long note and a flute tries to play in a low register, it gets swallowed up. If you have a flute and an oboe playing in thirds in the low register you're better off to have the flute below the oboe. In the long slow movement of Stravinsky's Symphony of Psalms, that long fugue, there's a high oboe sound to start the fugue. And then a flute comes in, almost an octave and a half below - and it comes out like gangbusters, because the overtones of the oboe don't get in the way. But there's very little time to talk about things like that, especially if composers spend all of their time today - as they are - working on Finale, the standard music software for composers. For example, we had a meeting yesterday with our composition majors, and we spent about 20 minutes talking about composition and another 20 minutes talking about how you negotiate Finale. When do they talk about the music? When do they talk specifically about tailoring the music to the performer? I've got one student who's a very fine composer, but he wrote some four-note chords for violins that are almost impossible to play. I showed him ways he could divide the violins so that each of them had an easier part to play, and he said, "Well, but you see, Dr. Bach, I'm picking friends of mine to play these parts, and if they're really my friends they'll go that extra mile and learn these awkward fingerings that I've written." I told him, "You may not have your friends very long." The first thing I'm concerned about is consideration for the performers. That not only makes and keeps good friends - you also get additional performances, and you get commissions. I enjoy my relationship with the performers when they're playing my music. You spend so many hours in a vacuum, working by yourself without ever seeing another human being. I find that I can't work like Haydn or Darius Milhaud could, in the middle of a party. I've got to be away, off by myself. I turn the phone off and close all the doors. I become really paranoid about being disturbed when I'm writing. Once the piece is done I enjoy the society of performers and talking with them. The problem is having respect for them, realizing they're the ones that carry out your music. And unless you only write electronic music you depend on these performers to project the best image of you, just like a coach depends on his players to project the best image of his training and expertise. They can never listen to each other if they're so busy working out the thorny mazes of their own parts that every measure is an excruciating experience. I got a very nice note from one of the players in the Chicago Sinfonietta who said [the steelpan concerto] was fun to play in a way that a lot of contemporary music isn't. Of course this is not a profound piece. This is a piece meant entirely to display the steelpannist's gifts, and in that way I think it succeeded. I guess I'm more of a populist composer. I like to have a variety of people playing my music. Today I feel I'm writing for musicians, and not for composers.

**SBM:** What about audiences?

**JB:** If the performers enjoy the music and it makes sense to them, I think they can project that to the audience. There's a danger in writing for both performers and audiences, because there is no ideal group of either. You don't know where any of your people are coming from, you don't know what their background has been. There's always a danger of writing for a lowest common denominator - so much pop music is written that way - or for a certain age group. I can't do that. Of course I would like to have layers in my music that would appeal to different people. The people who criticize my music for being too accessible or too tonal may not have taken the trouble to look at it and to see how careful I am to make it that way. In other words, for me structure is important, but continuity is even more important. I have to feel a progression, a climax, a leveling off to keep the audience interested throughout. And one of the best compliments I've been given several times is that I write fairly long pieces, but they usually seem shorter to the audience than they actually are. The only way you can do

that is to keep from boring your audience - and I'm more afraid of boring them than anything else. Maybe I sometimes go overboard that way with the little jokes and tricks I put into my music. I got that idea from Bartok. If you listen to his quartets you usually find a little oasis of silly music at the end of the last movement - maybe he starts pizzicato or he has a little folk song. Then it's "Now we rejoin our program already in progress," and he puts in his coda and ends up with the stringent sounds he'd had leading up to that point. That's another way of revitalizing the piece at a point where the interest is most likely to flag.

**SBM:** So you're a populist, but you're not commercial.

**JB:** To me, the distinction is that with so much commercial and popular music you set up one dynamic and you stay there all the way. You set up one tempo and you stay there all the way. I like to take advantage of all the distinctions that are made of texture and dynamics and range and tempo in the music of the so-called classical composers who had this freedom to vary all the parameters.

