

STEVEN GERBER

MD: Is it true that you may well be the most performed American composer in Russia?

SRG: Well, I may have been, but I haven't been going that much recently.

MD: How did that all come about? It's a rather strange distinction for an American composer.

SRG: Right. My career there started completely by accident and the really odd thing is that my symphony, which a lot of people think sounds very Russian, was written before I had the slightest inkling I would ever go. I suppose it was influenced by the fact that I'd been listening to and studying a lot of Shostakovich. I certainly had no idea I would ever go to Russia. My father was born in Russia – in what is now the Ukraine -- and just by chance in 1990 I met a second cousin of mine who's a Russian émigré and had been the executive director of the opera and ballet house in Kishinev, the capital of Moldova. He'd been in this country for many years but we'd never met and he was very excited to find out that he had a cousin who was a composer. When that happened he arranged a tour for me in the Soviet Union in October of 1990. The music was a success and he already had a lot of contacts from his days there, and he made a lot more.

MD: How many performances were there on that trip?

SRG: There must have been about half a dozen concerts in different places, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kishinev, Yaroslavl, Rybinsk, and Talinn, which is the capital of Estonia. I performed in all those concerts too. In fact one of them was almost a piano recital, although I ended up having a violinist play with me. That would've been the second piano recital I'd played in my life – the other was when I was sixteen. The concert in Talinn was the only one in which I played some music not by myself: I did the Copland Piano Variations and some little Prokofiev pieces, but otherwise these were all concerts just of my music. A few of them with orchestras, some with string quartets, some with violinists, some with a singer. Very much like 19th century concerts where you have both orchestra music and chamber music and vocal music all thrown in together. There was one performance of my Serenade for Strings, which was the world premiere and three performances of my symphony, which were world premieres.

MD: So I guess the reception was positive enough for you to make return trips.

SRG: Right.

MD: How many trips in all have you made?

SRG: It would take me a while to count them. I've been to Moscow probably ten times and then there were a couple times when I went just to Kiev or just to Talinn, to Bulgaria for a festival once, and once to some performances in Romania, all of which came out of the Russian traveling.

MD: So did those experiences in any way help shape the kind of music you were going to write? In other words, if you were getting lots of performances there and you get very positive feedback, does that in any way determine your next piece?

SRG: Well, it certainly affected what instruments I wrote for—I mean I wrote a piano concerto thinking I could probably get it played there. I wrote a violin concerto for Kurt Nikkanen, an American violinist, but I knew I could arrange performances for him over there. And actually when I wrote my cello concerto for Carter Brey, it was with the idea that I could probably get him performances there, but it ended up we did it in America and we never did it in Russia. But only to that extent. I don't think it affected my style at all. As I say, oddly enough, maybe it worked the other way around, that the reason some of the music was successful there was that it sounded Russian, rather my writing music that sounded Russian because I'd been there. I don't think it affected me as a composer.

MD: It's also interesting that the music would be popular because it sounded Russian, rather than because it sounded American.

SRG: Yeah, that's a good point. And pieces of mine that I think sound very American to them would sound Russian and I wouldn't know what they were talking about. But it's true their idea of American music is things that we think of as, you know, really American like Bernstein and Gershwin.

MD: You mean more jazzy?

SRG: Jazz influenced, pop influenced, yeah. There is one guy in St. Petersburg who runs a very well known dance company who really liked my symphony a lot and has been talking about making a ballet to it or to some other music of mine. And he said once, you know I didn't know an American could write a symphony. (laughs) Rather offensive, frankly.

MD: So would you consider this period a kind of a phase? The Gerber Russian period?

SRG: As far as going there, yes. From what I hear, things have changed there a lot and very few people want to do anything now without getting paid for it. So a composer comes or a conductor comes, they're expected to pay for the privilege, so I'm told. I'm sure that's not completely true. Mostly I sort of got tired of going there, and I didn't feel I needed it that much for my career and also I like to go to interesting places when I get my pieces performed. Russia is a fascinating place, but at least the major cities where all the good performers are I've seen so many times that I don't have a great desire to go back again.

