

Interview Transcript – Participant 2

Interviewer: Christian Ferlaino

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CF: The questions are mostly about your experience with music, your life into music or your relationship to music. So, things like, what kind of music do you like? What kind of music do you listen to?

P2: Right. I like all sorts of sound. And I choose my words carefully because music is a very narrow term for me. Because I'm a composer as well, so I listen to sound as music and music as sound and it's all interrelated, interconnected. So, yeah, the word music is very limited in my view. But yes, what do I listen to as in music? Very little, actually, I don't listen to a lot of music. I stopped listening to music as pleasure. Possibly 13 years ago. When I finished my MA in ethnomusicology, I saw music in a different way. And I no longer listen to it as relaxation or pleasure or for enjoyment. I always seem to analyse sound now. I can't help it. I just analyse it.

CF: Yeah, that's common.

P2: I think you know what I mean. But saying that, because I do that, it means that I listen to everything as music. I mean, in a sense, it's narrow, the word music, but in another sense, it's very broad as well. I still use the word music, but it depends on what the other person is meaning by it. You know what I mean? It's not pop music. Pop music is very narrow. Classical music is very narrow. But music in a broader sense, as in sound and frequencies and rhythmical structures or non-rhythmical structures is music as well. I was brought up on folk music, so I listen to folk music. I was brought up on rock music. I listen to rock music. Classical music sometimes. Jazz and blues sometimes. I like music concrete, just the sounds from the environment. I've always liked that, always. Even as a teenager, I used to listen to that. But yeah, not so much synth music and electronic music, not so much because we never afford it. We could never buy it when I was young. It was too expensive. It was mainly guitars, mandolins, keyboards, but cheap keyboards. But yeah, vinyl. My parents always listened to vinyl. Scottish folk music. I listen to cassettes, what you could buy in cassettes. So yeah, I'm not being very direct because I don't see it as a direct thing.

CF: Do you think this idea of music as very narrow but also very broad is a consequence of your studies in ethnomusicology or your interest in ethnomusicology?

P2: Yeah, I think so because before, as I said before, my MA, which is in like 2000, I still had an idea of what music was. It was very, in a narrow sense. We had rock, we had blues, we had folk, we had jazz, we had experimental. It was all structured. It was all in little boxes. And I think after my MA, those boxes were just non-existent then. Yeah, ethnomusicology certainly gave me a perspective of what I already knew. I think it just kind of, I could speak about it after

my MA. I think before my MA I saw a wide range of music, but it was all separate in compartments or departments. But now it's one big whole.

CF: Have you played an instrument? Did you play an instrument as a child?

P2: I'm afraid every school kid goes through the recorder.

CF: And you're afraid why, if I may?

P2: Because at school they teach you to hate the recorder. And it's torture because it's very simple and basic and uninteresting. And if you're given... an 11-year-old kid... which is a very complex and interesting instrument, the recorder, but if you're told to do very childish, basic melodies with a brain who is like 11-year-old, you're very quickly bored and it's not interesting. So yes, I was taught the recorder at school and I left music when I was 13. So I hated it that much. [LAUGHS] But at the same time I was playing guitar at seven. I mean myself... I was learning chords and melodies and classical guitar and blues and rock from an early age and that wasn't reflected at school where it was... a nursery rhyme. It was so boring. I also played mandolin as a child and also the ukulele, which my grandmother bought in a second-hand shop. It's a very nice banjo ukulele. I still have it. Very professional type. So yeah, I taught myself a few instruments back then.

CF: There was no way to integrate your interests into the school teaching?

P2: No. It was... I don't want to use the word academic because it wasn't. It was just childishness and simplicity. And the people who I think stayed with it until they were 16, I don't know why they did, you know, because it wasn't music really. I think maybe they went on to study violin later on. Because in the UK you could drop subjects at 13. So maybe after 13 they went into violin or clarinet or the school orchestra. But if you're into serious music like what you hear on the radio or television, then there was no outlet for that at school, not at all. Popular music wasn't taught at school.

CF: When you had the opportunity to drop the recorder, did you stop making music at all or you went into something else? I mean, I guess, besides school.

P2: Yeah, it was out of school, out of school activities. Yeah, it was electric guitar.

CF: OK, so you kept making music.

P2: Yeah, I was making music outside of school since seven years old.

CF: And do you have a particular memory associated to music? Like, the first memory you can relate to music or a very significant one that involves music, either making or listening?