**SBM:** How much do modern composers study the classics?

**JB:** Not enough. I think that European composers in general have a much larger overview of all music than composers in this country. Most American composers don't start studying composition until they're juniors in college and have had to go through two years of theory. Then they only have time for two years of composition, and it's all their teachers can do to give them some of the contemporary techniques - without having time to show them how they are, in a way, extending the legacy of all the earlier composers.

**SBM:** For many years most composers seemed to be academics writing for other academics. You could be accused of being an academic, since you work at a university.

**JB:** I work at a university, but there are a number of writers who have said that my music sounds nothing like an academic's.

**SBM:** Do you think that's an accurate description?

**JB:** Yes, I think it is. You've got some of these mutual-admiration societies, made up of composers who go to conventions - just like tuba players go to their conventions and violists have their own conventions - and I think there's a faddishness there. A friend of mine complained that one year at the American Society of University Composers, the ASUC - which is an even worse acronym than ASOL, the American Symphony Orchestra League - somebody wrote minimalist music in combination with an electronic sound track, and the next year everybody had pieces like that. I worry about that. I'm like a sponge - I soak up any music I hear. And while my wife loves Jim Unrath's program on WFMT in the morning, I want that radio off if I'm getting ready to work that day. I know I'm very likely to pick up something I hear. I've always been that way - I think it's because music is so abstract. It's not like a painter going outside and painting a tree. Maybe Beethoven could go outside and get inspiration from the birds, but, like Stravinsky, I get my inspiration from other music. Certainly most of the Hollywood composers get their inspiration from other music; perhaps they just don't disguise it as well as I do or some others do. Since I've gone through 12-tone and abandoned that for a more programmatic, diatonic construction of music, I've found that as soon as you start eliminating some of the notes in the scale you come closer to the possibility that you're going to duplicate a pattern somebody else has already written. Duplication is probably inevitable to a certain extent, because there are only so many notes. That's particularly true of the popular field - look at

Andrew Lloyd Webber. Every measure of Andrew Lloyd Webber can be found in somebody else's music. "Love Changes Everything" - that's right from Cunegonde's aria in Bernstein's *Candide*. "Music of the Night" from Phantom of the Opera is a combination of two popular songs.

**SBM:** There's a lot of Puccini in there too.

**JB:** "Memory" is patterned after an aria in *Madame Butterfly*. Peter Schickele mentioned on his program a record that the late composer Alex North had released of the music he had been commissioned to write for *2001: A Space Odyssey*. The public-domain music that we associate with that film was actually put in originally as a kind of working sound track, so Stanley Kubrick could suggest to Alex North the kind of music he wanted. Kubrick never intended to use "The Beautiful Blue Danube" but he got so used to that music in those scenes that he left it in. North was absolutely bowled over and terribly hurt that he went to the premiere of 2001 and discovered for the first time that his music wasn't being used for the sound track. I was very interested to hear what he wrote as a kind of overture for the movie, and then go back and hear *Also Sprach Zarathustra* and see the similarities and the differences. It's very interesting to make a study of the influence of certain composers.

**SBM:** Sometimes the work of people like Lloyd Webber and John Williams verges on plagiarism. It's obvious that John Williams was told to write something like "Mars" from Holst's *The Planets* for *Star Wars*.

**JB:** And that's exactly what he wrote. And if you go back and listen to the last measures of the music from the first Superman movie, he actually uses a portion of *Death and Transfiguration*. At least he gives Strauss his due for that in the closing credits. There's the old story of Dmitri Tiomkin, who accepted an Academy Award in the name of all the friends who had helped him - Brahms, Robert Schumann, Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, Mozart.

**SBM:** Have you ever thought of composing movie music?

**JB:** There was a time when I did, and a couple of my students have gone to Hollywood.

**SBM:** It seems to be fairly lucrative work.

**JB:** For the few that make it. But you see the same names showing up time after time. Danny Elfman, for example, does all the music for Tim Burton's films. Bernard Hermann did the music for Alfred Hitchcock. John Williams and Steven Spielberg are well-known partners. Movie music is effective to the extent that you don't notice it. If it becomes too obtrusive then you're not following the drama. I suppose that's why I prefer writing for the stage, in the same way a playwright would prefer writing for the stage instead of a screenplay. A live performance is a hot kind of performance. It's not a cool performance, like a film or a recording. It demands people's attention.