MD: Many of the works from this period have been released recently on CD. Actually two CDs and on two good labels, Chandos and KOCH International.

SRG: Yeah. That was a stroke of luck..

MD: Is the music on each of those CD's entirely different or, could it have been a two CD set say from either one of those labels?

SRG: Actually, they are different. It wasn't planned that way but I realized afterwards that all the pieces on the Chandos CD do have a very dark, somewhat ominous, and I suppose to some people, Russian sounding quality, though I don't think that applies to all the pieces. Whereas the ones on the KOCH label, I wouldn't call them light by any means, are not quite so heavy. I guess that's how I would put it, maybe more lyrical.

MD: But they're all large scale pieces?

SRG: For the most part. The Chandos recording has a symphony and a viola concerto, and two shorter works, one just for orchestra called *Dirge and Awakening* and the other a *Triple Overture* for violin, cello, piano and orchestra, which is not a big piece. The KOCH recording has three fairly large-scale works.

MD: Are they all recent pieces?

SRG: The earliest piece is the symphony, which goes back to '88, '89. The most recent, '98, is a *Triple Overture*. So it covers about ten years. In fact, oddly enough the *Triple Overture* was written for the CD. It still hasn't been played live. It was written for the Bekova Sisters, the piano trio that recorded it, and they've done a lot of recording on Chandos and they're the ones who introduced my music to Brian Couzens, who is the managing director of Chandos. And the CD came about when they asked me to write a piece for them, for trio and orchestra – a triple concerto actually -- and they said they could do that as part of a CD on Chandos. It turned out it wasn't really a triple concerto, it was more of a triple concertino, which I decided to call *Triple Overture* because I thought concertino sounded a little bit too light.

MD: Where were they recorded?

SRG: The Chandos CD was recorded in Moscow with the Russian Philharmonic and the KOCH CD was recorded in Maryland with the National Chamber Orchestra.

MD: They're very different just from that standpoint.

SRG: Yeah. And the venues were very different. The KOCH CD was done in a studio with very dead sound so there had to be reverb added, which I think worked out quite well. I like the sound. Whereas the one on Chandos was done at a hall in Moscow, a recording studio really but it's like a small concert hall. The conductor, Thomas Sanderling, told me that it's better than any hall he knows of in London. Wonderful acoustics.

MD: You thought so?

SRG: Yeah, yeah, I was very happy with it.

MD: So having 2 CD's out, almost at the same time, I guess you got a fair number of reviews and were the reviewers kind of overwhelmed by the fact that there were two to review?

SRG: Well, there have been a lot of reviews, both in magazines and on the internet. Many more for the Chandos CD than for the KOCH for some reason. And, except for that one reviewer I mentioned, no one has commented on the fact that there have been two. Some of the comments have been interesting. Most of the reviews have been very good. There has been one that is bad out of all of them. I find it sometimes a little strange to see which composers reviewers think I've been influenced by. I think some of them have greatly exaggerated the minimalist influence, I think two have suggested Roy Harris as an influence, which I can't see at all.

MD: Well, he'd be a great influence.

SRG: Maybe; the Third Symphony is the only piece I know that I like a lot. Not one that I was ever conscious of, nor did I ever think of him as a particularly important composer to me.

MD: Was there anything that was particularly satisfying that was said? You know, insightful or that made you think "yes, I did that right."

SRG I only remember one such comment – a critic who said that his observation that the music was easy to follow was not meant as condescension but as a tribute to the music's boldness, confidence and transparency. I liked that a lot. But usually I try not to be terribly hurt by a bad review and I try not to take overly seriously a rave review. I think, I don't know if I should say this or not, but I think all my life I've sort of had a mixed attitude. I've had a certain arrogance about myself and about my music, especially compared with most music that's around. But I've also felt very humble compared to the music of the past. I've never put myself in the category of the really great composers of the past and even if someone tries to compare me, I don't take it very seriously.

