

Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCAt)

An Interview with Stephen Dodgson

Pamela Nash

Stephen Dodgson has composed for almost every instrumental genre, his works for the guitar having brought him particular notice. However, Dodgson has also earned a place in 20th Century harpsichord history and he has probably the longest and most productive association with the harpsichord of any living composer. His affinity with the instrument has been nurtured by the developments in the harpsichord world over the last forty years, and his output now comprises 49 works, both solo and ensemble.

In my capacity as a harpsichordist and performer of contemporary music, I regard Dodgson as a singularly gifted champion of the harpsichord whose works should have wider recognition. His strength of feeling and depth of intuition for the instrument produces writing that is wholly idiomatic; his economy of line, clarity of voicing, control of texture, and dynamic rhythmic treatment are always expressed in ways that bring the harpsichord to life.

I asked Dodgson about his work with the instrument, and about his philosophy on contemporary harpsichord matters.

PN Is your penchant for the harpsichord partly a practical one: an outcome of being exposed to the instrument in your working environment?

SD I always seem to respond to its rhythmic clarity, and the vividness of texture and spacing. Perhaps 'living with harpsichords' quickens this response, but it's certainly not the cause of it.

PN Can you recall your first encounter with the harpsichord?

SD I can pinpoint it exactly. It was an afternoon in early summer 1955, when Stanislav Heller introduced me to Thomas Goff and his instruments with the definite aim that I should become interested in composing for him and for them.



Photo Courtesy of Radio-France

PN How did marriage to harpsichordist and Couperin expert Jane Clark foster your appreciation?

SD It quickly extended my knowledge of the repertoire and this has subtly infected my perception of the instrument itself.

PN Are there particular works that have provided the inspiration and impetus to compose for the harpsichord?

SD At the start, Scarlatti was uppermost. Then it broadened out; the inspirational factor has been a generalised one of character, not so much deriving from one specific work.

PN With the exception of a few pieces such as the Falla and Martin *Concertos*, harpsichord music before 1950 was either a sort of adjunct to the piano repertoire and impractical to play, or it was a pastiche of old idioms. You were one of the first to break these molds by writing true and characteristic music for the harpsichord: were you prompted by the burgeoning interest in the harpsichord in the 1950's, and by the new generation of players who were pursuing modern harpsichord repertoire?

SD I was a lot less aware than your question supposes. I just leapt in excitedly. But it happened to coincide with the explosion of interest among players and makers alike. George Malcolm, Stanislav Heller, Antonio Saffi were very encouraging. They liked what I wrote and played it.

PN You have been an observer of the harpsichord revival from those early days of your career; has your harpsichord music reflected the changes and developments in the instrument during the past 40 or so years?

SD I believe the evolution of the instrument is actually reflected in what I've written — with the 'classical' instrument steadily in the ascendant. Going back where I began is unthinkable.

PN Has the harpsichord been a technical factor in your development as a composer? Has it influenced the ways you write for other instruments?

SD It occupies a place all of its own in my thinking. Which is why I am jealous of being as idiomatic as possible in my approach. But because I value economy of means in everything I write, and an 'open space' approach is an essential factor in good harpsichord writing (in any century!) I'm sure there has been some cross-over influence.

PN Your harpsichord music is very rewarding to play, the main reason being that its style and idiom coincide very logically and happily with the harpsichord's character. This enables the player to make the music speak easily and directly. How does this work; do your ideas originate at the

harpsichord? How do you consider technical things like handshifts and fingering in your composing?

SD I never take something new to the harpsichord until I'm pretty certain of it musically. I then find I may here and there want to move up or down an octave — and leave out still a few more notes than I'd been crossing out the week before.

Handshifts and fingerings can actually be exciting things in harpsichord writing, because integral to the result in phrasing and attack. Some ideas have actually originated in this way: for example, *Invention Set 5, no. 3*. (Figure 1)



PN You also have a very strong symbiotic relationship with the guitar. Your harpsichord music seems to demonstrate how close the relationship is between the guitar and the harpsichord, and some of your ideas are found in the repertoires of both instruments. Do they have similar limitations that you can treat in the same ways?

SD Of course, harpsichord and guitar must both have their limitations. One has heard music on each of them which palpably didn't suit. But there's so much that can be written on each successfully, I've never found it profitable to think about limitations. Rather, I've always preferred going for it positively, trying to develop an instinct for what will succeed and give the performer satisfaction.

