

AN
INTERVIEW
REVIEWED



John O'Loughlin

AN INTERVIEW REVIEWED

Or

MUSIC IN THE STUDY

By

John O'Loughlin

Of Centretruths Digital Media

CDM Prose

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CHAPTER ONE

After what seemed an eternity the taxi turned into Hampstead Lane, where it eventually came to a sudden halt outside a large detached house bearing the rather enigmatic name *Tonkarias* on a small metal plate dangling from above its front entrance. With a distinct feeling of apprehension, Anthony Keating, junior correspondent for the influential monthly publication *Arts Monthly*, climbed out of the taxi and, resting his black attaché case on the pavement, satisfied the driver's financial demands. Then, turning towards the house, he sighed as deeply as he had ever done at the prospect of what lay in store for him behind its impressive dark-green front door.

Picking up his attaché case, he stood for a moment seemingly undecided what to do. There was still time for him to turn back, resign from the magazine, and have done with this sort of apprehension once and for all! What rotten luck that Neil Wilder had suddenly gone down with influenza and been obliged to withdraw from his professional commitments all week! How disconcerting to be informed by the editor that, other correspondents being ill, on holiday, or otherwise engaged, he would have to deputize for the sick man and interview the composer instead! As if he had nothing better to do than interview someone whose music he had little knowledge or understanding of, never mind inclination towards. Really, things were becoming more than a trifle farcical at the offices of *Arts Monthly* these days!

He pushed open the plain metal gate and slowly walked up the gravel path towards his professional destiny. He didn't have the courage to back out of the assignment, after all. It would only further complicate matters to find oneself being pompously lectured at by a cunning Nicholas Webb and induced to retract one's resignation because, in his editorial estimation, the magazine couldn't afford to lose such a talented young correspondent at such an inconvenient time, since people like Keating weren't easy to find, etc. Besides, what would he do if he didn't slave for Webb five days a week? What else *could* he do?

He stood in front of the front door and, with stoical resignation to his fate,

pressed its bell a couple of times. Almost immediately, a loud bark issued from somewhere deep inside the interior of the house, followed by a dutiful scampering of paws, as a large dog bounded towards the door and, drawing-up just short of a head-on collision with it, began to bark on a still fiercer note, until the sharp sound of a woman's voice served to create a temporary lull in its aggression. "Be quiet, Ludwig!" the woman shouted again, as the dog, a golden labrador (and not a rottweiler or pit bull terrier, as Keating had at first feared), renewed its barking at sight of the caller. She gave the brute a sharp slap on the nose and held it by the collar to restrain its aggression. Then, turning to her visitor, whose attention was largely focused on the overzealous animal, she apologized for any inconvenience.

"Oh, that's nothing!" Keating politely assured her, smiling apprehensively in self-defence. He gripped the handle of his attaché case more firmly and then informed her who he was and for what purpose he had come, as previously arranged.

"Ah, do come in!" cried the grey-haired lady, ushering him, with her free hand, into a brightly-painted, elongated hall. "My husband has been expecting you. What name was it again?"

"Er, Anthony Keating."

"Right! Just wait here a moment whilst I tell him you've arrived." She smiled reassuringly and, dragging a reluctant Ludwig along by the collar, shut him into an adjoining room. Then she headed down the hallway and disappeared round a corner at the far end. Ludwig barked gruffly a few times from his new place of confinement, but his initial aggression had considerably subsided, and soon he grudgingly resigned himself to the presence of a stranger in the house by growling a little for form's sake, as it were, and then relapsing into a brooding silence.

Meanwhile Keating had taken out a small notebook, which contained a number of hastily scribbled questions which he intended to put to the composer in due course – assuming his illustrious quarry would be willing to answer them, of course. Unfortunately, they hadn't been compiled by him but by Neil Wilder and, since he wasn't particularly familiar with Wilder's methods of conducting interviews, he considered it worth his

while to check them over once more, even though he had already checked them over in the taxi. But before he could get beyond the fourth question, Mrs Tonks duly reappeared in the hall to inform him that her husband would be ready in a minute. "He's just completing some work on the garden," she explained, as she led Keating down the hallway and into a large room to the right, which gave on to the back garden. Sure enough, there, no more than thirty yards away, stood Howard Tonks with a watering can in his hands and a bed of bright red roses directly in front of him.

"Would you like a tea or coffee while you wait?" asked Mrs Tonks, offering her guest an armchair.