P2: Yeah, I mean, yeah, OK, so my mother used to play vinyl records a lot. So it would be the Beatles, you know, on the small 45s. We're talking like 1970, you know. And basically pop music of the 60s, I guess. So vinyl, vinyl music from my mother. Myself... the first thing I ever recorded that I remember, I mean, besides the radio or anything, was... I smuggled... I smuggled in a big cassette recorder. It wasn't these small ones. It was the big ones. Very heavy. And I took it to the cinema. This was 1976. And I recorded Star Wars. [LAUGHS] And you had a cassette of 90 minutes each side. So I wanted to record the whole Star Wars film.

And I pressed play and I recorded the first side. And then I turned the cassette over and pressed play again. And then there's this mighty feedback, this screeching. And everybody was looking around thinking... And I quickly knocked it off. So I've only got one side of Star Wars. [LAUGHS]

CF: And you were interested in the music or the sound effects, the entire dialogues?

P2: Everything like that, yeah. I mean, I think I was just recording everything, even back then. And I was... How old would I be, 76? I'd be about 10. I was recording everything. We had these cassette players, these small portable ones, and I was just multitracking for the first time on different cassette recorders. This music concrete I was talking about, I would just record things. I mean, with no purpose, just record. I just loved recording. And I still do that today. It was very strange because when Star Wars got repeated, I remembered the dialogue because I used to listen to it so often. I could say, I know what's coming next. [LAUGHS]

CF: And then you made a continuous relationship with music also professionally. You went into studios and you say you're a composer.

P2: Yeah, I mean, but that came later. I was a hobbyist, then a semi-professional and then a professional musician. In those days, there was a lot of music in the bars, in the pubs. I mean, it still is in Glasgow, but in the whole of the country, there was lots of music that you could earn a living from. And I wasn't part of that, but I was part of that time. So I made my money from music, basically, doing different things. Playing in bands, different bands. School didn't do anything music, but I did a lot outside of school. And that led me to become self-sufficient with music, I mean, as a job.

CF: So you now teach music?

P2: Yeah.

CF: Okay. And which instruments do you play?

P2: Well, I teach Turkish *ney*... flute, Turkish flutes. That's what I teach. But I've been a teacher as well and I've lectured as well. I've been playing on the streets or playing concerts, everything, really. I don't limit to one thing. And it's all music, whether you're lecturing or whether you're playing on the streets, it's exactly the same, in my opinion.

CF: And so you play the ney, but you play also in bands. What type of music do you play?

P2: Not since Covid, no. Before Covid, I was heavily involved with folk music, traditional music.

CF: Scottish?

P2: Southern Scottish, the borders, so Northumbrian, lowland Scotland, really. But also I was living abroad for many, many years, so I involved myself with the music, like in Spain, the Baltic States, Turkey, Middle East, North Africa. This was before my ethnomusicology as well, so I was living in those places. Yeah. But yeah, so it's varied. You know, I didn't just stay with one thing. Always changing and moving. But the instruments, it's been mainly guitar. The folk music, it's been mainly bagpipes. I used to make bagpipes. I used to do workshops and things. Different things before Covid. It wasn't just one thing.

CF: Okay, wow. And this interest for sound, are there sounds that you like particularly? Specific sounds or specific qualities in sound that you enjoy?

P2: No. There's not a sound or anything that I can think of which is the best or the most interesting. No. I don't know what I go for really. Maybe that's why it's so interesting because I haven't found... I remember when I was younger I liked a certain type of music which I then called it Arabic music. Now I know it was a certain Maqam. But I only knew that after researching it. So if you ask me what sound do I like now, I don't know. And it's that same, maybe I'm looking for that. I'm not. You know what I mean? But maybe if I found it I would put a name to it. I just like the construction of noise really. Whatever it is. It's quite liberating. I'm sure you also can relate to that because I know you have different musical styles and interests and researches. So it all becomes like one thing. And it's very hard to pick out one thing from that big bubble of music and say, well this is something I like because... I don't think like that anymore.

CF: The other time you brought the violin. You told a very beautiful and troubled story with the violin as well.

P2: [LAUGHS]

CF: Which is very significant. You can see your love for the instrument and the troubles that you encounter in society in relation to playing the instrument and doing something that you like. Why the violin? What did you like in the violin that you wanted to play?