**SBM:** It's foreground, not background.

**JB:** It's foreground, and you've gone to the theater specifically to immerse yourself in that foreground.

**SBM:** Have the movies had an effect on the work of other composers?

**JB:** Hollywood has certainly embedded this idea of composers having a sudden great inspiration, sitting right down, and dashing out a masterwork. Years ago I saw a German biography of Wagner that gave me a totally wrong idea of what composition was all about. It showed him looking through a window of his study and seeing Cosima von Bulow swinging in a hammock while wearing a diaphanous white frock. He immediately got this incredible look of lust on his face, grabbed a pen, and started dashing off *Tristan und Isolde*. He hadn't even considered what his plot was going to be, the number of singers, the size of the orchestra - any of that.

**SBM:** It's ironic that such an absurdity should be attributed to Wagner. But he promoted that myth of the creative demi-god who never did any actual work, and I think it's contributed to the decline of the arts in our age. We have mediocre impulses presented today as great art, because they're sincere and from the heart.

**JB:** You have to have the technical background, even for improvisations. And not every improvisation is worth keeping. No movie has ever devoted any time at all to showing composers copying their parts, which is the least glamorous and probably most important part of a composer's work. It took me a month to write the *Steelman Concerto*, and it took me another three months or so to arrange it for orchestra and copy the parts. But without that the piece can't be performed. In the movies composers seem to spend as much time making love as they do making music. I don't think you can do that. I don't think you have that much energy. It takes hour after hour to bring a composition to a performable state. Any work of mine goes through a lot of changes from the time I write it until it reaches its final form, and I need to hear it, to hear the rehearsals, to be able to make those changes. A few times I've had CDs of my music sent to me by performers who apparently wanted to surprise me, because they didn't send me a tape to approve first. You'd think when a composer is still alive that performers would want to know your opinion! A group from North Carolina sent me a CD last spring and said, "Here's your piece - what do you think of it?" I knew they had performed the work at the National Gallery and a couple of other places, but I had not heard a recording of it. And it was awful. I would have suggested that they make changes in the way that they played it - and here it was on CD! I know they wanted a word of praise that they could put on their merchandising material, but I could not recommend it.

**SBM:** This all sounds like an argument against strictly hewing to original versions and in favor of paying attention to traditional performance practices.

**JB:** They say Mendelssohn changed his orchestra works every time he heard a performance. If he'd been able to get a tape of a performance he could have made a lot of changes at once, but he had to wait for the live performances. And he was the scourge of his publishers, because he constantly went through eight or nine editions of the music before he was satisfied. That is one of the reasons why today his music is so clear. Apparently Mozart was able to write crystalline clear music the first time around, but not Mendelssohn. He had to work to achieve it. I'm with Mendelssohn. For me, it's been a powerful tool to be able to take a tape of rehearsals and study it.

**SBM:** Are there any musical trends you find particularly distressing?

**JB:** I'm very concerned about the programming at radio stations, because if you can be doing the dishes and suddenly tune into Bach's *B Minor Mass* it's the wrong platform or time of day for that performance. Compare it to what people used to do - on a cold winter's night they would dress up, they would take the carriage to a church or an auditorium, and they would be spiritually prepared

for this experience. And now they get it with the flip of the switch. I think this is one reason that music has become so trivialized recently.

**SBM:** Trivialized?

**JB:** A friend of mine says that now that cheap electronic keyboards are available at K-mart, bad electronic music is within the reach of everyone. People can noodle around playing things - which to me is another example of the trivialization of music. I wonder if sculpture was taken less seriously when people started using clay to model instead of taking a huge block of granite and chipping away everything that didn't look like what the sculptor was trying to achieve.