"A tea would be fine, thanks," he replied, waiting until her plump middle-aged figure had vacated the room before, abandoning his seat, he ventured to tiptoe towards the French windows. He didn't want to go too close to them in case the composer, who had his back to the house, suddenly turned round and caught him staring through them. But from where he stood he could just about discern the body of a bikini-clad young woman lying on an air bed a few yards to the right of the rose bushes. Overcoming his timidity, he tiptoed a couple of paces closer to the windows to get a better view of her and discovered, to his additional satisfaction, that there were in fact two young women lying side-by-side on adjacent air beds – one in a pale-blue bikini, the other in a pink one. He almost whistled to himself at the sight of them, for they appeared to be highly attractive. That, at any rate, was the case so far as their bodies were concerned; for he couldn't, as yet, see much of their faces. Perhaps if he tiptoed a yard or two closer...? But at that very moment the composer turned towards the two bikini-clad sunbathers to his right and stared down at the nearest of them – a development which served to freeze Keating in his spying tracks!

Slightly disappointed, he turned away from the garden and, catching sight of a medium-sized portrait of Bela Bartók above the mantelpiece, gazed up at it with mild curiosity. But Bartók had never been one of his favourite composers, so he quickly lost interest in the portrait and turned away from it in disgust. He soon discovered, however, that there were some other portraits in the room as well – a large one of Stravinsky on the wall opposite and, on the wall facing the garden, two smaller portraits of what appeared to be Ives and Varèse respectively. It was evident that Mr Tonks liked to be surrounded by his musical precursors or heroes when he

composed. Perhaps they prevented him from losing faith in himself, or precluded any untoward frivolity from marring the austere atmosphere of his study? Standing in the middle of the room with the oily gazes of these particular composers upon him wasn't exactly the most uplifting of experiences, however, for Anthony Keating and, as though in a determined effort to break the spell which their stern miens had momentarily imposed upon him, he smiled to himself in seeming defiance of everything they stood for.

Taking mental leave of the portraits, he turned his attention upon an open music score resting against the stand of a Steinway grand piano, which stood, at that moment, with its ivory keys bathed in bright sunlight. He stared down at it with a slightly puzzled expression on his face, since the many lines and dots scrawled across its cream-coloured surface presented him with one of the strangest-looking musical hieroglyphs he had ever beheld. Should he attempt to decipher it? He bent closer to the manuscript and managed to make out the words "Sonata in indeterminate key for solo performer" above the first treble staff on the left-hand page, followed immediately underneath by "At one's own pace". With mounting amusement he scanned the treble bars of the first line, which contained a profusion of quavers, semiquavers, and demisemiquavers, and, calling upon the remnants of his youthful education in music, attempted to distinguish between the various notes on display there. Tentatively he groped his way deeper into the score, smiling to himself and, in spite of his contemptuous attitude, almost feeling proud that he could still differentiate between quavers and semiquavers, crotchets and minims. But there were many notes and signs there which neither the eccentricity of his school music teacher nor the concentricity of his private piano tutor of several years ago had intimated the existence of, and he wondered, while persisting in his investigations, whether he was really looking at music at all? However, just as he was about to extend his gratuitous curiosity to line five of the treble staff, the door burst open and in came Mrs Tonks bearing a heavy-looking tea tray in her hands. Startled out of his preoccupation with the score, Keating blanched at sight of her, then blushed when she smiled at him and apologized for her husband's delay. "Unfortunately, he's had to go upstairs to wash and change after his gardening," she explained, placing the copiously stocked tea tray on a small coffee table to the right of the piano. However, with nothing more to say on that subject, she pointed to a plate of assorted biscuits and informed him that he needn't feel obliged to eat any of

them if he didn't want to, it simply being a custom of hers to serve biscuits with tea.

Politely thanking her for her generosity, Keating reseated himself and, when she had withdrawn again after pouring him some Chinese tea, selected a pink-topped biscuit from the plate and devoured it in a couple of ravenous bites. He was really quite pleased to savour the taste of a sweet biscuit, for he hadn't eaten one in about six years and had virtually forgotten such things still existed. Washing it down with a mouthful of tea, he turned towards the garden, where the mid-afternoon sun, shining high in the right-hand pane of glass, momentarily caught his attention. Its brightness quickly dazzled him, however, making him see sparks in the air as he averted his gaze, but it served to remind him of the sunbathers outside and, prompted by a lustful desire to spy on them afresh, he abandoned his armchair for the second time and, with cup in hand, tiptoed across to the French windows again.