P2: I think the violin was a door to classical music at the time. I had no interest in the violin or the fiddle because in the folk world... I was introduced to the folk world at an early age through my parents, and I had no interest in the fiddle. But the mandolin in a way is the same fingering as a violin. And I just liked the mandolin. I think when I left school I wanted to explore classical music a bit more. I played classical guitar, but I wanted to maybe... Violin is a very versatile instrument. You can play many styles. And I think I saw it as an instrument like a doorway to those different styles, like blues or jazz or whatever. But certainly classical music. And when that didn't happen, I kind of lost interest in it, in the violin, and I went to other instruments. Yeah, if somebody says that I'm not going to teach you something, then there's many other instruments that you can go and explore. You don't have to give up music. So yeah, the violin is an instrument, but I don't have a love for the instrument.

CF: It's also saddening that you're being left-handed was regarded as a sort of impairment for making music.

P2: Yeah. But it's an interesting thing, isn't it, being left-handed. Because in a way it got worse. After I left England, I went to live in the Baltic States, which was ex-Soviet. And in the Soviet Union, it was even worse being left-handed. I mean, if you wrote with your left hand, you were forced to write with your right hand. So it wasn't just an instrument. It was your daily life. You had to change the way you're made. Yeah, and I mean, society was very different back then. Really, we're talking the 70s here. And there wasn't much tolerance for people who were different. So if you're going through the official levels of school, university, then I would have

no place in music. I was an outcast. It wasn't done to be left-handed. But being from a rock and folk background, we had left-handed musicians, like famous musicians who were left-handed. So it was there, but it wasn't so common to be buying a left-handed instrument. In the classical world, as I was saying, it's only recently changed. You can buy a left-handed violin now, but you can't buy a left-handed cello. So it's slowly, slowly changing. In fact, I think Eastern Europe is changing the West because they are manufacturing left-handed instruments more than the West.

CF: And there is also this fact that you still need to adjust. If you play in an orchestra, you still need to adjust. Even if the instrument is left-handed, you play... the bowing is opposite to the orchestra because otherwise you clash into the other's bow.

P2: Yeah, I mean, it's a silly argument because they could just sit you on another side or something. I mean, it's just so stupid. You read on these forums, I mean, I was researching it, and people get really angry saying, how dare you tell me to change who I am just so you can have a normal life? I mean, being left-handed is normal for me. And it is for many other people, right? It's like saying, oh, you must be straight, you can't be gay. You know, today, that's a big topic today. But in the 70s, it was just as taboo to call yourself gay as it was to be left-handed back then. You know, you were forced to play right-handed. And you had all these like friends, like friends, teenagers who were playing upside. I can play guitar quite well upside down because I had to learn the guitar upside down. And then I turn, you know what I mean? I can play left-handed in a normal way. And that's what we used to do back then. We had to adapt just to fit in. It was ridiculous, really. And that's Britain, you know. Britain will, you know, the Beatles and all this history we have of music and were forced to, Paul McCartney, left-handed bass player, he played upside down.

CF: Yeah. And it's still crazy that you can task a bass player to scooch a few centimetres away so that you don't mess up with the bowing. You know, you keep your up-bow or whatever... Instead of just adjusting, you know, the bowing or making them the other way.

P2: Yeah, exactly. I mean, 2023 and we're still from the 1970s really. In the classical genre, you know, in other genres not so much. And it says something about the classical genre really when it's like that. It says something seriously wrong with the people who play classical music, you know. And that's a different topic but it's a very serious topic because the mentality is not worth bothering with really. It's quite sad.

CF: And you left the violin for good or you kept playing it?

P2: No, I left it for good and only very recently I got it out of the attic again because I always loved the cello. I really loved the cello but again in the 70s it was unheard of, for a boy to play a cello because it was such an expensive instrument. There was no teachers back then, you know. I mean, where I lived, yeah, in London, Manchester, OK, but where I lived, no. So it was just impossible to play a cello. I've always loved the cello, the sound of it, I mean. Again, not the instrument but the sound. And when I looked into buying a cello recently, again I came up with

this left-handed nonsense and it put me off buying it two times. I seriously wanted to buy a cello two times and the mentality has put me off, and lack of instrument has put me off buying it. And so I had this violin and I thought, well, I'll look into different ways of playing the violin because I was really into the gamba and that didn't seem to matter because it has a different boring technique and the way you position it is different to the cello and then it got me thinking and I thought, well, North African violin players, they just have it on their knee and then you have the Carnatic Indian, you know, again it's different. Yeah, so there's different traditions, very respected traditions who don't have this nonsense about being right-handed, left-handed. So I started looking at it and that's when I started to try and play it again and get it out to the attic really. I'm quite serious about playing it but it's just the mentality that's put me off.