MD: Do they?

SRG: No. I was thinking of one of my friends actually (laugh). We had a big fight about Dvorak recently and he told me some piece of mine was much better than any Dvorak and I thought he was full of shit. (laugh)

MD: Nice for Dvorak. So what are you working on now?

SRG: I've just received a commission from Voice of America for its 60th anniversary. I'm writing a fanfare, I guess you could call it my 9/11 piece. I'm also working on a clarinet concerto for Jon Manasee, who is a terrific clarinetist, and our managers are trying to work together on a consortium commission. The reason I'm writing this piece for him is that he premiered my last piece, a work called Spirituals.. And I'll say something about that because that was completely new for me. Actually that and the piece before it. I'd never, until about two years ago, written any music based on other music. And I'd certainly never written any music based on any kind of folk music or popular music. I got some ideas for some pieces based on Gershwin. I wrote a series of pieces for 3 violins called Gershwiniana in which I took just little fragments from some of my favorite Gershwin songs and preludes and completely changed and reworked them.

MD: Do you want to name a few of those favorite Gershwin songs?

SRG: Well, I used two of the Preludes, "Nice Work if You Can Get It" and "Love is Here to Stay." I don't know how recognizable they are unless you know from the titles what I'm using as the material. Basically they're independent pieces.

MD: When you say independent pieces, you mean they—

SRG: I mean they exist independent of the Gershwin; even if you don't realize the relation to him, they are a work by themselves. Then a Russian violinist I've worked with a lot, Tatyiana

Grindenko, who played my violin concerto several times and for whom I wrote some pieces for two violins and then a work called Serenade Concertante for two violins, string orchestra and harp, asked me to write a new work for her, I guess this is in 1999. She, in case Americans don't know her too well, is the ex-wife of Gidon Kremer and performs with him a lot. She's a very well known violinist in Russia and Europe, not so well known here. She for many years was not allowed to leave the Soviet Union, and during that time she founded the first original instrument group in Russia, called the Moscow Academy for Ancient Music, and they now do contemporary music as well. Actually she and Kremer commissioned Arvo Pärt's Tabula Rasa and Schnittke's Concerto Grosso #1. For the millennium she asked some composers to write pieces for this string orchestra and she asked me to write something. She wanted something that was in some way based on some kind of old music or folk material, or some kind of music in which the composer was anonymous. So I got the idea of using spirituals to write a bunch of pieces. So I did basically the same kind of thing as in Gershwiniana for string orchestra. I wrote a bunch of pieces which took fragments from spirituals and completely transformed them. And then when I got a commission from Concertante Chamber Players to write a work for clarinet and string quartet for them and John Manasse I arranged some of those pieces and wrote a bunch of new pieces for clarinet and string quartet. So for me that's been a completely new direction and something I'd like to continue if I can.

MD: The newness isn't taking some pre-existing music, but really taking music that's popular music?

SRG: Yeah, something that's very tonal and diatonic and try to find some way of dealing with it where I still feel like I put my own personality into it.

MD: Now when you work with a soloist, do they see the piece as you're working on it?

SG: Yes, I usually try to consult them while I'm working on the piece. I think in both my violin and cello concertos I've just revised mostly details in the string writing. Things that didn't work out too well. Actually when I wrote Spirituals I thought I was writing for clarinet in A and Jon convinced me that it was impossible for a clarinet in A and the whole thing had to be written for clarinet in Bb so I had to have the whole thing transposed and get rid of one low C#. But other than that, there wasn't anything much that was unplayable. I remember asking about the break and he told me not to worry about it.

MD: So you'll send passages that you have questions about?

SRG: Yeah, or I'll meet with performers and sometimes it will have to be rewritten.

MD: But it's really for playability, it's not how do you like this?

SRG: Right. Exactly. They'd better like it.

MD: That must put the performer in a semi-awkward position because it's kind of hard to only comment on playability.

