

# Space time continuing



Barry Guy has spent the last 40 years exploring the myriad possibilities of the double bass. As he celebrates his 60th birthday, he casts a retrospective eye over his career with **Philip Clark**

Later in our interview, Guy gives answers too: 'Why do we improvise? We're playing this music to discover interaction between people. Free improvisation is one of the great socialist musics because it obliges us to respect and take care of each other as musicians, building a language together.'

Back in his days as a South London teenager, Guy's own language gradually evolved by putting together the cultural information that surrounded him. Playing skiffle at school led him to Dixieland jazz, and forwards to Benny Goodman-like swing music. But a formative meeting with the avant garde was just over the horizon. 'The defining moment was hearing [Charles] Mingus for the first time,' Guy recalls. 'I had a friend, Bernhard Living, who was a saxophone player and it was unbelievable how much this young lad knew about the American avant garde. How he had so much knowledge about Jackson Pollock, Cage and Feldman I'm not certain, but it was through him I heard Mingus. Then he took me to Goldsmith's College where there was a composition class and Stanley Glasser was professor. We analysed Beethoven through to Stravinsky, Ligeti and Stockhausen. A wash of interesting stuff.'

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'For me, the great thing about Mingus was that he was a part of the great Afro-American movement, but broke the rules. In his writing for ensembles, he showed ways that composers could build in drama. Rather than structural repetitions, Mingus's wonderful manipulations of the music gave us drama and space. There were fast-time things, slow things, open things and, crucially, he allowed the musicians to respond to the unusual circumstances he created. It stretched everybody.'

'Through the composition class at Goldsmith's, I was invited to write a piece for the end of the year, and I was already fascinated with improvisation so I wrote a piece called *Perceptions 1966* that had improvised cadenzas for alto sax and trombone. Suddenly I had to find an alto saxophone player and someone suggested Trevor Watts. I met him through [trombonist] Paul Rutherford, who was living in Blackheath. They came along, played the piece and a few weeks later I was invited to join the Spontaneous Music Ensemble.'

By joining the SME, Guy found himself in a pivotal role within the emerging UK free-improvisation scene. Led by charismatic drummer John Stevens, and featuring musicians such as saxophonists Trevor Watts, Evan Parker and trumpeter Kenny Wheeler, the SME played now legendary sessions at the Little Theatre Club in Covent Garden, London. Stevens's approach to music held control and creative freedom in a fine

balance and Guy found his bass playing developing, almost without realising.

'We fed each other all sorts of musical ideas and I'd find I was doing things on the bass that weren't necessarily very bass-like, because they came from within the ensemble,' he reflects. 'I hit a crisis about getting my thumb position to feel comfortable when I was studying classical bass at the Guildhall and I thought, "wait a minute, when I'm playing SME gigs I'm going into thumb position without thinking about it." At college I was analysing the problem from the perspective of playing Dragonetti and Bottesini, but almost overnight working with the SME changed how I played more conventional repertoire. I had a psychological block, but improvisation allowed me to overcome it. Once I convinced myself about the efficacy of free playing, it could be channelled to either side.'

Guy's awareness of the American mother music was also increasing, and he discovered a spiritual link between British improv and the most adventurous extremes of jazz. 'Whereas Mingus thrilled me, when [saxophonist] Albert Ayler came along,' Guy confesses, 'he seemed shocking because I didn't know that way of articulating the saxophone. It had an inner energy and focus that was totally unique, but it was kind of rough. The way he hollered was like a singer shouting, and was very moving and important for me; Ayler's album *Spiritual Unity*, with Gary Peacock on bass, seemed endlessly fascinating. Gary's negotiation of space and harmony, and where he put his notes, was majestic. Once I got my ears around Albert's saxophone, then everything else fell into place. I understood what Gary was doing

IT'S A FEW DAYS SHORT OF HIS 60TH BIRTHDAY AND BARRY GUY is back where it all started, in the leafy Blackheath area of south-east London where, as a teenager, he first made music. He's come to London from the Zurich home he shares with violinist Maya Homburger to take charge of a new travel bass that's been custom-built to his specifications. Flip back to the Blackheath of his childhood and there you'd find an enthusiastic teenager grappling with the thud of a one-string tea-chest bass played like he was in the band of skiffle icon Lonnie Donegan. Forty-five years on, and Guy is struggling up the stairs with his new toy. Three more strings. Big smiles all round. He is indeed the cat that got the cream.

