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**Hattie Butterworth:** Hello, and welcome to Things Musicians Don’t Talk About with your hosts, Hattie Butterworth.

**Rebecca Toal:** And me, Rebecca Toal.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Within our vibrant musical world, it can often feel that the struggles and humanity of musicians is lost and restricted.

**Rebecca Toal:** Having both suffered in silence with mental, physical, and emotional issues, we are now looking for a way to voice musicians’ stories, discuss them further, and to connect with the many others who suffer like we have.

**Hattie Butterworth:** No topic will be out of bounds as we are committed to raising awareness for all varieties of struggle.

**Rebecca Toal:** So, join me, Hattie, and guests as we attempt to bring an end to stigma by uncovering the things musicians don’t talk about.

[Music Break]

**Hattie Butterworth:** Hello, welcome or welcome back to Things Musicians Don’t Talk About. Today, it’s just me, Hattie on my own, sharing a conversation that I had with the fantastic composer Gavin Higgins. I met Gavin back in May to chat about his mental health journey, including his experiences living with both Tourette’s Syndrome and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder.

So, I actually found music myself out of my own childhood experiences, having intrusive thoughts and OCD. And so, I was really keen to meet Gavin once I discovered that he also had quite a similar experience in finding music as being something that was an escape for him through his mental health problems.

The other thing is that throughout the three years that we’ve been doing the podcast and me having opened up throughout that time about OCD, the number of musicians that have come forward and shared that they are also dealing with it or have dealt with it is insane to me.

For some reason, it’s both surprising and not because there seems to be quite a common combination. And I’m just always asking, “Is it that music requires an obsessive brain, and so people who maybe have those kinds of issues gravitate towards it because it requires an obsessive brain? Or is it that people who have obsessive tendencies gravitate to be focused on something to sort of distract or mediate the issue, whether that be music or sport or drama?”

So, Gavin and I are also going to talk about the reality behind contemporary opera, and I’m now working as the editor of Opera Now Magazine—almost forgot what it was called then.

And Gavin has had some fascinating operatic commissions and yeah, it was really interesting to talk to him about that process and how long it was and also the potential traumas that are involved. We’re taking on a large-scale project as a composer.

Also, I just want to say, please don’t forget to follow us on Instagram and keep up to date with us by subscribing to our monthly newsletter—you can find that in on our website.

Also, if you find yourself struggling with anything similar to the issues that Gavin and I are talking about on this episode, please do go to our resources page on the website. You could also call Help Musicians as Music Minds Matter helpline 24 hours a day, seven days a week on 0808-802-8008.

So, without further ado, let’s get on to the interview with Gavin Higgins. So, I’m here in South London on a beautiful Wednesday morning with the composer Gavin Higgins.

How are you doing today?

**Gavin Higgins:** I’m all right.

**Hattie Butterworth:** You’ve had a lovely breakfast.

**Gavin Higgins:** Lovely breakfast. I’m enjoying the weather finally. Summer is here.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Yes, you brought your gorgeous dog Lyra with you, which has completely brightened every ounce of my soul. And yeah, I first kind of came across you, I guess, through last year at the Proms—your brass band. Was it Concerto for Brass Band or Peace for Brass Band?

**Gavin Higgins:** Well, we call it Concerto Grosso for Brass band.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Yeah.

**Gavin Higgins:** Although Concerto Grosso has been tied to a lot of people have questioned, I still think it’s a good Concerto Grosso, yeah.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Okay. Yeah, I heard about you on Music Matters for World Mental Health Day in October—which I think is 10th of October or something— and you spoke really openly back then about how Tourette’s and OCD have kind of like being a big part of your experience from that a very young age, and also a big part of your kind of getting into music and how music kind of helped it calm and all of that.

So, I mean, I guess you kind of started always speaking from it in terms of music being a kind of therapeutic part of your life. But when it did begin, has music always felt like it helped? Or was there a time where nothing helped and it was just kind of crisis period?

**Gavin Higgins:** Yeah, so I grew up in a very musical family—amateur musical— so my entire family were in the local brass band—everyone except my dad and my nan. So, one granddad conducted the band, my other granddad played bass and the band, my uncles played the band, mom, both aunties, sister, cousins.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Literally everyone.

**Gavin Higgins:** Literally everyone. Even my nan, we used to do a carnival day and where the band would march down in front of the carnival. And my nan once was just given a trombone to sort of move the slide in and out just to sort of makeup.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Keep her involved.

**Gavin Higgins:** Yeah. So, always Super Bowl, I think someone gave me a corner when I was about three. I have no recollection of learning to play, it was always just something we did.

