

Joachim Steinheuer
Rohan de Saram

Conversations

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Preface

In 2006 Rohan de Saram was invited to give a solo cello recital during the biennial New Music Festival LINKS in Heidelberg. The general theme of that year's festival had been *Musiksprachengeflechte* (interweavings of musical languages) and the concerts centred around music by composers of both European and non-European biographical and musical background. It seemed an almost natural choice to ask Rohan de Saram to propose the programme for one of the concerts and play it himself. Not only is he one of the foremost cellists in the contemporary music scene, but coming from Sri Lanka and having made much of his career in the Western musical world, as well as playing both the violoncello and the Kandyan drum (one of the traditional Sri Lankan instruments), he shares in his own biography as a performing artist a pluricultural background with the composers the festival focused upon. His programme featured solo cello works by the Korean composers Isang Yun and Younghi Pagh-Paan, the Vietnamese composer Tôň Thât Tiêt, the two Indian composers Naresh Sohal and John Mayer and finally the *Sequenza XIV* by Luciano Berio which has sections based on Kandyan drum rhythms of Sri Lanka. Three of the pieces had been specifically written for him; in fact *Voyage* by Tôň Thât Tiêt had its world première in this concert.

It was on this occasion that I got to know Rohan de Saram personally, although I had been familiar with several of his recordings as a soloist and with the Arditti Quartet for many years. I was not only impressed once again by his extraordinary technical skills which make even the most difficult and demanding passages sound natural and musically convincing, but I was particularly struck by the entirely non-theatrical manner of his performance. There was not the slightest hint of artistic pose for its own sake; every single gesture seemed to be entirely in the service of the music he was playing. It was not a surprise that the concert ended with a standing ovation by the entire audience.

The idea for the conversations which would become the basis of the following chapters arose when Rohan de Saram came back to Heidelberg two years later to play for the opening concert of the next LINKS Biennale. He himself had proposed the theme for this year's festival, *Contemporary Music and Improvisation*, at the end of his previous concert as a subject worthy of more attention. Between the rehearsals and during the meals, I had the chance to get to know Rohan de Saram more closely. While talking to him, two things became more and more clear to me. The first was that his thinking is by no means confined to some specialized realms concerning his own instrument and its repertoire, but extends to a broad knowledge of and insight into manifold aspects of the music of various cultures,

performance practices of different periods as well as lively interests in literary, philosophical and religious questions. The second thing which occurred to me was that as a soloist, chamber musician and member of the Arditti Quartet for a very long period, during almost sixty years he has not only encountered, but also been in direct working contact with almost all of the significant composers of the second half of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century. One might say that from his particular focus he has experienced, witnessed and also actively participated in the musical history of the last decades from the inside view of a performing artist who has been and still is involved in bringing to life the most advanced innovations in contemporary music.

When I proposed to him that it would be worthwhile to write down his experiences, he told me that he would certainly not consider doing something of the kind himself, but that it needed somebody else, maybe a musicologist like me to do this. I accepted and we both agreed from the start that the aim of this book should be not primarily biographical, but that his musical experiences and his views on music should form the main focus. I felt that the form of conversations might be the most appropriate way to deal with the wide variety of subjects involved, and after some necessary research and preparations, this was what was decided.

The actual conversations took place at the end of August and the beginning of September 2009 in the small medieval Umbrian town of Panicale where Rohan de Saram gave a solo recital in the historical theatre as part of the annual festival *Musica Insieme*, created and directed by the Swiss composer Klaus Huber. Many thanks are due to both him and to Sabrina Caciotto from the Ufficio di Cultura di Panicale for their support of this project. During the many hours of recording sessions we enjoyed the view over the Lago di Trasimeno and the Tuscan and Umbrian hills and mountains from the balcony which is part of the flat that Silke Leopold owns in Panicale. Without the view and her excellent Italian cuisine these conversations might have been much less inspired.

Within a rather short time span the painstaking work of transcribing the entire series of our conversations from the recordings was done in a very reliable way by Diana Kupfer and already by October 2009 we were able to start editing the manuscript for publication. This consisted in transforming the spoken text into a version which also worked as a written text, without giving up the conversational character, in clarifying and sharpening many arguments and in incorporating many further details and pieces of information that were not available during the time of the conversations. In many cases composers and colleagues of Rohan de Saram had to be contacted directly when other sources were not available, many thanks to each of them for their support. The written recollections of his mother Miriam de Saram who in part stayed with her son in England and Italy during the 1950s and in her later years had planned to write a book on his career were especially useful in clarifying open questions regarding the early part of Rohan de Saram's life and career.

My special thanks go to his wife Rosie de Saram who actively participated both in the preparations and some parts of the editing. Many of her comments and suggestions were of great help and she supported the project in every possible way, not least in welcoming me into their home for a series of sessions of intense work on the manuscript over a period of more than two years. Special thanks also to Hermione and Jean-Pierre Lin; I enjoyed their generous hospitality during several of my visits to London to work on this book.

The first four chapters cover the earlier part of Rohan de Saram's career in chronological order, starting with his beginnings as a musician during his childhood in Sri Lanka, then called Ceylon (chapter 1), the phase of auditions in London, Paris and other places which would lead to a period of studies in Florence and Siena (chapter 2), an extended stay during the late 1950s and most of the 1960s in the varied and stimulating cultural atmosphere of Oxford (chapter 3), and the first decisive steps towards contemporary music during the 1970s after his move to London, with solo performances of music by Xenakis and various projects with the ensemble Dreamtiger (chapter 4). The later chapters do not aim at a chronological order: two of them cover the period of more than 28 years between 1977 and November 2005 during which Rohan de Saram was a member of the Arditto Quartet and focus on the vast and extremely varied repertoire of the Quartet as well as on aspects of the various new technical demands involved in playing this repertoire (chapter 5), and on the development of particular working methods during rehearsals and the contexts in which the Quartet appeared (chapter 6). One chapter is devoted to Rohan de Saram's musical work with other musicians both during the time he played in the Quartet and after he left it when these other collaborations would become more intense and multifaceted (chapter 7). The remaining chapters focus on different aspects of music and music making that are central to his repertoire, especially as a soloist, and to his thinking, dealing with some general issues in contemporary composition (chapter 8), his work with both contemporary composers of Asian descent and European composers who integrated ideas from the East in their own works (chapter 9), his experiences in improvising with musicians from very diverse musical backgrounds (chapter 10) and in the final chapter some general concerns regarding spirituality and music (chapter 11).

The preparation and publication of this book were made possible by the funding that was generously granted from the Cluster *Shifting Asymmetries Asia and Europe* at Heidelberg University, a broad research project of excellence financed by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG). The funding not only covered the expenses for some of the travelling and the transcription of the conversations, but also a larger part of the costs of publication. Without this financial aid, for which I would like to thank the Cluster committee and especially my colleague Dorothea Redepenning for supporting the application wholeheartedly, it would have been much more difficult to bring this book to conclusion. Many thanks also to Peter Mischung from the Wolke Verlag for his interest and belief in this project

even at an early stage, when he accepted the book in the programme of his publishing company, as well as for making possible the inclusion of a rather large number of photos and other graphics and for the editing and the final version of the manuscript for print. Last but not least I am very grateful to John Comiskey and Matthew Gardner for reading passages of this book at various stages and especially to Paul Tarling who annotated and carefully corrected the entire manuscript several times before publication.

Joachim Steinheuer
Heidelberg, November 2012



Rohan de Saram and Joachim Steinheuer in Edenkoben, 3 July 2011;
Photo: Silke Leopold