When it comes to a holistic understanding of the double bass, few musicians can rival Barry Guy. From his pioneering performances of Iannis Xenakis's out-to-lunch solo piece

*Theraps* to his work with the Academy of Ancient Music and the London Classical Players, to his consummate mastery of improvisation (oh yes, and he's a composer too), Guy's musical world has been formed by the bass, a debt of gratitude he's returned many times over. As often happens when unashamed left-wingers get together, our conversation turns to Iraq and the impoverished state of our culture. When Guy avers that people don't ask 'why?' enough these days, and that it's the one question politicians are afraid of the population expressing too vocally, the links to his musical credo quickly become apparent: 'I question why so much that's considered "jazz" has to be in 4/4 or 3/4, and in a constant metric rhythm,' Guy explains. 'Why is "real" jazz supposed to be repetitions of eight, 16 or 32 bars? I'm not saying it's wrong – but why does there have to be a dogma about it? Why can't the music move somewhere else?'



Photograph by Francesca Pfeiffer

Photograph courtesy of Barry Guy



## BARRY GUY'S TOP TEN RECORDINGS

Iskra 1903 – Chapter One 1970–1972 (*Emanem 4301*)/Chapter Two 1981–1983 (*Emanem 4303*)

Guy/Riley/Wachsmann – improvisations are forever now (*Emanem 4070*)

Barry Guy – Symmetries (*Maya MCD 0201*)

London Jazz Composers Orchestra – Double Trouble Two (*Intakt CD 048*)

Barry Guy/Marilyn Crispell/Paul Lytton – Ithaca (*Intakt CD 096*)

Barry Guy New Orchestra – Inscape-Tableaux (*Intakt CD 066*)

Barry Guy/Evan Parker – Birds and Blades (*Intakt 080*)

Barry Guy – Portraits (*Intakt CD 123*)

Homburger/Guy Duo with guest Pierre Favre – Dakryon (*Maya MCD 0501*)

Barry Guy – Folio (*ECM New Series 1931 476 3053*)

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with his sparse textures – and at the beginnings of some of the pieces it seemed like he was picking notes out of the air.’

Although Guy’s SME stay was relatively brief (he only appears on one recording, *Withdrawal*, from 1967) the experience had a dramatic impact on his personality as a bass player and improviser, and whetted his appetite for in-the-moment creative experiences. In a precedent of how Guy’s career would eventually fork, in 1970 he was a founding member of radical leftist improv trio, *Iskra 1903*, led by Paul Rutherford, and also established the London Jazz Composers Orchestra to explore his burgeoning concepts of ‘manuscript paper’ composition. The first incarnation of *Iskra* paired Guy with guitarist Derek Bailey; a later version featured violinist Philipp Wachsmann in Bailey’s place. Guy was already discovering how his experiences of improvisation and composition might feed each other.

‘In the SME there was a delicate balance between trying to keep the ego down to give your services to the group, but you couldn’t subrogate the ego so far that making a statement became impossible. *Iskra* was a very different type of musical space. There were no drums, and in that first edition with Bailey and myself I could explore a particular type of string sonority that got more intense when Wachsmann joined. We luxuriated in the possibilities of our string sounds, and my technical facility was getting better. I had a clearer idea of how I could articulate the instrument to fit in with what Phil was doing on violin, and that fascination with sonority also became apparent in my writing.

‘With the London Jazz Composers Orchestra I wanted to achieve comparable spontaneity within a large ensemble. Once you reach about ten musicians, unless you get into fairly rigorous studies and rehearsals, that can get difficult. My challenge was to create big extended pieces that had flexibility and definition in the sonorities. These pieces were like my “symphonies” – how to achieve big composed structures using improvisers.