And I wasn’t that kind of into it when I was young. I really wanted to be a palaeontologist, that was all I was obsessed with when I was young. I wanted to dig up dinosaur bones and then Jurassic Park came out and then everyone wanted to dig up dinosaur bones. It sorts of ruined that thing for me.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Not the edgy thing to do anymore.

**Gavin Higgins:** And I can’t quite remember when it all started, but it must’ve been around seven or eight or something, but I started developing these facial tics quite different to what I do now.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Okay.

**Gavin Higgins:** And it was they got quite severe and they were very painful. What I did and my mom and dad took me to numerous doctors. This would’ve been like, late 80s, early 90s, who had no idea what was going on.

They essentially said it was attention-seeking. I was attention seeking, which is quite hard, I think, to hear when you are that young and you are like, “I literally can’t. I can’t control these things.”

**Hattie Butterworth:** So, no mention of Tourette’s at that point at all?

**Gavin Higgins:** No.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Wow.

**Gavin Higgins:** And same with my teacher. My teacher said I was showing off a lot. So, what I used to do in lessons is I would save up my ticks as long as I could. And then I would drop a pencil underneath the table, go underneath the table, get all my ticks out, come back up, rinse and repeat. I would do that all day long.

So, there’s whole gaps in my education, which I never really have got back because I spent so much time trying to just do this. And when I wasn’t, and all I was doing was sitting there trying my hardest not to tick. But then along with that, there were all these other things were going on. So, I started having these kind of when I got a bit older, beginning of secondary school, these kind of invasive thoughts where I was convinced everyone was going to die.

So, by the time I left my house and got to school in the morning, I’d convinced myself that everyone in my family had died. And when I say, “commit,” and it sounds like such a good frivolous thing, but it was like real genuine panic fear, like clench fist sweats.

And I would run into the school office just with before mobile phones, that’s how old I am. And I would pick up the school payphone and call every single person in my family to check they were okay. And if I got through to everyone, I was fine for like an hour. Oh, yeah, thank you.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Thank you.

**Gavin Higgins:** Yeah, thanks. If I didn’t get through to everyone, I wouldn’t basically able to function for the rest of the day, but of course, within the next hour or two. So, by break time, I might be doing the same thing again.

I also started biting my hands sort of all across my knuckles, basically, everywhere there was a joint until it bled. They were all scabbed over.

All the time, I used to obsessively collect leaflets from doctor surgeries and pile them all in my room in and eats that—very strange behaviour. But anyway, it was all sorts of various symptoms that were going on. And it just was getting worse and worse and I was just sort of just not really functioning very well, living in kind of constant existential dreads, those kinds of invasive thoughts.

Anyway, eventually a doctor said, “You know what? I think I know what this might be, but I’m not qualified to diagnose it. You think you should go to the Maudsley Hospital in London.” She says, “Ironically, literally where I now live. I’ve been living for the last 10 years.”

And I went to the Maudsley Hospital and I remember sitting in a waiting room with all these other kids who were twitching and some of them were shouting things out, and I just had no idea what was going on.

And they did an assessment and I went back in and they said “Right, we think you have this thing called Tourette syndrome. We think you have this thing called obsessive compulsive disorder.” And I had fully no idea what any of those things meant, but it was the first time anyone had said there was a word to explain what was going on with a condition. And to this day, I remember just feeling like the weight lifting off my shoulder.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Yeah.

**Gavin Higgins:** Just feeling so relieved because I thought I was going insane. I was like, “I can’t control any of these things I do. These invasive thoughts are taking over every aspect of my life.” So, just to have someone tell me that . . .

**Hattie Butterworth:** It has a name.

**Gavin Higgins:** It has a name.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Yeah.

**Gavin Higgins:** Just sort of like really, it was just such a sort of a burden off my shoulder. It didn’t really change anything, but it just felt, it was just a sort of a phew moment, you know?

**Hattie Butterworth:** Yeah.

**Gavin Higgins:** And they also asked me, they were like, “Oh, you play musical instruments, don’t you?” I kept asking about music and I was like, “Yeah, I do a lot of music now.” And they were like, “So, what happens when you’re playing your instrument?” I was like, “Oh, well, nothing, it all just kind of stops.” And they went, “Oh, isn’t that interesting?” And I was like, “That is very interesting. And so I remember like—whatever age it was, 10 or 9, whatever—I just remember thinking, “Well, I need to basically do that more.”

**Hattie Butterworth:** Yeah.

**Gavin Higgins:** So, that’s when music became more of a thing I had to do every day and instead of just something I was being forced to do because my whole family did it.

And so, I would play my horn and do kind of music-related things all the time. Break times I’d be in the practices playing this, and it just kind of became like a sort of a self-therapy. Actually, they had put me on Prozac when I was that age— whatever it was, nine or something.