SRG: Yeah, but they don't really know whether they really like it until they've heard the whole piece with the orchestra and seen how it all works together. I don't think they're in the position to really judge it.

MD: Because you're not showing them everything?

SRG: Well I mean, if I play it on the piano, they get a better idea that way, but even so it's not quite the same as playing it with the orchestra. Although, when I was working on my violin concerto, at one point, out of laziness, I thought I'd just arrange another piece and use that as a slow movement and I played it for the violinist and we both agreed that it really didn't work. Luckily, I came up with a whole different idea for the slow movement, but that was a case where I was consulting about something important musically. And I think there was a case in the first movement also where I played him a long section and I said, maybe this ought to be cut here, and he agreed with me.

MD: Do you hear instrumentation or do you orchestrate later? I mean, do you concern yourself with instrumentation first?

SRG: Yeah I do. But I don't do the final orchestration until the end. But I have a general idea.

MD: I noticed at the Tower Records web site you were described as being of the "new tonal school." Certainly there was a time in your career when that label would not have been appropriate. When did the changeover, so to speak, occur?

SRG: I think the first piece of mine that represented a change was my piano sonata. That was '81-'82. That has a mixture of styles. The last movement is by far the most tonal and that piece came after a period of writing twelve-tone music. Somehow or other, in the course of largely, but not completely abandoning twelve tone music, the piece just came out more tonal than what I'd been doing before it. And then, right around the same time, I started writing a lot of songs which were much more tonal than almost anything I'd written before. I also wrote a lot of atonal music at the same time. I would go back and forth between pieces that were very diatonic and pieces that were extremely chromatic and basically atonal. I haven't written too many of those recently, though I have nothing against doing it in principle. So I guess it's true that recently a larger proportion of my pieces have been tonal, if that's the right word. But it wasn't really what I think of as a gradual change. It happened pretty quickly in the early '80's.

MD: So for you that's a significant piece. You knew that you were doing something entirely different.

SRG: Right and it really is a mixture of styles. I mean the middle movement sounds twelve-tone, though it's not, but it's certainly atonal. And the first movement is a kind of Copland homage, somewhere in between.

MD: But you continued to go back and forth for quite a few years-

SRG: Yeah, for quite a few years

MD: Do you actually think in these terms when you're sitting down to write a new piece? I mean, is tonality a question for you, or is it already a question that's answered?

SRG: I use the word in a very loose way, the way I think a lot of people use it, meaning just the presence of some kind of pitch center. Certainly I'm not thinking in terms of tonic, dominant and subdominant and all that. When I say tonal, I mean tonal in the same sense in which I think of Bartok, most of Stravinsky, Debussy and Ravel as tonal, Prokofiev and Shostakovich, I don't really mean anything more specific than that.

MD: When you're working, do you in any sense lay out a plan of pitch centers?

SRG: Not usually. I don't do a lot of theorizing about my music. There are exceptions though.

MD: So you're saying that the piece evolves as you're working on it?

SRG: Yes.

MD: Yes, you compose by ear?

SRG: Well, no, I use my mind, I don't know the difference between the mind and the ear...

MD: But is it trial and error -- this sounds good, this doesn't?

SRG: I'm sure that's part of it, but I think at this point I've been composing so long that I can think about what I'm doing without necessarily having to put it into words, but it's not just trial and error, it's not just intuition, although that's part of it. I'm certainly conscious of composing with intervals, in the way that Stravinsky used the term.

MD: If someone were to ransack your apartment, they wouldn't find sketches?

SRG: They might. It would depend on the piece. I think I did more of that when I was writing serial music than I do now, but I do occasionally do that. More and more, though, compared with the past, I don't really put things down on paper until I'm pretty sure of them. Until then, they're just in my head and I keep thinking about them and don't write them down until I'm satisfied with them.

MD: Do you have a sense of how big a piece will be when you start?

SRG: I have a sense of how big I want it to be, but sometimes I'm disappointed. I've often started out wanting to write a big piece and been disappointed that it came out rather small. I was planning on writing a triple concerto and it didn't work out that way, so that's how the triple overture came about.