To his surprise he discovered that the sunbather in the pink bikini had risen from her horizontal position and was applying suntan lotion to her shins, massaging them slowly and steadily – first the left and then the right. As she bent forwards Keating noted, with especial avidity, the curvaceous outlines of her ample breasts, snugly nestled in the cotton material supporting them. They appeared to hang loosely and to swing gently backwards and forwards, like a pendulum, with her undulating movements. He was almost hypnotized by them. But what if she were suddenly to look up and catch him standing there in such an uncompromisingly voyeuristic position, teacup in hand and mouth hanging open like a dog in heat? He felt a reluctant misgiving at the thought and would have abandoned his curiosity there and then, had not the subtle pleasure resulting from it induced him to stay. Lifting the china teacup to his lips, he took a few absent-minded sips of tea and continued to stare at the young woman, whose long fair hair, having adjusted itself to her movements, was now partly obscuring his view of her breasts. But as though in compensation for this intrusion, the other young woman suddenly raised herself from *her* back and said something to her companion. Almost immediately, she unclipped her pale-blue bikini top and exposed a pair of the most ravishing-looking breasts Keating had ever seen! In his excitement the young correspondent almost spilt some tea down the front of his shirt. For he had been about to take another sip of it when the unclipping took place and had

quite forgotten to adjust the angle of his cup, which he held an inch or two in front of his quivering lips. And now he was half-hoping that the informal striptease act wouldn't stop there; that she would remove the lower part of her bikini as well when, to his dismay, she turned over onto her stomach and lay with head turned towards the rose bushes, while her companion applied suntan lotion to her back. He took another sip of tea and had time to note the seductive contours of her cotton-covered buttocks before a deep male voice, sounding a few yards behind him, made him start violently awake from his self-indulgent preoccupations. Turning sharply round, he recognized the silver-haired figure of Howard Tonks advancing towards him with outstretched hand. He almost dropped the teacup in his embarrassment, as the composer's gesture of introduction obliged him to transfer it to his left hand.

"So sorry to have kept you waiting Mr ... er ... er ..."

"Keating," he obliged, blushing to the roots of his hair. Was that irony he saw in the man's eyes? His right hand went limp as it encountered the firm grasp of the composer's predatory handshake. He hardly dared look into his face.

"The weather has been so fine recently that I simply had to water the flowers today," Mr Tonks informed him with an ingratiating smile.

"Yes, I was admiring the roses when you came in here," explained Keating, who wondered whether this ruse might not serve to justify his presence at the French windows.

The composer, having terminated his python-like handshake, directed his attention towards the garden and commented approvingly on the way his plants had thrived this year. Not only the roses, he ventured to stress, but the dahlias and fuchsias as well. And with an air of satisfaction he pointed to the respective beds in which the majority of those plants were reposing – the dahlias to the left of the garden and the fuchsias to the right. "You like fuchsias?" he asked, briefly turning towards the figure in profile at his side.

"Most beautiful," replied Keating, the consciousness of renewed embarrassment endowing his response with a degree of irrelevance which only served to embarrass him the more, insofar as the part of the garden the

fuchsias were to be found in caused one to look in the general direction of the two young women to the right of the roses, and the sight of them somehow implicated one in an opinion not wholly confined to plants! The tingling sensation beneath his skin was virtually at fever-pitch. "Yes, I'm very fond of fuchsias," he added, automatically stressing the noun, as though to preclude any possibility of ambiguity being inferred from his statement. And, resolutely, he kept his gaze riveted on the shrubs in question.

"Such charming things," opined Mr Tonks, as his eyes came to rest on the sunbathers. "Incidentally, in case you're wondering who those immodestly clad young females are, the one on the left is my daughter, Rebecca, and the one on the right is a friend of hers, a fellow-student from Music College by name of Margaret."

"Oh really?" exclaimed Keating, feigning surprise as best he could. One would have thought that he hadn't noticed them until then. His attention wavered and focused, wavered and focused again. And the tingling sensation beneath his skin actually reached fever-pitch.

"One can hardly blame them for taking advantage of the weather in such an unequivocal way," remarked the composer, smiling delicately. "Though they looked sufficiently well-tanned when they arrived back from the South of France the other day. It's a kind of addiction young people suffer from these days – call it tan-for-tan's sake. How long it will damn-well last, God only knows! But I shouldn't be particularly surprised if the next generation revert to the pallid complexions of their grandparents' and great-grandparents' generations, to the detriment, temporarily or otherwise, of such godforsaken places as St Tropez and the Costa del Sol. Then any attractive young woman with a well-tanned body will be considered a pariah, to be shunned from decent society."