PN Combining harpsichord and guitar in *Duo Concertante* and *Dialogues* must have been uniquely difficult.

SD When asked to write for harpsichord and guitar together, I simply couldn't persuade myself it could work. But Rafael Puyana and John Williams insisted it did, so I took courage in my hands, and as I worked began to believe in it more and more.

PN Because their timbres are at once similar and different, how did you reconcile them, both in off-setting them soloistically, and in combining them homogeneously?

SD The fascination is because they are similar yet different. My object was to make them homogeneous here, and by contrast very separated in other places; figuration, spacing are important factors; how to devise dialogues that bring out different facets in the relationship. Then there was the excitement of finding a dramatic structure to give such colorings purpose.

PN You often end a phrase with an octave unison or an open 5th, which is very idiomatic for plucked instruments where chords can actually sound louder without the 3rd (for example, the ending of the *Duo Concertante*, where it sounds as though there are several guitars and harpsichords playing!) You also juxtapose thick voiced harmonies of 3rds with open 5ths or unisons a lot, which seems to have to do with accentuating the pulse, and with rhythmical stress and energy. The notes often seem subservient to the pulse, as in Scarlatti. (Figure 2: *Invention Set 3, no. 3*)

Invention, Set 3/3 : Fig. 2



SD Agreed! This is certainly something I learned from Scarlatti. Rhythmic stress does indeed require additional notes. In cadential situations the big bare intervals appeal through their primary force.

PN Would you say there are other significant parallels between Scarlatti's harpsichord writing and your own? For example: in the use of harmonic texture: in leaving out the 3rd of the

chord and opening out the last chord in a progression to an octave or 5th: the use of an ornament on the off-beat: the tied chord on the last beat or the half-beat, which gives a syncopated weight or accent, significantly on the anacrusis. The use of rhythm and timing to create drama and suspense in the way the music breathes and is sometimes suspended is also similar. Although Scarlatti was specifically concerned with emulating flamencan rhythm on the harpsichord, your music seems to function on the same level as it too explores the harpsichord's ability to dance and 'swing'. Are these reasonable comparisons?

SD Yes — to my mind they are very close indeed to my way of going about it, and you're right to point out my penchant for the anacrusis accent, perhaps with an ornament for extra emphasis. (Figure 3: *Invention Set 3, no. 4*)

Invention, Set 3/4 : Fig. 3



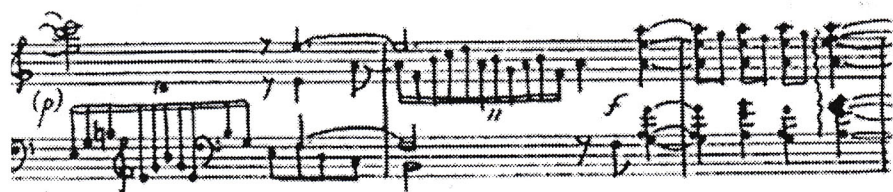
PN It is often said that there is an English quality about your music in general. What is it do you think that gives this impression?

SD I think I'm just very English — full stop!

Dodgson's use of dynamics (before *Inventions/Set 4*) is very economical for the harpsichord, which adds to the practicality of his music on the classical-type instrument. He has gone from using standard

dynamics, to registration dynamics, to no dynamics at all with Set 4 of the *Inventions*. A decade later in the most recent 5th Set, all expression marks are eschewed to leave 'just the notes'. The dynamic and expressive feeling in the music has always been intrinsic, in the baroque sense; very often, a marking of 'p' or 'f' is reflected in the notes themselves, in a shift to a different tessitura, or a change of texture, pace or harmonic rhythm. To then add the registration is merely an accentuation of the inherent musical dynamics. (Figure 4: *Invention Set 3 no. 1*)

Invention, Set 3/1 : Fig. 4



PN Could you explain the evolution of the dynamic treatment in the *Inventions*? In some of the earlier writing where the registration dynamics cannot be realised on the classical harpsichord, are you happy for the player to revise them?