**Hattie Butterworth:** That’s very young.

**Gavin Higgins:** Very young. It felt like quite a high dose of Prozac, and I don’t know how long I was on it for, but a long time. And I just hated it. It didn’t stop any of the invasive thoughts, didn’t stop my ticks, it just made me sort of not care.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Yes.

**Gavin Higgins:** But I was always kind of also just really exhausted and tired from the whole thing. And eventually, much later I just took myself, I was like, “I don’t want to be on this anymore.” And kind of used music more as a coping mechanism than the drugs.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Right. I’m always really interested in this because that was sort of the exact situation I was in of music was the thing that made it stop and kind of gave me a focus that took away from these thoughts. But was there a love there would you say? Or was it more of a therapy? Does that make sense?

**Gavin Higgins:** Yeah.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Did it take more time for you to realize it’s something you actually liked doing? Or was it just “This is the only thing that will stop?”

**Gavin Higgins:** Yeah, exactly that. I didn’t enjoy it when I was younger. It was just something, I didn’t want to go to band and practice. I didn’t want to. I didn’t want to be doing this, I wanted to be staying at home watching and read things about dinosaurs and reading things about, that’s all I wanted to do.

And going to band was just like this annoying thing we had to do because the whole family did it. But yeah, I mean obviously the more you practice the better you get, so I kind of realized I was actually quite good at it, and then it became more enjoyable, then I kind of fell in love with music. But I think it was using it as a kind of sound therapy first and foremost.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Yeah.

**Gavin Higgins:** And then kind of learning to love it. And kind of learning to love it because kind of understanding the power of music.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Yeah.

**Gavin Higgins:** But it’s a powerful thing. It’s like, I can’t believe we even have to keep saying this these days, which politicians would sort of be aware of this. It’s like, it’s not just something nice you listen to.

I was thinking the other day about the fact that they’ve now proven that music is actually scientifically a good thing for people with Alzheimer’s. It’s like, that’s not a frivolous thing.

That’s a really massive thing we should all be talking about, and if they can do that for people with Alzheimer’s. It’s like the things it can do for other people.

And I don’t know enough about music therapy to really speak on it, but I know from our experiences it’s a very powerful thing. And we should be funding it and not stripping it away, you know?

**Hattie Butterworth:** Yeah. And so from the moment of diagnosis, I guess, and I’m trying to think what would that have been sort of three or four years until then you went to school in Manchester.

**Gavin Higgins:** Yeah.

**Hattie Butterworth:** In that time, what kind of therapy were you engaging in? Or were you slightly left sort of this is the medication? You’ve got music now, you don’t need any talking therapy, or was there talking therapy?

**Gavin Higgins:** I didn’t really have any therapy. And it’s something I’ve been thinking more and more about recently. I just keep thinking, “I think I need to go to therapy.”

**Hattie Butterworth:** Yeah.

**Gavin Higgins:** I think I need some therapy. I don’t know that I was ever given the real skills to sort of process and deal with what. The one thing—I mean, you know, it was a long time ago, and I’m sure they’ll be very embarrassed that this was even a suggestion there—but the one thing they told me to do was to put some elastic bands on my wrist.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Oh yes.

**Gavin Higgins:** And they were like, “Every time you feel an invasive thought going on, every time you feel a tick coming on, just slap the elastic band.” I mean, it’s like a weird sort of aversion therapy. So, I was just snapping elastic bands on my wrists all day long just being like, “It’s just uncomfortable.”

**Hattie Butterworth:** It’s another compulsion as well, isn’t it?

**Gavin Higgins:** Yeah. And that’s kind of it. I mean, a few times I went back to the Malty to shut myself, but there was never any weekly therapy not that I remember.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Program, yeah.

**Hattie Butterworth:** I certainly don’t remember learning much about any of these conditions and how they…It was weird. The second someone told me what it was, it was almost like, “Great, that’s all I need to know. Thank you very much.”

**Hattie Butterworth:** Yeah, okay.

**Gavin Higgins:** And then I just sort of tapped out. But no, so I’ve never really had any sort of like therapy because I think those, particularly the OCD, like the impressive thoughts, I think it is a kind of trauma. It’s like this weird intense trauma you put on yourself. And every time those things happen, even now, I could feel my body getting into this.

When I leave the house and I’ve become convinced that I’ve left the stove on or something and then I have to make some excuse to go out of my way to go back to the house to let myself into check.

Even though I mean, someone says to me like, “Why don’t you just take a picture every time you leave the house?” I was like, “Kind of a brilliant idea.”

**Hattie Butterworth:** Yeah. It’s revolutionary, yeah.

**Gavin Higgins:** But those kinds of things. That’s kind of annoying these days when I’m like. I was in New York recently with some friends, and I was the last person to use the hob in our friend’s house and we left.