‘One of the things I’d forgotten – bloody stupid of me really – was that many of the improvisers I worked with in these early days didn’t have formal training. They couldn’t read music that well, and it was frightful for some of these guys to be reading a piece like *Ode*, which is two hours long and all in time/space notation. They’d have to improvise, then read some more and follow a conductor giving them downbeats. Extraordinarily it came off because there was super-human concentration, and I have huge respect for the guys who managed it. I got more into using the orchestra as a sound-block, and some of the later pieces took that aspect of reading and sound manipulation too far and didn’t pay enough regard to improvisation.’

Despite the prevailing trend for ‘crossover’ music, there’s still a dearth of musicians who are able to cross the cultures of ‘traditional’ classical music and free improv meaningfully. The intriguing thing about Guy’s approach is that his bass has acted like a passport, guaranteeing safe passage over the divide, his awareness of its acoustic realities informing both processes. In 2002 Guy composed *Anaklasis* for himself to play as a duo with bassist Stefano Scodanibbio, and it’s a piece that plays with the oxymoronic situation of ‘composing’ for ‘improvisers’ impeccably. Its notation is somewhere between an architect’s plan and a graphic score – see page 14 for a half-size reproduction. The musicians are given tangible instructions (both verbal and pictorial), but need an improviser’s ear for spontaneously evolving structures to play the piece with the spirit its composer intends.

‘Whenever I write a piece I feel like I’m reinventing the wheel,’ Guy elucidates. ‘It’s always the case that I try to get background information on the musicians. Do they prefer playing



## BARRY GUY'S EQUIPMENT

### BASSES

2 five-string basses by Roger Dawson, 1997 and 2001;  
2 Guy-Dawson Travel Bases (2002 by Roger Dawson and 2007 by Lawrence Dixon);  
Chamber bass by John Barrett, c.1780

### STRINGS

All basses use Thomastik Spirocore (Weich) except the chamber bass which has gut strings made for it by Bernd Kurschner

### BOWS

French style: A. Thoma; copies of Thoma bow by Richard Wilson and Brian Tunncliffe; G.E Bailey Baroque: Brian Tunncliffe and Louis Emilio-Carrington

### AMPLIFIERS

Walter Woods  
Acoustic Image Clarus 2R series III  
Acoustic Image Contra 600 watt  
Gallien-Krueger 200MB

### ACCESSORIES

Schertler transducer (Switzerland)  
Soundwear soft cases (Germany)  
Stevenson Travel Trunks (UK)



Bach or Debussy, or are they happy to exist within a more exploratory format? It reveals a 'tipping point' about where I can go. Before doing *Anaklasis* I was thinking about the idea of it as architecture. I talked to Scodanibbio because I know that he's a fiercely independent player and has a very specific technique – and the idea of presenting graphics seemed the way to go.'

Guy then produces the extraordinary looking score and lays it out on the floor for inspection. He points to one of the central graphic panels: 'If you were to raise this off the page and imagine it on three floors, it becomes like a building where you have to negotiate space as you move or else you fall off the edge,' he explains. 'There are boundaries clearly specified in the preface (six pages of written instructions Guy provides as a guide to interpreting his graphics), so you can't enter into a free-for-all and you have to move through the piece in a specific direction. The lines of demarcation and different domains are clearly defined by types of material. You could have a bad performance if you don't respect the material which exists within these domains.' Guy then points to another graphic domain: 'This material can be introduced as "interventions" within the section we've just been looking at. If things are feeling flat either musician can give the signal, and the intervention adds definition. Then we can go off again into the big central graphic.'

Given Guy's notation, what defines *Anaklasis* as specifically double bass music? Could it work on other instruments? 'There could be a version for cellos, but it wouldn't work for violas or violins, for instance, because they're not resonant enough. The point of the title is a reflection of sound re-echoing to resound and reverberate. In this early domain I indicate that paintbrushes are to be put through the strings and used as an oscillator. Because of the length of the bass strings, it gives a certain kind of effect that would be lost on other instruments.' So, the physical dimensions of the bass are written into the piece? 'That's right – you get this particular powerful effect because of the depth of the bass strings.'