CF: How was it the other day to play the violin in that setting?

P2: It was good, I mean, the whole GIOdynamic thing. I mean, I've done a lot of that before in the 90s. I mean, my BA was in contemporary music and composition and stuff and we did a lot of that in uni and it's so refreshing to do it again. That's why I really like it. The first time I went there I took a little synth, the second time I took my ney and the fact that you can just play it in any style and experiment with it and get different sounds from it, I really like that.

CF: You played the ney, the GIOdynamic where I was...

P2: Yeah, the one just gone last month. Yeah, the violin is... It's good when you can experiment with something like that which is so established and recognised and you come out with something completely different. I mean, it's nice. It's the freedom there. I'm sure you know that there's a freedom of just playing what you want.

CF: Yeah. Do you think that is it for you liberating, using specifically an instrument that has such a tradition tied into the object itself, like the violin, in non-conventional ways? Is there a special pleasure in using it that way or is it just another instrument that you like to...

P2: Yeah, I'm not fighting back or going against a tradition. I'm really exploring the instrument, I think. And I think when I look at the North Africans or the Indians, I take encouragement that there are alternatives to what it's generally used for. I'm not copying a North African tradition. I'm just saying, well, it's there, I can experiment with it. And that's really how far I've got with that, really. Also, I'm trying different tunings as well because I don't use the standard tuning. I tune it down to a *rabel*, which is a North Spanish tuning, which is basically like in a C, in a sort of a C tuning. So it's a lot deeper. And I'm also thinking about tuning up to a cello tuning. Yeah. And then it's a lot different on the fingers as well. So it's very elastic. It's not so tight. So maybe I can do things with that as well.

CF: With the strings, like the violin strings or putting some more heavier strings?

P2: No, just... Yeah, I just want to try with the normal violin strings.

CF: You can squeeze a fourth into the...? I mean, it's still responding, even a fourth below.

P2: Yeah. Yeah, it does. I mean, because I'm not a violin player, I don't know what is the feel, really, of a properly tuned violin. I'm coming at it in a new way, really, because I don't have a

background of knowing what it is I'm learning for the first time. And yeah... so... I realized I was... how to say... because of this nonsense with the left-handed thing, that no teacher is willing to teach me. So I go online and I find a young Arab boy who plays in a North African style. And I think, OK, I don't understand the word you're saying, but I can look at you and I can see how you bow and I can see how you finger, and I think, well, why not tune it down? Why not? Because I'm creating a style for myself, so why not tune it down? There's nobody telling me not to tune it down. There's nobody telling me not to hold it like this or in different ways. It's like creating something for yourself. But that freedom again comes back... I'm not constrained by tradition, which in the past, when you learn, for example, the Turkish ney, you are fixed in a tradition. You don't go out of it. And I guess classical musicians have the same constraints on them, which is not true in folk music or rock music.

CF: What type of music do you compose? As a composer, is it contemporary music? Do you use your folk knowledge?

P2: It's a bit of all that. I like improvisation, so a lot of my compositions come out of improvisation. It also comes out of the instruments I'm composing on. Quite recently, I'm doing a lot with semi-modular synths, and I just basically play, experiment... I use MIDI a lot with the synths. With the ney, I do a lot of improvisation. With the pipes, not so much, actually. Again, we're playing Northumbrian pipes. In a word, it's very rigid. There isn't a lot of experimentation on the Northumbrian pipes. They play traditional music, and that's it, really. There's not so much modern compositions, and I think that's because of the people who play them. It's very rooted in traditional music. The ney is very experimental. Modular synths are very experimental, so it really depends on the instrument and what I'm doing. Strangely enough, I was mixing the styles up this morning. I was using traditional music. At university, I did a lot of this stuff of mixing styles of contemporary music and traditional music. I've gone back to that recently. It's a bit of both, really.

CF: Why the ney is experimental? What drives you to experiment with the ney rather than with another instrument?