MD: Has the reverse ever happened? Began with a study and ended up with a concerto?

SRG: I don't think so. I can't think of any. (laugh)

MD: I find it interesting that you seem to actively seek out the music of composers who write music very different from yours. Arvo Pärt and John Corigliano, to take perhaps two extremes.

It's not like if someone listened to your new CDs, for example, they could say, oh, I know who he's been listening to. I guess they could say that but they'd be wrong.

SRG: I've always had a passion for listening to all music. Especially 20th century music and I guess especially my contemporaries, whether or not I like them. That's something I've just done I think more than most composers ever since I was quite young. I was fascinated by digging up music, particularly of obscure composers. I'm sure there's some weird psychological component to it. I've always been fascinated by picking up composers who were once well known and are now obscure.

MD: What's the psychological component?

SRG: Oh, I don't know, I don't want to get into that, but it's there somewhere. (laughs). I'm not sure when I first realized it but when I was quite young my parents had a book of Sigmund Spaeth which had themes from all the famous pieces. And there was one almost totally forgotten composer, Joachim Raff. A basically poor composer, but he was very famous in the 19th century and I became fascinated with digging up his music and I used to go to a little music shop which no longer exists behind Carnegie Recital Hall. And I would buy these long out of print scores of his. I probably still have them, well I know I still have his third symphony, fifth symphony, I may have the piano concerto. Now a lot of stuff is being recorded on Naxos and on other labels because all that stuff is being dug up. But at that time it was totally forgotten and I was absolutely fascinated to find it and fascinated to find that it was justly forgotten with maybe one exception. There's one sort of cute movement in his fifth symphony, a cute little march movement, but it's basically banal music and I was fascinated with the idea that, at least when it came to the 19th century, it seemed that all the good music had been discovered. Almost everything that was obscure was obscure for a good reason. Which is not true in the 20th century. And then I was fascinated by digging up music by Krenek and Dohnanyi and you name it. And I still do that. I'll go to the library and get a huge stack of stuff, which is what I've done since I was a teen. One of the nice things about being a graduate student at Princeton is that the music department essentially let you alone for the whole time, so I would spend tons of time in the library there just going through basically the whole literature, including obscure as well as well-known composers. One of the interesting things about doing this is that I have in recent years come to admire very much music that I would never have expected to like and that I almost feel guilty for liking it at first since it was so different from the kind of music that I thought that I admired. Like for example, *Tabula Rasa* and *Fratres* by Arvo Pärt.

MD: You're saying you felt guilty about it?

SRG: Guilty is the wrong word, but I would often go back to the music thinking this time I'm going to see how hokey the piece is and I would still like it. So obviously there was something wrong with the premises I was starting with.

MD: Has Arvo Pärt had an influence on you?

SRG: A little bit. I can think of one movement of mine that I won't name, or maybe two that have been influenced by him. Well, this leads into something that I wanted to get into. You haven't asked the question yet, but when I was in my teens, I guess I had two basic attitudes

toward contemporary music. One, was that the only music that seemed to me of real significance, this was in the late '60's, early '70's, was non-serial atonal, perhaps somewhat expressionistic music. I basically didn't think the twelve-tone theory made much sense. At that time I guess I thought that tonal music was basically a thing of the past. I felt completely alien from Cage and the whole downtown school and the stuff I really admired was, just to name a few things, the Yehudi Wyner Concert Duo, some early Kirchner, some works by my teacher Robert Parris, the string quartet of Billy Jim Layton, a few things like that and that's where I really thought contemporary music should be. I hated most, but not all of the Darmstadt School and I thought the European idea of total serialism made absolutely no sense. And where Pärt comes into all this, and the reason I'm mentioning this is that it was a big surprise to me to discover how much I liked that piece—those two pieces actually, *Tabula Rasa* and *Fratres*, and then later the same thing happened with the Gorecki string quartets and with one piece by Schnittke, whom I had always thought of as very gimmicky. I really fell in love with his first *Concerto Grosso* a few years ago. And the other thing about my attitude back then was I had a very chauvinistic point of view. I thought America was the only place where anything of significance was happening in music after World War II. That also changed.