And I remember going like, “I turned it off.” I was saying it to myself, “I turned off.” And by the time we’d almost got to the subway and like I’d convinced myself the entire house had burn down. So, I had made some excuse. I said, “Oh, I need to get my wallet. I forgot my wallet.”

And my friends were like, “It’s fine. We’ll cover you today.” I was like, “No, I really need to get the wallet,” and ran all the way back to their house. And of course, it’s completely fine, everything is locked up, everything’s turned off.

But yeah, it’s something I never had any real therapy and I’m sort of now 40 thinking maybe I should just do, I think a minute probably everyone should have therapy, right? It’s what Americans say.

**Hattie Butterworth:** I mean, well that is what they say, but I think they’re probably right at least about this.

**Gavin Higgins:** Yeah.

**Hattie Butterworth:** How many years has it been now that you’ve had these two diagnoses and throughout that time, would you say you’ve, especially with OCD, has it been a kind of relapse situation? How would you explain your experience with OCD throughout that time? Have there been times where you haven’t been able to create because it’s been so bad?

**Gavin Higgins:** Yeah, that sometimes. I mean, once it’s a funny thing, it’s like, you know, I learned what Tourettes. Basically, they were like, this isn’t true. They said, “Oh, a lot of people grow out of it, right?” That’s what they used to say— people grow out of it. You don’t grow out of it. It’s a neurological thing, but it can lessen, and for some people, it can practically disappear.

So, my Tourette’s, for example, is there’s kind of nothing compared to what it was when I was a kid. Now I just sort of twitch my nose and sniff a bit. I don’t even know I’m necessarily doing it. Sometimes it’s worse than ever.

So, I was out the overnight with a friend and he said, “I’ve noticed your Tourette’s is like really bad tonight.” And I was like, “Yeah, I feel quite stressed today actually.” So, a lot of stuff going on in my head. And it’s interesting that some people notice it because other people just don’t even know I’m doing it.

But the OCD thing, I always use this analogy, like when I was younger, it was a bit, like I was on a pirate ship, sailing through an ocean, and there’s just like whirlpools everywhere. And I would just keep slipping into these whirlpools getting sucked down into these deeper things all the time and I wouldn’t see them coming. Now it feels a little bit more like I can kind of see with my spyglass where these things are, I’m like, “Oh, I’m, you know . . .”

**Hattie Butterworth:** And when it’s starting to kind of bubble up.

**Gavin Higgins:** Yeah. And I’ve got a bit more of a sense now of when they’re going to happen, so I can sort of slowly just try and steer the ship away. It doesn’t always work. Sometimes I steer it from one whirlpool straight into another.

So, I’ve got a little bit more of a sort of a handle on it. learned a few years ago that people who have OCD, depending on what era they grew up in, can often have a very specific type of OCD.

So, people who grew up in the ‘70s, cancer is a big thing for them. People who have grown up in the early 2000s, it could be things like paedophilia and people who grew up in . . .

**Hattie Butterworth:** HIV was a big one, yeah.

**Gavin Higgins:** So, for me, it was HIV and the amount of times I’ve just completely sort of convinced my…I’ve had friends who’ve gone to a GM clinic with me several times being like, “You haven’t got this.”

And I’m like, “You’re saying that, but I’ve completely convinced myself I’d have to go through this whole thing, and then I’d have the test and I’d be like, ‘But what if they’ve got the wrong test?’

**Hattie Butterworth:** I’m the one person that they’ve missed.

**Gavin Higgins:** “What’s gone wrong with the . . . What if they . . .” and so I’d go again. I’d go three or four times before finally, I’m like, “Okay, it’s fine. I don’t have this thing.”

But it was, growing up in the 80s and also as a gay person, it’s like, you were told you were going to get HIV and die. That was the… Everyone is dying of this. You are going to get… you’re going to die. So, it’s not that surprising that perhaps that would be a sort of thing. And if you’ve got this sense of compulsive thing to keep going back to that, you know? Luckily that hasn’t happened for a little while now.

And once again, it’s like, sounds like a silly, frivolous thing, but it’s hard to explain to people, it’s like, I can’t tell you how much my brain is telling me that this thing is real.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Yeah. And how unsure, how about like doubt will lead me to do everything in my power to prove or disprove it.

**Gavin Higgins:** The fact that I’m like, when people say, like “Oh, statistically, you know…” whatever it is, it’s like, yes, but there is this percentage that it does come through, and that’s obviously going to be me. I’m going to be that percentage.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Definitely.