SD I may have been reasonably consistent about dynamic markings at any one time, but, overall, I think there's no consistent development. At first I only thought in terms of 2-manual instruments. In general therefore the *f* & *p* invite a registration change, or an addition/subtraction of 4ft or coupler. By the time of Set 5 I'd become concentrated on making all the coloring arise from the music itself, with the ambitious aim that the whole set could succeed on a single register throughout without seeming monochrome. In settling for 'just the notes' notation I'd convinced myself anything else would be a distraction. I actually want to appeal to the imagination of the player! And this naturally applies too to those spots where my notified changes cannot be realised on the instrument being used.

PN Have you also dispensed with the use of accents? In your earlier writing the accent or [-] tenuto dash is often poignant as an indication of the rhythmic intent, or the importance of a note. And although accent in the tonal sense (as on the piano) cannot be realised on the harpsichord, in some ways the spirit of it can be: for example as an agogic accent, or a tenuto or *inégaie* form of accent.

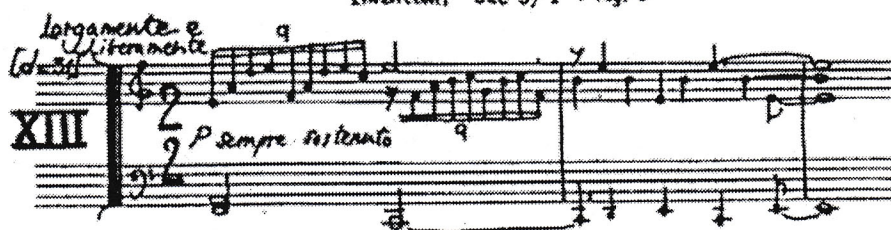
SD In general I'm a great supplier of accent signs, but more and more I question their relevance for the harpsichord. I'm also a great one for beaming notes according to their accentual grouping, and allowing these to criss-cross with the metrical organisation. This dispenses with most of any remaining need for accent signs. But who can deny the psychological impact of a *Sforzando* where the intention is dramatic? So I don't promise never to use accent marking in the future.

PN You seem to have almost phased out the use of mixed meters as well: why is this?

SD Modern music has often done itself disservice with over-complexity of time-signature and incessant change. The simpler the notational method the better. Constant change tends to result in constant choppiness in performance; OK if that's the purpose, but it's really never my purpose. Therefore I've a preference for the basic 3/4 4/4 6/8 standard and let the more capricious rhythmic elements fly about, since this is an inducement to continuity. If I can get the music to look simpler than it actually is, I take a pride in it.

Today's baroque, almost 'vocal' approach to playing the harpsichord contrasts strongly with the generic pianistic approach of the old school of harpsichord playing, but although piano technique is not desirable for early repertoire, the 20th Century is a different context. Some modern harpsichord works will sound basically the same regardless of the source of technique used to play them, but there are instances in Dodgson's works where real harpsichord sensibilities in the performer can be important. For example, *Invention Set 3, no. 1* (Figure 5) is

Invention, Set 3/1 : Fig. 5

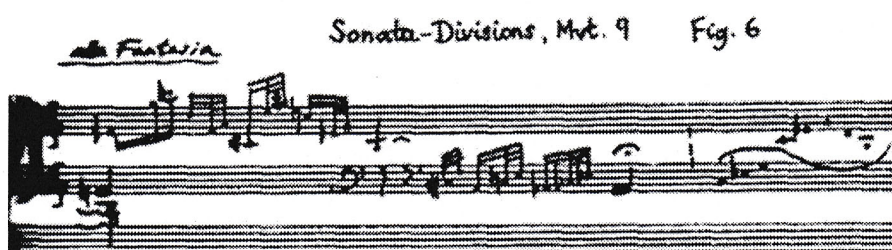


a very expressive piece, improvisatory in feel, and it could be seen in the light of the unmeasured prelude. It is marked 'largamente e liberamente' and 'sempre sostenuto'. This can be expressed on the harpsichord by overholding the notes of the broken chords and by 'arpeggiating' between voices. For example, to play the E and the C in Bar 1 fractionally broken is an example of harpsichord technique that gives a more expressive and resonant result, as well as a rhythmic emphasis by bringing out the duple time. The use of harpsichord articulations brings out phrasing and pulse, and this can be said for much of Dodgson's music where the voices are exposed, slow and melodic, and where harmonic and rhythmic emphasis are important.

PN In general, how relevant is it that your music is played by a true harpsichordist? Perhaps the issue of technical style is less important when the right musician is playing it, regardless of their keyboard 'persuasion'?