**SBM:** But isn't making things more accessible a good thing? How many people can go to the symphony or the opera house? And how many people could really become sufficiently acquainted with the wide range of music we think of as classical if you didn't have the radio, CDs, and tapes? And if someone can make even bad music themselves aren't they likely to be more appreciative of the effort that goes into making art?

**JB:** Only if they are aware of the vast gulf between their efforts and the models they try to emulate. And when businessmen are sold software that promises to boost their "creativity," I wonder if we aren't all being flattered into thinking that everyone can create good art. Also with the cutbacks in music education in the schools and government funding for the arts I don't know what appreciation people will have in another generation or two. I'm not sure that an audience going to a concert can really understand what a performer is going through if they haven't experienced it themselves. The other problem is that people experience a false perfection on recordings, and they expect that same perfection in live performance. Listening at home also spoils them for going out to hear music. I believe it was composer Ned Rorem who recently said that he very rarely goes to concerts anymore, because if he stays at home and listens to CDs over his headphones he doesn't have the coughing, he doesn't have the people talking, the disrespect shown the performers. It's interesting that at Lyric Opera, for instance, you find more coughing, more talking and less respect for the performers the lower you come down toward the main floor.

**SBM:** The stereotype is that the real music lovers are up in the rafters.

**JB:** Yes, because they can only afford the balconies. But the music is good up there.

**SBM:** You mentioned computers a while back. A disproportionate number of musicians go into the field of computers - there seems to be some affinity.

**JB:** That's true. Musicians have already mastered a symbolic language, and a lot of computer companies have sought out musicians because of that. But as far as a computer helping you or jogging you to write music, I don't think it happens. I find a real friction when I try to put my music on a computer, between those processes and what I really want to do - because a computer limits my imagination. However, I've written some computer code, and it's very similar to the instructions you give to an orchestra to play. You're telling them to play at a certain time. And when you're writing computer code you say, "Compare these two numbers. If this number's higher, then go back to line such and such of the code." That's no different than seeing the repeat sign and going back eight measures to the beginning of the section of music. I know people who've gotten so involved in the computer aspect of things that they've stopped writing music. There used to be a charm and a real carrot as motivation to go through the whole process of trying to imagine the notes, writing them

down, copying your parts, getting a performance, hearing whether it came close to your own imagination, and then seeking out a publisher and eventually getting your music published. That hard copy - from G. Schirmer or Boosey & Hawkes or whomever - was a wonderful thing, a wonderful treasure to look at, because it was the last link in a long chain of events that led to that publication. Well, today any composer, if he's got a good enough sampling keyboard, if he imagines a soprano in unison with an oboe, he can get the sound immediately - and maybe no longer has the motivation to seek out the soprano and the oboist. And as far as printing it, the music programs today on computers can give you that instant gratification of seeing your music in print - and it often looks as good as the publisher's copy. You've lost that long chain of small accomplishments in the process - and immediate gratification is no gratification at all.

**SBM:** Do you consider yourself a part of any school of composition today?

**JB:** I guess - along with people like Schickele and Corigliano - I'm no longer fighting the influences of other music or trying to keep my music as pure as Beethoven was able to in his last years. I know that I'm going to meet with a variety of influences, and hope I can merge them into a new shape. I get a certain amount of encouragement from reading about contemporaneous and very critical opinions toward people like Mahler. His music sounds spotty to me - it seems to swing to extremes, from very vulgar to incredibly sublime - but there is a Mahler style. Critics said the same thing about Mozart - they said his music showed too many influences. We don't think of that today. We think of every bar of his music as Mozart.

**SBM:** What about the commercialism versus elitism charges that are sometimes flung about in the music community these days? Academics are very quick to accuse composers who are popular of commercialism.

**JB:** I suspect that a lot of the academic composers equate their lack of success with a profundity that may or may not be there - they're simply "ahead of their time," and thus misunderstood. Actually, there's a good reason why most obscure works are obscure.