**Gavin Higgins:** It’s so stupid, but that’s kind of how… So whenever I see something on TV and it’s like a one in a million chance of this thing happening, my brain just starts going like…

**Hattie Butterworth:** There are 7 billion people in the world.

**Gavin Higgins:** That’s actually a lot of people.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Yeah, yeah.

**Gavin Higgins:** Anyway, so yes, so that’s where it is. And that is still more than Tourette, that’s the thing that probably still affects my life in any sort of… And sometimes, like I said, if the OCD gets really bad and I can’t work, I just kind of shut down and become a bit of a weird, shaky mess of a husk of a person, and then I can’t compose. So, it can be quite debilitating when I’ve got a deadline approaching, and I’m like, “I need to do this.”

**Hattie Butterworth:** How have you navigated having a deadline, at the same time as an episode? Have you had to sort of delay and things like that?

**Gavin Higgins:** Yeah, it just has to be what it is. I can try and do some work, but sometimes it’s just not going to happen. And I can sit there at my piano for hours and hours and hours just trying my best to come up with something, but I’m just like, there’s always this thing in the back of my mind saying…. Yeah, so, it’s much better than it was, far more in a good place generally, in my life, I think, which helps. When that stuff happens, it’s amazing how quickly you revert to that eight-year-old again, it’s mad, like, wow.

**Hattie Butterworth:** So true. Even after—for me anyways—even after so much therapy, and so much of what they say is the best kind of, the most rigorous, helpful therapy for OCD and medication, all of this, still an episode can take you right… What it feels like right back to start.

**Gavin Higgins:** Yeah.

**Hattie Butterworth:** But I’m really curious to hear about the years before the mental health advocacy and awareness sphere, the hope that luckily we’re living more in now. And a lot of your experience with OCD and Tourette’s was before this time. How do you see the last few years of your life, being more open about it? How is that different, or how is that, I guess, better than how you were living before? What do you think is the importance of this openness that we’re seeing?

**Gavin Higgins:** When I was diagnosed, I was still very young. And by the time I got to midway through secondary school, I was just embarrassed by the whole thing, to be honest. I was like, my hands were a mess because I was biting all of the skin off them. Like all my school books were just covered in blood, so I was really embarrassed by my hands. And actually, the biting of the hands only stopped when COVID started, from the age of 8, until the age of 39, and then COVID happened.

And I think because I was just so heightened about germs, overnight, I just stopped biting my hands, it’s just a strange weird thing, I was like, “How has this…?” And it became a bit more of like a hand washy thing then, it…And I haven’t been biting my hand since. And I thought I would never be able to stop doing that. And that as well was a weird thing, it was like, I’d look at them and be like, “Oh, they don’t look nice, they look untidy,” and so I would bite them to try and…

**Hattie Butterworth:** Like tidy them up, yeah, I get you.

**Gavin Higgins:** It sounds completely weird—to tidy them up—but of course, that just makes them even worse, and it becomes this obsessive cycle you do. But yeah, so the midway through secondary school. I was just embarrassed by the whole thing, like my ticks were probably quite different at that point, probably more like what they are now. But even so I was just kind of… Because what I used to do when I tick is I would try and hide away, I would always move away to do.

There were videos of me when I was younger, and you’d see me in the corner, and you’d see me keep turning my head away, and I’m like, I know what I’m doing, I was just so embarrassed by the thing, I was just trying to… Or I would go behind something and you know…

And they stopped becoming so painful, because like I said, when I was really young, it was just really painful, every time I did it. It was like this sort of…I couldn’t stop myself doing it. I feel they were coming on, knowing that every time it would happen, I would be in pain and discomfort.

And so it was just like the psychological trauma of that, sort of like, you know, it’s a bit like…it’s kind of like torture, actually, it’s just like, “This thing is going to happen, you’re going to be in pain, you can’t do anything about it,” but like all the damn time. But that finally started to change once I got into my teens, and it just became something a little less painful and probably a little bit less noticeable.

And the OCD stuff, you kind of keep that to yourself, people don’t need to know about it. And then I just stopped talking about it. I mean, it was a funny thing, when I actually went to my secondary school, I remember my form teacher having… I stayed away for like an hour or something, I’ve been asked to stay away from an hour, and she basically told the whole form class I have Tourette syndrome, I have OCD. If you see me doing this, they can do this, and if you see me having a little moment, this is what you can do.

That just kind of like a nice thing. And I just remember when I came back into the class, all my friends just like being amazingly **[inaudible 27:32]** Even people who weren’t necessarily my friends, being quite nice about it all, which is nice. And I think that actually helped.

But, yeah, I kind of just stopped talking about it, and kind of kept it all to myself. And I really didn’t really talk much about that stuff until probably like five years, six years ago. Certainly not publicly. And then I started thinking like, actually, this is stupid, this is actually a part of me. I think it’s probably part of the reason I’m…Absolutely a reason I’m a musician. It’s a reason why I compose. I think I was saying to you before we started this interview, like having things like OCD, and likes of it. It’s kind of a bit of a superpower to be a composer. I spend so much of my time obsessively, compulsively, yeah, obsessing over chords, over and over, “I’m playing this chord in this way, let’s do it this way.” If I wasn’t so obsessive about that stuff, I don’t know that I can be a composer.