SD As such, it's not so important; but I'm a bit upset if I find the player isn't as sensitive as I'd like to peculiarities of harpsichord sound. On the other hand, their keyboard persuasion can mean an overweening devotion to one of the tenets of 'performance practice'. I remember begging a continental harpsichordist to play a certain passage in my *Aulos Trio* with the hands together in place of the exaggerated displacement which so appealed to him; after which he was less keen to have my opinions.

PN The Fantasia movements in Set 5 and in *Sonata-Divisions*, and the unmeasured prelude style, seem to illuminate further the dichotomy between the piano and the harpsichord in your keyboard writing. (Figure 6: *Sonata-Divisions*)



SD I've developed an unmeasured style in writing for the piano too - but it's completely different. I love both instruments, but I do not let them meet!

PN In throwing off the last vestiges of 'piano writing' in your most recent harpsichord works, do you feel a greater sensitivity to the whole harpsichord aesthetic?

SD Yes: it's an important reason why I've gone on writing for it - the search for an elusive ideal - a modern music that is intrinsically harpsichord yet carries resonances of its historic past.

PN In writing for harpsichord in ensemble, what are the challenges in balancing the sonorities? For instance, how do you work round the predisposition of the harpsichord's treble register to get lost in ensemble?

SD I agree that the harpsichord changes its nature in ensemble, and each ensemble situation is unlike the others. In nearly every situation its sustaining power is eclipsed by all the naturally sustaining instruments. To obtain a balance, it's the handling of those instruments

which is the clue to success. Avoid the register where the harpsichord is to penetrate clearly; similarly avoid duplicating its busier figurations. Open spacing is always good; single notes rather than chords better for a held background.

Dodgson demonstrates in his *Arlington Concertante* that harpsichord sound can 'behave' very differently in a concerto context; it has a highly dramatic effect, sometimes of menace — particularly when re-entering with a burst of activity after a long rest. Dodgson projects this quality to compelling effect in his fondness for suspense and dramatic shifts of mood. Ornaments and fast arpeggiated movement are also fantastically effective inside a varied instrumental texture. (Figures 7 & 8)

PN With the denser instrumental texture of the concerto, there is a propensity for the harpsichord to lose its rhythmic power. How did you compensate for this, for example in *Arlington Concertante*: in particular, writing rhythmic stress into the harpsichord part? In what ways did the orchestration allow the harpsichord to cut through the texture, particularly in tutti passages?

SD *Arlington Concertante* was a challenge indeed,

Arlington Concertante Fig. 7

being on the face of it an impossible combination. There had to be an illusion of tutti, achieved by leaving 'holes' in spacing and rhythm for the soloist. The thematic ideas were shaped by this - a case of making a virtue out of a necessity. I must have a perverse streak, because I really enjoy that sort of situation!

Arlington Concertante : Fig. 8

PN What was the difference in your approach to scoring in *Concerto da Camera* in 1963? What were the reasons for its revision in 1979?

SD *Concerto da Camera* is scored for violas, cellos & d/bass only (I was thinking of the 6th Brandenburg); their natural compass exactly where the harpsichord has its soul. It was a long time before it came to performance, and by 1979 I acted to improve its sonority, its transparency, in

ways I knew little of when originally working at it.

Dodgson attended a week-long symposium of his harpsichord music in 1996 run by Southern Methodist University of Dallas. It was led by the organist and harpsichordist Larry Palmer who commissioned Dodgson's *Duo alla Fantasia* for harp and harpsichord in 1981. It featured masterclasses by the composer, and performances of *Inventions*, *Sonata-Divisions* and *Carillon* for two harpsichords.

PN What was it like to be studied and performed so intensively and by such a diverse group of keyboard players?

SD It was a new experience for me. I'd never previously thought of all my harpsichord music all at once, and was anxious about a good many of the earlier *Inventions*. Would they stand up to an intensive week? Would they fail to hold the attention of the participants? They were a very diverse group, in age and attainment. It was not only a true adventure for them, but it felt like one for me too - and I felt I'd been right to pursue harpsichord composition as long as I have.

PN As a composer, you must have an ideal in your mind of how a piece should come across in performance. Is it more rewarding to collaborate with the performer, for example in a masterclass format, or is hearing what a performer makes of the piece on their own terms equally valuable?