MD: What about minimalism?

SRG: Well, what's odd is that I never liked minimalism, and yet at some point it started to influence me a little bit. I think some of the reviewers of my CD's have exaggerated tremendously the influence of that on me, but it definitely is there at least in some of the accompaniment figuration. And maybe in some other ways like the amount of repetition I'm willing to tolerate in my music compared to when I was younger. I think for a lot of composers, those who are not minimalist really in their aesthetic at all, it has been somewhat liberating and has really lead them to new things that they wouldn't have done otherwise.

MD: What do you see as the components of the new music landscape these days? I mean if I were sixteen years old and wanted to be a composer, does it look different today than it did 30 years ago?

SRG: Yes. I try not to have too many opinions about that or about where music is going. I don't really think it's particularly helpful to you as a composer to be full of opinions about such things. I think there's no question that for composers now there's just a larger number of possibilities there that you can consider using. I think it's very hard within that to forge your own style. It's hard to be around now and not to be aware of all kinds of music that probably one wouldn't have been aware of thirty years ago. Especially the kind of composer who has been trained in classical music and came up through college and the university, and just the classical music world.

MD: Weren't you trained in colleges and universities?

SRG: It's funny but I wouldn't exactly put it that way. My most important studies were probably the piano lessons all through my life and then the private composition lessons I had with Robert Parris. I certainly got something out of graduate school in Princeton, but I don't think of myself as exactly university trained.

MD: Robert Parris clearly had a big influence on you.

SRG: Yes, he had a big influence on me. He was probably the only mentor I had as a musician. He influenced my music a lot when I was young. I think some of the pieces I wrote when I was in my late teens clearly show his influence. But we went through a couple of periods where we argued all the time and he didn't like the direction my music was going. That was probably valuable.

MD: When was that?

SRG: The first time was when I was a graduate student at Princeton. He thought my music was getting too cerebral. And the second period was in the late '80's when my orchestral music was much more tonal than what I'd done before.

MD: You've never spent any time teaching.

SRG: No. I used the word guilt in a sort of flippant way before, but that is something I do feel guilty about because I think there isn't going to be an audience in the future unless classical music is taught and tradition is kept up. I guess the main reason I've never taught is because I've never felt a calling to teach and when I was young I was incredibly lucky with some of the teachers I had. I didn't want to be a mediocre teacher and didn't want to teach unless I felt teaching as a calling.

MD: Do you want to tell us about them, about your musical education?

SRG: I began taking piano lessons when I was eight. I never seriously considered being a concert pianist because I wasn't quite good enough. I went to a music camp called Indian Hill when I was, I think not quite fourteen. That was the first time I ever saw composers.

MD: Who were they?

SRG: No one that you ever would have heard of, but there was one teenage guy who had perfect pitch and would sit in front of a tree and write atonal music that I liked very much and I really admired the fact that he could do that. I thought that was a great thing to do.

MD: Where was Indian Hill?

SRG: In Stockbridge, Massachusetts. One of my roommates was Arlo Guthrie. We exchanged ten whole words the entire summer I think. He just was off by himself playing guitar. And I had a very good piano teacher there, Daniel Abrams, who was also a composer. So anyway, when I got back home from there, that was the first time I started writing music. Not very seriously, but that was the first time it occurred to me to write music. But I never really took the idea of writing music seriously until I was in college. And there, just by chance, what happened was there was a student composers concert at the end of my freshman year. At that time I decided to show a few people something I'd written, a little atonal fugue for piano about one minute long, which I'd never had the nerve to show to anyone. And everyone liked it there and praised it and just getting that praise at that particular time was enough to make me realize that that was what I'd be doing for the rest of my life.