Moving from the specific to the personal, Guy explains his relocation from the UK to Switzerland (via a period in Ireland) as 'rationalising one's musical objectives. There were many things that needed sorting out, both compositionally and also defining how I wanted to run my life with Maya and be involved with her musical goals.' Maya Homburger is a specialist on the Baroque violin, but rich opportunities for artistic overlaps soon presented themselves. 'I've written three solo violin pieces for Maya,' Guy reflects, 'and we often do one of them as a duo in

concerts; she plays the solo violin part and I improvise with her.

'Having an improviser responding to the material in a through-composed piece is very interesting. When Maya plays with me, she frees up her interpretation. Instead of sticking rigidly to the metronomic suggestions, she can move with me because I'm feeding her a certain counterpoint. As a composer it gives me another insight into the piece. It's like a sculpture that can be turned around, so you can see another side of the same piece. It's fair to say that – naming no names – it's not every improviser who would necessarily add something to a piece, and we've had disasters. Unless you've got the developed ears of, say, an Evan Parker, who can hear right inside a piece, analyse material and give something back, it can seem meaningless.'

Guy celebrated his 60th birthday in Kilkenny, his former Irish home, hosting a concert with Homburger featuring his own music alongside Bach. In March a two-day birthday bash in Zurich was something of a career retrospective and featured his seminal trio with Evan Parker and drummer Paul Lytton, the Barry Guy New Orchestra and a procession of other groups and associates. And Guy's relationship to the bass – and his reinvention of it with foot-pedals, electronics and cruder hardware like wedging sticks between its strings – remains absolutely central to all these exploits. 'Sometimes I see players – not necessarily bass players – who add things to their instrument and it can be dull, because it's not integrated into the language,' he concludes. 'It's important that extensions have rationale and reason. There's no point in doing these things to titillate. It's not an add-on – it's a genuine extension to the expressive vocabulary and sonority of the instrument.' **DB**

## Anaklasis overleaf...

Turn the page for a reduced reproduction of Guy's graphic score, *Anaklasis*, for two double basses. The full-size score is published with full performance instructions and is available from the composer: [barry@aglais.ch](mailto:barry@aglais.ch). Guy invites any interested parties to contact him for information about playing the score.

**Anaklasis** for two double basses

By Barry Guy – composed for Stefano Scodanibbio and Barry Guy, 2002

BRUSH STICK OSCILLATIONS + PZ

Section A features a complex arrangement of musical notation and performance instructions. It includes parts for SS (Stefano Scodanibbio) and BG (Barry Guy). Instructions include **ARCO**, **SS**, **PZ**, **PERC**, **LH**, and **RH**. Dynamic markings such as *fff* and *sim* are present. Diagrams show a hand holding a brush and stick, with arrows indicating oscillations and specific points of contact.

This section is titled **VETO-BG** and **VETO-SS**, both marked **ARCO**. It includes detailed musical notation with dynamic markings like *pp*, *ppp*, *ff*, and *ff sub.* Hand diagrams at the top show fingerings for sections I, II, and III. Performance instructions include **coordinated**, **BELLS not coordinated**, **SPICC**, **interpola**, and **interpola**.

**ANAKLISIS** a reflection of sound, re-echoing, to resound, reverberating.

**FOR TWO DOUBLE BASSES**  
FOR STEFANO SCODANIBBIO  
& BARRY GUY

BARRY GUY AUGUST 2002

Section B includes musical notation for SS and BG. Performance instructions include **COL LEG**, **BATT/TRATT**, **SS**, **PZ PERC**, **LH**, and **RH**.

**PZ/LH/RH/PERC**

This large section features complex musical notation and performance instructions. It includes parts for SS and BG. Instructions include **ARCO**, **COL LEG**, **TRATTI**, **BATT.**, **ACCEL CRESC.**, **FAST BRUSH HAIR**, **OSCILLATIONS**, **DOUBLE / TRIPLE STOPS**, and **P sub.** Hand diagrams show fingerings for **on cue VBG** and **on cue VSS**.

Section C is marked **HIGH** and includes musical notation for SS and BG. Performance instructions include **COL LEG**, **BATT/TRATT**, **SS**, **ARCO**, and **BG**.