SD The most rewarding thing is the discovery that a performer has identified with what you've written, and found meaning and excitement in it. It actually adds to the interest if it's not identical with mine.

PN You have written for many different media, but you show a predilection for non-mainstream 'uncommercial' instruments and ensemble combinations. The *Duo Concertante* for Guitar and Harpsichord, for example, while demonstrating that this is a fascinating medium, is still a relatively uncharted territory. Few players after Rafael Puyana and John Williams have explored the harpsichord and guitar ensemble, not least because of a dearth of major works like the *Duo Concertante*. Then there are the limitations

~~I~~ Distribution and publication etc: doesn't it ~~therefore~~ deliver rather a small return on your ~~investment~~? Or is it more important to you to ~~follow~~ your nose for a particular medium, regardless of its marketability?

SD Don't forget that the larger part of what I've written for both guitar and harpsichord has been at specific players' request. It's not just my predilection; it's my willingness to be led where the prospect seems interesting. I should probably give more attention to marketability than I do and you are of-course right on the general point!

PN Although there is a segment of the classical audience which still associates the harpsichord with unflattering antiquated recordings, it seems significant that harpsichord aficionados were often converted to the instrument by these early renditions; was it because one was listening without judgement or criterion, and so the spirit of the music came through regardless?

SD Yes. The 20th century history of the harpsichord is every way as fascinating as the original hundred years from circa 1660. Those early renditions from the dawn of the revival will never lose their fascination, and are so illuminating as to all that has happened since.

PN Although the criteria for judging harpsichord performance style has changed dramatically since the dawn of the revival, there are still anomalies in current opinion when it comes to certain performers. Landowska's style, for example, is at odds with today's widely-held maxims of performance practice, and yet there is an almost universal reluctance to evaluate her style objectively.

SD To evaluate Landowska's style objectively is hard, not just because she was so strong and individual herself, but almost as much because our standpoint is constantly shifting as to what is or is not a 'good style'.

PN Most people, including yourself, now feel that there is nothing of any value the pedal harpsichord (such as the Pleyel or the Neupert) can do that the classical harpsichord can't. And whilst it must be said that the tone and

responsiveness of the classical instrument bears it little comparison, would we do better not to try to relate these two species at all, and simply to preserve the role of the pedal harpsichord as it was? The instant registration, and the colorations and combinations therein can add up to 30 or more on some instruments, and there are certain pieces where this can still come into its own. For example, in Elliott Carter's *Sonata for Flute, Oboe, Cello and Harpsichord*, the treatment of the other instruments' dynamics and phrasing, and indeed the texture and form of the music revolve around the tone color possibilities of a pedal harpsichord.

SD The pedal harpsichord is part of history. There has to be a preservation order before we lose them all! I heard a claim the other day that only two Pleyels remain in the UK in anything like working condition. Elliott Carter's *Sonata* is part of history as much as Ligeti's *Continuum* and Poulenc's *Concert Champêtre*.

PN Aside from works where range of volume is a condition of the music, could pedal instruments still play a part do you think in championing new music?

SD The classic, reproduction harpsichord IS the harpsichord of today; I suspect new music itself is out-of-date if it fails to recognise the march of time.

PN But are there pieces which could be considered equally viable on both instruments?

SD The Falla *Concerto* sounds wonderful on the classical harpsichord; but you learn something about its historical place hearing it on a Pleyel. The application of 'authenticity' doesn't only apply to olden time.

PN Players like George Malcolm always seemed to be compensating for the fact that the harpsichord wasn't the piano; perhaps his resultant 'hybrid' style is another example of 20th Century 'authenticity', particularly on the Thomas Goff harpsichords, since these were hybrid instruments anyway? Specifically, wasn't Malcolm in fact serving Goff's vision of the perfect harpsichord, along with composers like yourself?

SD The Malcolm/Goff interdependency was unique. An adequate answer to this question needs a chapter to itself! Goff was undoubtedly ambitious with regard to his instruments being in the forefront of public attention - and they were!

PN Do you think that the harpsichord still remains relatively obscure to the general public?

SD I think there's complete public awareness of the harpsichord, but little knowledge of why it sounds the way it does, and only a little more of the reason for its existing today.

PN How should we raise awareness of the harpsichord in the contemporary music field?

SD A good first step would be for contemporary music to understand better what the contemporary harpsichord is - to regard it as more than merely a timbre.