Also, this whole thing, a word I’ve learned recently called hyper focus, which makes complete sense, was just sort of like completely lose myself for hours and hours and hours and hours in the task I’m doing, which is usually composing, to the point where it just feels like 10 minutes have passed, and I could have been there for three hours, completely often missing meetings, missing trains, not eating, not eating for hours and hours and hours and hours and hours on end. That kind of stuff, not good, which is why it’s really important for me to have entire days free where I could just compose and…

So I thought, I should probably just embrace this, not be embarrassed by it, talk about it. People are talking about these things a bit more now, so it didn’t feel quite so difficult to discuss. And yes, I’m just starting to be a bit more open. And also I’m starting to learn more about it. I just don’t think I know about it, because I never really…I got told this is what was going on, and I left it at that.

So I’m learning stuff, I’m learning that things like when you’ve got people who have Tourette’s syndrome, will almost all the time also have OCD, ADHD, all these other things that go alongside it. They must inhabit the same space.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Pathway, yeah.

**Gavin Higgins:** Yeah, I don’t know, there’s obviously something about that. I mean, Tourette’s, which is kind of obsessive ticking, makes sense that OCD would inhabit that same world.

So yes, so I’m starting to learn all these things about it, which is kind of, I guess informing me as well. And also learning how this stuff affects other people, and actually learning how many more people who do have OCD. Not that I’m out in the habit of diagnosing people with OCD, but when you have OCD, and you speak to someone who has OCD clearly, but don’t know they have it, it’s very obvious. And I’ve semi diagnosed a few people, and I’m like, “I think this is what’s going on.” Because same thing, they feel like they’re going crazy, and you can see them.

And I’m like, “I think you should just go and get a little assessment, see what they say.” And the three or four people I’ve said this to have come back and like, “Yeah, you’re right, I’ve got OCD.” And I think there’s more people who have this than we want to admit. I’m sure some people have it.

People say, “Oh, I’m a little bit OCD.” I don’t know what that means. It’s like, if it’s not affecting your life, then I guess it’s fine. But if you’re finding it stopping you in your tracks constantly, you’re struggling to do basic stuff and function some of the time, or a lot other time, then just getting the diagnosis I think is… Well, like I said, for me, just that alone was just like…

**Hattie Butterworth:** **[Inaudible 31:37]**

**Gavin Higgins:** … Oh, my goodness, thank God someone put a word to this thing. So yes, so I’ve just become a bit more chatty about it, and I’m just a bit more willing to talk about those things now than I was, and I’m not really embarrassed by it anymore.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Yeah. Were you ever anxious about the potential impact to your career or whatever? I think a lot of the times, you know, my parents or my own internal dialogue has been, if you’re open about this, this might… Whether they realize it or not, that steer people away from you, or think you’re… Do you ever have any of that kind of thing? Or do you not just didn’t really care?

**Gavin Higgins:** I don’t know, to be honest. I don’t know, maybe deep down… I mean, I was definitely embarrassed, quite embarrassed by it. I thought I looked ridiculous, I thought I looked ridiculous, I thought whenever I was having these thoughts, I was being ridiculous. It was really embarrassing to tell people, “Oh my God, I think I’ve got HIV.” That was embarrassing, because they’re like, “Of course, you’ve got it.” And that is the correct answer, but…

And so I guess I was embarrassed and mortified to have to say to people that I’m having these thoughts, these things, these kind of fears about people dying all the time, or in the most elaborate… I mean, God, you know? It can happen. It’s happened in my head, like every possible…

**Hattie Butterworth:** Worst case scenario.

**Gavin Higgins:** Oh, my God, it’s always the worst case scenario.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Always.

**Gavin Higgins:** And so, yes, so I was always just a little bit mortified, and I was always weird that people wouldn’t react in the same way, that people would either laugh it off, which was just as bad as not saying anything either…

**Hattie Butterworth:** Horrendous, yeah.

**Gavin Higgins:** Or not taking it so seriously even, it’s just like a knot, she’s like, “Oh, you’re just being silly,” and I’m like, “I know you think I’m being silly, and I probably am being silly, but right now my body is going into fight or flight mode.” Everything physiologically changes, I think. You shake. You get tense. It’s the kind of stuff… It’s like a real physical thing that happens. And I’m like, “I know this sounds really daft, but I’m actually having a very physical, and I need someone to basically listen…”

**Hattie Butterworth:** Understand.

**Gavin Higgins:** “Understand, try and talk me down, and just sort of go, what do you want to do?”

**Hattie Butterworth:** What you need from this.

**Gavin Higgins:** “What do you need from this? Like, do you need to go to the doctors four times? Well then, we’ll do that.” It’s like it’s so silly, but sometimes that’s literally it.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Sometimes it’s so bad, you need that, yeah. totally get it.