MD: You finished Haverford as a music major?

SRG: Yeah.

MD: And then?

SRG: Actually, I spent my junior year at Columbia, but I was not really happy living in New York at that time so I went back to Haverford.

MD: To study music at Columbia?

SRG: Yeah, I studied composition with Harvey Sollberger and I studied music history and theory. And then I went directly to Princeton, which I went to mostly because I wanted to study theory and analysis. I was quite arrogant and thought I was already a composer and didn't need to study composition with anyone. I did think I hadn't had enough theory and analysis and hoped to get a lot of that there. And being in Princeton had its advantages; as I say, they let you alone. I had lots of free time just to write music and to spend as much time as I wanted in the music library listening to music and playing scores on the piano, so that's basically what I did.

MD: And you were finished there by 1973.

SRG: Yeah, I was there from '69 to '73.

MD: And you sort of just started composing.

SRG: Well, continued composing, yeah. (laughs)

MD: (laugh) I didn't mean that. I meant you started to make a life as a composer rather than as a student composer.

SRG: Yeah, that's one thing I was totally unprepared for by Princeton. Not only did no one give you the slightest idea as to how you could make a career as a composer, but at least for me, they always made me feel somehow there was something demeaning about trying to get your music played or wanting to have a reputation. And it took me many years to get over that, which is probably my fault more than theirs, but nevertheless, that was a problem for me.

MD: So are you saying then that, you kept a low profile, or maybe another way to put it is that you didn't push yourself for some period of time because of the residue left from Princeton?

SRG: Yeah, and also my own shyness and just my incompetence at being political in the way that you have to in order to get your music played.

MD: So what changed it?

SRG: I guess what changed it was, first I moved to New York, which already meant I had a lot more contact with composers and performers and started getting my music played there. Before that I lived in Connecticut a couple years and spent one year abroad. Once I moved to New York it was easier to make contacts. And then for many years in New York I was really looking for a

manager and had several who weren't able to help me very much and then finally this Russian cousin of mine came along and made himself my manager without asking because he fell in love with my music and became very close to me personally. So that's really what helped my career a lot. It's certainly nothing I could have done myself.

MD: So that was a fortuitous meeting then?

SRG: Yeah, it really was, very much.

MD: This may be an unfair question, but do you think you would have written in the same quantity and the same kind of music had, that not occurred? You know, if your cousin had not been there to kick start a career.

SRG: I'm sure I would not have written the same pieces. I don't think I would have written a series of concertos if I had not had people to write them for. I don't know what I would've written instead. I suppose I would've written more chamber music rather than orchestral music. Very hard to say. I certainly don't feel that what I've written is so inevitable that I wouldn't be influenced by something like that.

MD: I do know that though you aren't officially a teacher, you do enjoy talking to young composers. Is there anything that you tell them, or wish to tell them?

SRG: I don't think most composers realize how difficult it is to write music. I've felt for a long time that most music being written is too glib, full of too many notes, in many cases too dense, not thought through enough -- it's very facile. It's very easy to put notes down on paper and make them look impressive and get somebody willing to put in all the time and effort to perform it. I think it's too easy. I guess that's one of the reasons that I feel when I'm writing a piece that it's important to know what I'm writing from memory. That might be partly because my music is not as dense and complex as most people, but I generally find that when I'm writing and I can't memorize it or have a lot of difficulty there is probably some lack of profile in it. One of the things that really struck me when I was in my late teens was how much 20th century music didn't seem to make sense to me. I focused on the pitches and a lot of it seemed to have very little character, very little sense, at most there might be a certain consistency, but nothing more beyond that. It seemed very puzzling to me. I couldn't really understand why people would put things down on paper that didn't seem to make much sense. Later I realized from studying with Jim Randall at Princeton, it wasn't just a question of the harmony. I thought of it in terms of harmonic coherence and I remember discussing this with him and he said that harmonic coherence isn't something a piece of music either possesses or doesn't possess. First of all there are all kinds of gradations, degrees of coherence, and second of all it wasn't just a question of harmony, but everything that goes into the making of the music, whether it has to do with rhythm and phrasing and everything else. So that sort of refined for me the conception of what it was that I was missing.