PN You have a strong vantage point from which to view today's harpsichord scene, and to reflect on the changes you have witnessed. Do you feel there is a certain directness and simplicity lacking in some of today's harpsichord playing: that the currently received ideas under the banner of performance practice have had an intimidating effect on artistic intuition?

SD Yes. The currently received ideas on performance practice seem to me largely outmoded. They were too academic in formulation to withstand the onrush of musical curiosity.

PN There has also resulted a sort of cloning of playing style which appears to be more endemic in the US and in other parts of Europe than in Britain. There seems to be more independence of style and more individuality among British players. It is due partly perhaps to the absence of a 'school' of British harpsichord playing, but is it also that we have a greater *sang-froid* and directness of character — a 'no-nonsense' objectivity towards music in general?

SD Yes, I think we are a little more sceptical, more suspicious of dogma. So, there again, you see how British I am!

PN 20th Century music is not a medium for demonstrating 'performance practice', as the context does not engender the same sorts of freedoms as early music does, and there is no assumed historical agenda other than the composer's own. The performer has to be open to this and technically versatile; in your own harpsichord music, there is a need for great clarity and technical precision and little margin for liberties within the style. Is this part of the question of why contemporary music is ignored by harpsichordists?

SD Perhaps so. If I take your question aright, the 'Performance Practitioner' finds his interpretative role diminished by the exact requirements of a contemporary score, and so retreats to his beloved old masters, who (he believes) give him this freedom. Something in the argument, but a bit simplistic I think.

PN Do you see it as being rooted politically in the old factions that formed in the harpsichord world: those who endorsed contemporary harpsichord music were 'politically incorrect' because their wider musical concern was seen to detract from the cause?

SD Rather more in this argument. Dabbling in contemporary music is avoided by some players (but only some!) as a dilution of their application to the old masters - that their seriousness as 'specialists' is undermined thereby. The low-pitch factor plus meantone tuning also play their part in creating a chasm between old and modern music. A composer may want to write for the harpsichord in ensemble, but may not want the partnering instruments to be baroque.

PN Has this chasm affected the harpsichord's credibility as a contemporary instrument in your view?

SD Not too much, for I'm convinced that the contemporary composition that shows strong and idiomatic insight into the harpsichord and its players as they actually are won't need to struggle for its champions. As to the public, that may take a bit longer.

Stephen Dodgson: Music for Harpsichord

Solo Harpsichord:

SIX INVENTIONS Set 1 1955
SIX INVENTIONS Set 2 1961
SIX INVENTIONS Set 3 1970
SIX INVENTIONS Set 4 1985
SIX INVENTIONS Set 5 1993
SONATA-DIVISIONS 1982

Two Harpsichords:

CARILLON 1967

Harpsichord and Guitar:

DUO CONCERTANTE 1968 (Max Eschig, Paris)
DIALOGUES 1976

Harpsichord and Harp:

DUO ALLA FANTASIA 1981

Violin and Harpsichord:

THE NEW TERPSICHORE Bk I 1995
THE NEW TERPSICHORE Bk II 1996

Recorder and Harpsichord:

WARBECK DANCES 1970
SHINE AND SHADE 1975

Oboe and Harpsichord:

SUITE IN D 1972 (Oxford University Press)

Solo Voices and Harpsichord:

QUATRE RONDEAUX de
CHARLES d'ORLEANS 1982
CHANSON de CROISADE 1982
THE SNAIL & THE BUTTERFLY 1990

Harpsichord in Chamber Music/Cantata:

VARIAZIONI CONCERTANTI 1970
(Fl/Ob/Vln/Vc & Hd)
LOVE'S MADNESS 1970
(Sop/Vln/Va/Vc & Hd)

Recorder, Guitar and Harpsichord:

HIGH BARBAREE 1999

BIOGRAPHY

Stephen Dodgson was born in London in 1924 and has lived there ever since. He was for many years a teacher of composition at the Royal College of Music in London, where he had himself been a student after the war. He has gone on to become one of Britain's most eminent and respected composers, and has produced a vastly diverse range of works. He has also been a prominent BBC radio broadcaster for the past 40 years, and has written scores for many major BBC drama productions.

Stephen Dodgson continues to develop his prolific career as a composer and is currently enjoying a resurgence of interest in his work through new commissions and recordings.

He is married to the harpsichordist and Couperin scholar, Jane Clark.