**SBM:** Somebody once said, "There are no lost masterpieces."

**JB:** I don't think I would go that far. It's true that very few composers who were not known in their own time have suddenly surfaced as important. Even Bach, who was only known within a hundred-mile radius of Leipzig, was well-known within that circle, and word didn't travel as fast then. There are composers who could not write a piece for general consumption if their lives depended on it, but of course they say they don't want to. I remember seeing some early paintings of Piet Mondrian. When he tried to paint like the academicians, the results were pathetic. There are those who say he went to squares and rectangles because he couldn't paint the human figure, and of course that's true. But he still created something interesting with them. Some of those composers are doing the same thing, and their best pieces will eventually create their own audiences. I believe that some people who gave up writing 12-tone music for neo-Romanticism, like Ezra Laderman, failed miserably. Some people simply are not able to change their styles or techniques that easily. Stravinsky certainly tried a wide variety of approaches; some of his pieces were more popular than others. When he harmonized "The Star-Spangled Banner," Eleanor Roosevelt wrote to him and said, "For God's sake, in the name of national pride and unity, don't ever have that piece performed again!" So even Stravinsky didn't always succeed. I don't like *The Rake's Progress*.

**SBM:** Why not?

**JB:** I think that he intentionally sets words against the grain. I think he looks for all the accented syllables of a word and then changes them. In other words, he misplaces them. It's almost like he deliberately finds the weakest syllable and puts it on a strong beat. I've always felt that vocal music is an extension of the declamatory style, a heightened version of the kind of inflection one gives to words when one is speaking them in a highly dramatic fashion. All you need to do is expand those intervals and you've got melodic line. To deliberately go against the grain that way, to try to destroy the meaning of the words in an opera - where words are very important - is just wrong.

**SBM:** It seems to me that many composers of recent years make their work gratuitously difficult. For example, Benjamin Britten could have made his music easier to perform and still got the same basic effect, but instead he chose to make it tricky. Is there a good reason for making so much music so tricky?

**JB:** Well, I'll give you one example from James Blades's autobiography, called *Drum Roll* - a wonderful name for a book by a man who made his living as a percussionist. When he wrote *Albert Herring* Britten asked Blades to play that difficult snare-drum passage in the third-act manhunt. Blades said, "You know, it would be so much simpler to change this to this." [Bach illustrates the passage.] And Britten said, "Yes, but several other composers have written that figure already." So I think part of it was striving for something a little fresh and unusual. He did challenge his performers. *Peter Grimes* is challenging, but aren't its choral parts more interesting to do than Verdi's?

**SBM:** Absolutely, but I think it's written for a broader audience than many of his other works. And in Verdi's time choristers weren't professional musicians in the sense that we are today. Even now European singers tend not to have the musical background that American singers do.

**JB:** That's right. Even Britten was depending on amateur singers and the choral tradition of England. As he got more professional singers he became less careful to keep the average abilities in mind.

**SBM:** I think that's one reason that *Grimes* is mainstream repertory, along with *Billy Budd*. But *Albert* is a delightful show that ought to be done regularly by all the little regional companies, and it's not - because it's gratuitously difficult.

**JB:** Yes, You're right. But where would you begin changing it? Rhythmically or pitchwise?

**SBM:** Rhythmically. I don't see a reason to change the meter every measure in some places, for example. There are common sense ways to get the same effect that are easier on your performers.

**JB:** That's true, but at some point you have to ask yourself how much easier you're going to make things - People always of course accuse Britten of being a very clever composer. But I think there are a number of other composers who find, as Peter Schickele says, "originality through incompetence." I think I'd like to put that on my coat of arms, because when I wrote my harp concerto I had a terrible time. It was a terribly difficult piece to play, simply because I didn't know my way around the harp very well. I have yet to write a guitar piece, out of the same fear. When I finished the *Steelpan Concerto* - considering that the steelpan has 30 notes, isolated little circles spread out on a concave surface, without even the help of certain notes being raised the way they are on a piano keyboard - I thought, "What have I done? Liam hasn't seen the piece. Is he going to be able to play it, or has this been a wasted exercise?" I was fortunate. He spent his Christmas vacation learning it, and when he came back he had only one request: "Can I play the second movement faster?" I said "Yes, by all means!"