MD: Missing in?

SRG: Missing in a lot of music, but even now it often seems puzzling. I'll pick up a bunch of scores from the library for example, or tapes, whatever, and I just don't get it. Maybe this explains why some of the music I wrote when I was young is a lot denser and more complex than

what I'm writing now. I wrote a big piano trio when I was nineteen, a very romantic, kind of an expressionist piece, which I still feel very close to, but I remember I thought there were parts of it that weren't sufficiently controlled for my taste. I felt a need to pare down what I was doing and just have a sense of being more in control of all the material. As a result, ever since then, my music has tended to be a lot sparer. A lot more restrained. A friend of mine, the conductor Joel Suben, was looking at a score of mine recently said every page of it exuded restraint. And I guess that's almost become an aesthetic with me even though I like music that is very expressive, very out front emotionally, and I hope that mine is, and yet technically I think it is extremely restrained.

MD: I once heard a composer make disparaging remarks about another composer. A third composer came to her defense, and said this composer has spent the better part of her life composing music and just for that fact alone, she should be given a lot of credit. And I often think that there are really a lot of composers, a lot of music being written, and I can say, almost the opposite -- that it's not easy to write music. It's certainly not easy to have a career as a composer. That someone has to be already fairly talented to even consider that as a thing to do in life. So do you think—

SRG: Well, you certainly have to know a lot about music to write music at all. I can't really answer the question whether you deserve credit simply for writing music. You certainly deserve sympathy and it is hard to make a career and my heart goes out to anyone who wants to be a composer. I find in general, most composers I know are really nice people, really bright, really articulate. And often more of their intelligence, more of the things that are interesting about them, come through when you're talking to them than come through in their music.

MD: Would you not say that that is probably true of any century or decade?

SRG: Oh, absolutely. And it's true of some great composers that had minor pieces that sort of sound like generic examples of the style without much individuality.

MD: I mean, it's very hard to be even a third rate composer. I mean, it's pretty hard to be Chabrier say-

SRG: Yeah, it takes a tremendous amount of skill just to be on that level.

MD: So do you think then, do you think it's too easy to be a composer? That the societal mechanism that one has to go through allows one to be a composer before, let's say in a different time and place they'd be weeded out? Or encouraged to do something else with their life?

SRG: I don't think we get as good training as composers did in the past for sure. I'm not sure about the 20th century because there is such a lack of a common language, there is even a lack of just an ability to make judgments on the most basic things that people can agree on. I think there is a lot of good music that could easily go completely forgotten. I could name lots of recent pieces that I think are among the best that hardly anyone knows or cares about. I've mentioned a few earlier. For example Earl Kim was a very good composer. Some of his works I admire very much. I don't know if that means it will survive.

MD: Why do you think Kim, and other music you like doesn't get noticed, especially if it has quality?

SRG: If you write music that doesn't use weird sounds or is not drastically new in one way or another, people are apt not to notice it as much. One thing that I've been curious to notice, and that I have mixed feeling about, is that at least with my recent music, the people who seem to respond to it the most seem to be people who are not big fans of contemporary music. And they tend to be people like me who are skeptical of most contemporary music, not anti-20th century music, certainly not anti-contemporary music, but people who don't have the attitude that a lot of composers and critics do that there are a huge number of composers around who are just writing fantastic music, one piece after another. I think that some critics are more advocates for contemporary music than real critics of it. There are certain composers they love and will praise every piece by, will never write anything critical of that composer and to me that is a sign that they just don't have a very discriminating ear. I think the hardest thing about writing music, is, assuming you have a certain amount of craft, the hardest thing is to be objective about your own work. I think that's incredibly difficult. And I agree with T.S. Eliot, that nobody can really know whether their work has any ultimate value. It's just impossible to be that objective about your own work.