Anthony Keating was wondering to what extent *his* red face was making *him* a pariah when the composer's next words, applying to the business at-hand, quickly cooled him down and restored it to something like its normal colour. Instantaneously the spell of fuchsias and breasts, buttocks and roses was broken, as he returned to the sober context of a correspondent for Arts Monthly who was there to interview the world-famous composer and conductor, Howard Tonks, on the important subject of his life and music.

"I was quite impressed by an article your magazine did on Berio a couple of months ago," continued Mr Tonks, turning away from the French windows and slowly walking towards his Steinway. "One felt that you had a genuine interest in the man."

Keating feigned a smile of gratitude on behalf of Neil Wilder, the author of the article in question, while feeling less than grateful for this allusion to something he hadn't even bothered to read, let alone write. There was certainly a genuine interest in the man so far as Wilder was concerned. But as for himself ... he hastened to change the subject and, since Mr Tonks was standing in front of the piano, ventured to suggest he had noted a Berio-like quality about some of the music in the score there which, out of idle curiosity, he had taken the liberty to scrutinize, shortly after entering the room.

"How interesting!" exclaimed Mr Tonks, eyeing his score in a detached manner. "In point of fact, this work is a little more complex than Berio."

He sat down on the velvet-cushioned piano stool and, positioning his fingers on the keyboard, informed Keating that he hadn't yet completed it, there being a number of bars in the last movement still to be composed. "But listen to this," he went on, and immediately commenced playing the opening bars of his new piano sonata with obvious relish.

At first Keating's reaction was one of dismay for having blundered with his reference to Berio, made on the spur-of-the-moment and without any genuine conviction. But as Mr Tonks proceeded with his playing, the young correspondent's attitude became tinged with amusement until, by the time the composer had got to the middle of the first movement, he was obliged to grit his teeth together in an effort to prevent himself from exploding with laughter. Really, this was becoming more than a trifle farcical; it was positively grotesque! Where, one might wonder, was the slightest intimation of genuine music among all this confusion of notes, this outbreak of diabolical cacophony? And why was it that a man who, only a short time ago, had given one the impression of being reasonably intelligent, should suddenly seem an imbecile – worse, a lunatic – as his fingers performed the most unbelievably strange antics on the keys? And not only his fingers but, to judge by this performance, his elbows and arms as well! For he had got to a section of the sonata which apparently

necessitated the simultaneous application of elbows and fingers! Keating almost bit his tongue.

"Oh, damn it!" groaned an irate composer as the technical demands of the 'complex' work suddenly got the better of him. "I've gone and messed it up again!" he complained, frowning down at his fingers with a look which might have suggested, to an impartial observer, that they alone were to blame for the mistake.

Despite efforts to retain a respectful silence, Keating was unable to prevent himself from sniggering slightly. Frankly, he would have been incapable of discerning a mistake at *any* stage of the performance simply because, to his mind, the whole damned thing was a mistake! It had been a mistake from the very first note!

"You see, I'm utilizing a technique here which requires the utmost concentration and is extremely difficult to perfect," revealed Mr Tonks, once he had recovered his aplomb to a degree which made it possible for him to articulate an explanation. "The chord clusters in this bar are dependent upon the elbows of both arms *as well as* the fingers of both hands, so the successful co-ordination of each is of the utmost importance in achieving the desired effect. Unfortunately, my left elbow struck a note adjacent to the ones specified in the score, while the middle finger of my right hand connected with a note reserved for the index finger," he confessed, leaning on the keys with elbows outstretched and fingers contorted in accordance with the exacting demands of the inner part of this particular chord cluster. He raised himself a little from the keyboard and slumped forwards, causing the Steinway to emit a violent discord. "There!" he cried, with an expression of unequivocal triumph on his bony face. "That's how it *should* have been played. After which one proceeds to another chord cluster formed in a similar way ..." He raised himself anew and slumped forwards to the dictates of the next cluster of chords, which somehow sounded even more violently discordant than the previous one.

Keating put a hand over his mouth, but the mirth he was attempting to stifle somehow succeeded in relieving itself through his nostrils instead. This being the case, he took a paper tissue from one of his front pockets and pretended to be blowing his nose. And when Mr Tonks produced yet another violent discord, he availed himself of the cover it afforded him to

give vent to his repressed amusement in the form of a series of low-key sniggers, which were successfully drowned by the noise coming from the piano.

"Fortissimo!" bellowed the composer, as he repeated the third elbow-finger chord with triumphant glee and lent on the keys for the duration of a minim. "Undoubtedly the most difficult bar of the entire movement!"

Keating wiped his eyes with a corner of the small paper tissue and mumbled something about hay fever before inquiring, in a less than respectful tone-of-voice, why it was necessary to utilize both fingers and elbows ,,,