**Gavin Higgins:** I don’t know, I also feel guilty, I’m like, “Oh, I shouldn’t be taking up doctor’s time,” the guilt of doing. I think it’s quite a complicated and complex thing that I’m only just sort of, in the last few years, sort of getting my head around. But my friends are great, and my partner is great, so all that helps.

**Hattie Butterworth:** What’s your view on the wider classical music world, awareness or, openness or not about all this stuff? Like we were mentioning before, there are certain people here who we know anecdotally struggle, but when it comes to their image, it’s very much not something they would ever discuss, and I completely respect that.

But I think, at least from my point of view, growing up into it and coming into the industry as a young person, that can be very isolating, when you don’t see other people like you. So, what’s your view on the industry itself, and how it treats people with mental illness?

**Gavin Higgins:** Well, the classical music world is not good for people who have obvious illnesses. I have a friend of mine once said to me, in a major orchestra, he’s like, “Unless you’re literally dead, you go on stage. It doesn’t matter how…”

**Hattie Butterworth:** Yes, so true.

**Gavin Higgins:** “… You go on stage.” I know people who’ve been going on stage with Norovirus, giving Norovirus to the whole orchestra, because they’ve got to go on stage and do this thing. So, we’re not very good at taking care of stuff, which is really obvious, it’s like, I wouldn’t want…If someone said to me, “I’ve got Norovirus,” I wouldn’t want them on stage with me.

So, it’s probably unsurprising that they’re not particularly good with coming with things that are unseen. Someone’s having a bit of a mental health crisis, I think the **[inaudible 36:05]** role is quite like, well, go on stage, do the thing. I think we’re getting better at it. I think in the past how many years, self-care and people being like, I need to look after myself. I mean, Kuzco..**.**

**Hattie Butterworth:** Kuzco, yeah.

**Gavin Higgins:** …Recently being like, “I’m just going to chill out and eat some magic mushrooms, and because this is like…” You see it a lot, you see a bit more of that now with music has been like, “I’m taking time off because I’m having sort of too much.” So, I think we are getting better at it. But I think there’s still a bit of old guard, which is like, “Oh, just come on, shut up, get on with it, stop making a fuss,” that kind of… Not very kind.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Yeah.

**Gavin Higgins:** Not very sort of…Not very kind of…

**Hattie Butterworth:** Malleable to experience with someone.

**Gavin Higgins:** Yeah. And so, like I said, it doesn’t surprise me that the world is not so good with mental health issues, when I know how not okay they are with people who are literally really, really ill.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Yeah, good point.

**Gavin Higgins:** And I get it, it’s like, you’ve got a job to do, you got to go on stage, and you got to do the job. But I think we’re living in a world now where self-care is just a little bit more important, “I’m not feeling well, I need to do this thing from my physical self, my mental self.”

I think people are a little bit more receptive to that now than they were, so I think we’re definitely moving in the right direction, I saw an article in the Proms Guides the other day from the leader of the BBC Synth, talking about OCD and how it’s affected him, and I was just thinking like you know, he had his assessment, I think very late in life, he’s been doing that for a long time.

At least I got my assessment really young, and it’s like the one thing…I think the more I think about it, it’s the one thing I think is the most important, you’ve got to get these assessments as early as possible, because then give it a name…

**Hattie Butterworth:** Freely.

**Gavin Higgins:** … You learn to, and there’s more information about this stuff than when I was a kid. You type OCD and Tourette Syndrome, there’s so much information, and there’s so many people with these things, they can talk to and normalize it. And when I was a kid, like I said, the doctors didn’t even know, didn’t even have a name for this, it seemed to be that new a condition. I don’t know how new it is, but they certainly didn’t feel like they were just telling people they had this willy-nilly.

**Hattie Butterworth:** I think there’s something like—well, I think it’s an average of 10 years between the onset of OCD and a diagnosis.

**Gavin Higgins:** Wow!

**Hattie Butterworth:** That’s like the average amount of time it takes for someone to get diagnosed. And that terrifies me, like to know day after day, that people can be dealing with that for 10 whole years as before.

**Gavin Higgins:** Well, I suppose the reason I got diagnosed with it so early was because I got diagnosed with Tourette’s. They were like, “There’s a thing, you’re literally ticking, you’re doing things. We have a word for this thing, it’s called Tourette Syndrome, you know? These other things that are going on inside your head, we also have a word for that, which is OCD. Those things often go hand in hand, same with ADHD, these things often like they’re partners at the ball, right?”