P2: The tradition of the ney is experimental in nature. There's a big part of Turkish classical music is experimentation. When you're experimenting, you're starting off in a certain maqam, and then you're modulating or whatever you're doing, but it is part of the tradition. So when I say I'm experimenting, it's actually I'm being very traditional, really.

CF: So rooted in improvisation.

P2: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

CF: Well, I'm more or less the same as well. I mean, with the bagpipes, very rarely I use it in contexts that are not the traditional one. I very rarely play music that is not traditional music.

P2: Right.

CF: But for me it's mostly the fact that I learned into the social setting of making music, which is... I think we talked about this, the fact that music is sound only half of it. The other half is where

the sound is made or with whom. So... yeah... I have this issue of playing a concert... like the concert setting with the bagpipes. It's more of a physical relation with music and space and the people around because you play in between the people and you play for the musicians, for the singers, you play for the dancers. And it's like a human component that I can't find in the concert setting. And I'm fine with the saxophone for that. I mean, I really like it, the concert setting. Jump on stage, play and everything. But with the bagpipe, I really have to make a strong effort to overcome the absence of that human social component.

P2: Yeah, I agree. I was thinking about that and sometimes I think it's because there's no, it's just like a monotone frequencies. I mean, it's not quiet, it's not loud. It's just this bandwidth of... And you can only do so much with that. Whereas a sax or a ney, you've got dynamics, you've got loud, soft, also, and everything in between. Whereas the bagpipe, you've just got this monotone pitch. And there's only a certain amount you can do with that. You're just left with your fingers, basically. What you can do with your fingers is, that's about it with a bagpipe. Vibrato, staccatos, whatever else, but you're limited. And I mean, I'm actually working on an improvisation piece on the Northumbrian. And yeah, I mean, you're so limited. Sometimes I think, let's put it down and pick up another instrument. Why am I searching for a certain thing on a Northumbrian pipe, which it's not really made for. I think the bagpipes are made for a certain type of scenario, situation, music, genre. And I know that's widened over the years, especially with revivals. There has been a new way of looking at it, but it's still pretty traditional. It's still yeah, I don't know, like an imagined, it's for dancing or it's on hillsides. You know what I mean? It's not in a concert setting or a philharmonic orchestra setting. It hasn't changed, you know what I mean? Whereas the sax, the sax has so many different genres of music. Clarinets, guitars, you name it, it's all... But the bagpipe, not really.

CF: Well, my journey into experimenting... I've always been into improvisation, into free improvisation and everything. But my entry point to contemporary music, more or less, was the bagpipes. But actually bringing the constraints of the bagpipe to the saxophone. The absence of dynamics, the absence of breath interruption, the absence of... the technique itself. The fact that you have the fingers and it's all about the fingers. So even with the saxophone, then you have no other resources but making it interesting through the fingers. And for that reason, like this first work, I entitled Bad Habits because it was a way of bringing the habits of the bagpipe to the saxophone who's not made for that, so they're extremely bad habits in that context.

P2: But with your zampona, you have harmonies, you have the possibility of harmony.

CF: Well, it's very constrained as well. You have fifth, you have that relation... it's not... tonic and dominant, even if they don't make sense in that context, because it's just fifth or fourth, it depends on which side you look at it.

P2: Right.

CF: But yeah, in some cases, with some instruments, you can sort of fake a fourth degree, but it's not entirely sounding as a subdominant. It's more of a, yeah... you have... also in that regard... you have to deal with a very limited harmonic space, which is another constraint you have, which is fantastic. I mean, for me, both for the bagpipe in traditional settings and for the saxophone, when you bring over the habits.

P2: Yeah, yeah. But... I mean, when I think of experimentation and stuff like the Galician *gaita* and the Irish *guillian* pipe, they've really... they've pushed the bounds of what tradition was, right? They're still constrained about, I mean, both of those instruments, they can play like semitones, whereas maybe like my Northumbrian can't, yeah, we're kind of fixed like that. But I also see the Galician and also the Irish as a completely different instrument now to what maybe your instrument is and what my instrument is, which are still quite constructed traditionally. The *gaita*, the Galician *gaita* anyways, is such a different animal now. The technology that's gone into it has made all the different drone tunings and all this stuff and some of the Irish pipes, the two octaves and whatever else. And yeah, I think it's unfair to say that the bagpipe that we play hasn't evolved because it hasn't. You know what I'm trying to say is that we're still stuck in the past in many ways because it's traditional, whereas we have to evolve the instrument to evolve the music.