

SHARING MUSIC

Elisabeth Smalt

Bob and I were not married, we didn't want to be. 'Let's each day choose each other in total freedom' is what we easily agreed in the early days of our courtship, 14 years ago. We didn't feel the need to seal our love by law, because something else and very powerful united us: a shared passion for music.

We came to music from completely different angles. Bob had no musicians in the family, but an uncle had taken him to concerts of the Ulster orchestra every Friday from when he was eleven, and that had started off his passion for music. He told me about a record of a Beethoven symphony that he had listened to endlessly in his teenage years. I myself come from a family background where making music was the normal thing to do, like eating and sleeping. For me this musical tradition can sometimes be a heavy load to carry: a big responsibility and sometimes a burden. To listen to a CD is not something that I would do naturally. For Bob it was the opposite: simply, music in any form meant pure joy and happiness to him. The most happy days at our home were when he would listen to his favourite CDs at a very high volume, one after the other. I relished his enthusiasm and was excited by all these composers I had never heard of before. I had played a lot of contemporary stuff before we met, but somehow Bob's taste was completely new and refreshing for me. This also gave me a fresh approach to my own music making, both traditional and contemporary. We would often listen together and exchange views on what we heard. I played solo pieces for him and Bob suggested new pieces for me to play. Bob discovered that I could sight-read and I discovered his piano playing skills; soon we played as a duo almost every day, him on the piano and me on the viola or violin, repeating our favourites endlessly – pieces of Berlioz, Dvorák, Haydn, Britten and Schubert – until his illness made it too tiring. Sharing music always made us happy.

How is it possible that a boy from a poor Northern Irish background who grew up in the grim reality of the Troubles, then at their highpoint in Belfast, fell completely for new music and especially for the music of the, there and then, totally unknown American composer Harry Partch? Bob discovered Partch when he was a teenager, and this would become the basis of his musicology and his further professional life. A few years ago, Bob wrote a very moving essay about the world he came from: 'On being Northern Irish'. After reading that, I understood how music had saved him, and how Harry Partch had played a crucial role in this. 'My own way of altering things, albeit purely within myself at first, was through music', he writes. 'Partch is a powerful example of not having to accept the life you inherit if you don't want to'.

Even now Harry Partch is not exactly a household name. This experimental composer grew up in the isolated desert of South California in the early twentieth century. He became a viola player, but was unhappy with tempered tuning as we know it. So he invented

a new tuning system, which led eventually to him building his own instruments and composing music in a special notation system. The young Bob made this man his inspiration, following his example of how to persevere and go all the way for beauty, for art, honest and uncompromising in a world that wants you to be negative and give up on life. When we were together, I saw this still strongly reflected in his character, taste in music and life choices. Bob was attracted by music made by original thinkers who follow their own path, even against the general fashion. He didn't have time for uninteresting people, lost causes or political games. He would not wish for the impossible but set his goals high and take all the necessary steps to make them happen, such as organising a concert, making the best possible *Tempo* issue or writing about music. I remember him telling me: 'To start a book is easy, but to finish a book is very, very difficult', and when I witnessed the immense 12 years' work on his biography of Claude Vivier, I saw how true that was, and understood how much work his Partch biography must have been, written in the eighties and early nineties, before the age of the internet or mobile phones, and with only a prehistoric version of the computer.

As a young musicology student Bob had written letters to California, to all the people who had known Partch and worked with him. Only a few took the trouble to take pen and paper and write a letter back (amongst them was Ben Johnston, and later Bob edited a book about his writings) but the exchanges of letters that followed made Bob's idea of a Partch biography into a realistic possibility. Bob told me how grateful he had been for their help and feedback at that time. I think this experience was the reason that he was so generous in helping others. With his music students, but also with young and unknown composers and others who asked him for help, he generously shared his knowledge, scores and recordings. Now, after Bob's death, many of those have their own careers and have written to me to say how meaningful these early contacts with Bob had been for them, not only because of the help and information that Bob had provided, but also because Bob had trusted them and believed in their potential.

When I met Bob for the first time I had the same experience. I was eager to ask him about Partch's so called 'Adapted Viola', but also a bit nervous. Bob took me completely seriously. He helped me to build one, gave me the scores and taught me how to play the music notation. During this working process we fell hopelessly in love with each other. Later, with the music of Partch as our starting point, we founded Trio Scordatura with our friend Alfrun Schmid as a singer, Bob on keyboards and me on viola, viola d'amore and Adapted Viola. The term 'microtonal' we avoided; too dogmatic. We preferred to call it 'a special interest in tuning'. In our trio we decided that we would not be democratic. Bob was the leader: he had the capacity to find new paths and bring people together. When a composer would come to our house, the sheer joy of exchange and conversation would carry us towards more and better music-making and our explorations into unknown musical territory were accompanied by lots of laughter and fun. Bob liked to inspire, decide, direct and overcome difficulties if the cause was his beloved subject, music.

The day that Bob was asked to be Editor of *Tempo* was a particularly happy day. 'This is what I want to do in life', Bob told me. A bit later he sighed: 'if only it had come my way a bit sooner', because he had been diagnosed with cancer shortly before. But Bob was able to do this work at home, in between the treatments, and we were hoping

for many years still to come. This was his dream job, and he jumped into it with the same positive energy as always. Eager to stimulate debate and to support a variety of opinions about new music, he made sure that the writers in *Tempo* were of diverse backgrounds and types. Not always men, not always UK-based, not always covering the same music and always striving for quality. He also started a *Tempo* facebook page. This job made it possible to share his enthusiasm for new music with a wider audience.

My life with Bob has been a wonderful experience. I feel privileged that this man was there for me, every day. Now he has become a memory, and with him a lot of knowledge about music is gone. He still had so much to say, had many ideas and plans that now remain undone. Luckily we have his writings, and I recognise in every single word the Bob that I knew. And in his audio documentaries *Tentative Affinities* that he started when death was approaching – it was quicker than writing books – his nice voice tells us about new music in such an enticing way that I immediately want to get my viola and play. He will remain an inspiration for me and I think for many others as well. An inspiration to be generous in sharing music, this wonderful art form that makes our lives a pleasure to be lived.

30 January 2014