**Hattie Butterworth:** Are more **[inaudible 39:10],** yeah.

And so I think the reason I got it diagnosed so early was just because there was a physical obvious thing that was going on with me. And I think for a lot of people with OCD, they probably get so internal, and I think it’s so easy to just pass it off something else or to bob off. Do you know what I mean?

**Hattie Butterworth:** Yeah.

**Gavin Higgins:** I think that’s part of that issue.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Or do you think it’s a kind of inability for yourself to control something, or that this is my fault that I can’t get this under control, this is a problem inherently with me? I really want to talk about the opera world, if you’re happy to.

**Gavin Higgins:** Yeah.

**Hattie Butterworth:** So obviously, you’ve grown up in this brass band culture. A lot of your music is very much from your soul and from the kind of things that interest you and bring you to life and all of that. But why did the opportunity of writing an opera come up, first of all? Like, how did that come about? And was it something you were always wanting to do in the back of your mind? Or was it just like the opportunity arose?

**Gavin Higgins:** Yeah. So obviously, growing up in the world I grew up in, classical music, it just wasn’t part of that world. It was in that we would often play arrangements of classical music in bands. The first pieces of music brass bands ever played, when they’d come out of the pit, these big burly men in Yorkshire and Wales and Scotland, and they would play opera overtools, arrangements of opera overtools. Which is part of the reason why brass bands have that vibrato, is because they were emanating the vibrato, the strings and the vibrato voices. So that’s why brass bands have that sort of shimmering sound to them.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Yeah.

**Gavin Higgins:** But I guess I got to know some classical music through that, but I wasn’t listening to orchestras. No orchestras came to our part of the world. And opera was obviously not even a consideration.

When I went to music college, obviously, I started learning a bit about opera, but they were all in foreign languages. I would try and listen to them on head phones, I was like, “I have no idea what the hell is going on. I didn’t know what they’re singing about.” This was before DVDs were really in existence, so, you was trying to read through on the… Anyway, I couldn’t really get into it.

And when I moved to London, one of the first things I did was I went to see Grand Macabre by Ligate. IT was the first opera I ever saw. And it kind of blew my mind, I was like, “Wow, okay, this is amazing.” I was like, “This is theatre,” and I love theatre, and my music is quite theatrical. I think about music in theatrical terms a lot of times.

So anyway, I was just completely taken, I was like, okay, I think at some point I want to write an opera. Never in my wildest dreams did I think that would ever happen, because I wouldn’t even know where to start.

But then in about 2016, 15, Francesca Simon, who writes the Horrid Henry books, basically sent me through, she said, “Would you mind? I’m just writing this new book, would you mind reading it for me?” And I was like, “Okay.” I knew Francesca, and I bet she was…

**Hattie Butterworth:** Right, okay.

**Gavin Higgins:** … and I said, okay. And I got the manuscript, and I sat outside a theatre at five in the morning, queuing up to get one of those cheap tickets for an evening show. I got there about 5:30 in the morning, and I read this book, and it was about the Norse goddess Hel, who is like one of the monstrous, or three monstrous daughters of Loki.

And it’s Hel who’s sort of half goddess, half corpse. Her brother Fenrir, who is a wolf who becomes so big he eats Odin, and her brother Jormungandr, who’s a snake who gets so big he goes around the whole world and eats his own tail, and he kills Thor, and they bring on Ragnarok, which is the end of Days. Which is basically the ring cycle.

But she’s like a Saki, she’s perpetually a teenager in this, she’s a Saki **[inaudible 43:17],** quite funny, quite witty, very dry. And I read it, and I wrote back to I was yeah, I think it’s great, it’s a bit like Wagner for teenagers. It’s kind of to the Wizard of Oz, what wicked is, but to the Ring Cycle. And she said, “Oh good, because I think we should turn it into an opera house.” And then we basically approached the Royal Opera House, and they commissioned it pretty much on the spot, which is unheard of.

And we just got straight into it. I had no idea if I could—I’d never written for voice before in my life either. So quite a risk to take, but I realized actually, that writing for voice and writing for brass, it’s very similar, similar ranges, similar sort of…Like the way you can leap around on a brass is very similar to the way you can leap around in a voice. They’re quite comparable, actually.

So, I kind to took towards, and I remember saying to Francesca, “I’m either going to love doing this, and just want to write opera’s verse in my life, or I’m going to absolutely hate it and never ever want to do it again.”

And luckily, it was the former, I didn’t… Well, enjoy is not the right word, I enjoyed the process of collaborating with Francesca, collaborating with Tim, the director, I enjoyed seeing the awesome group, I enjoyed the theatrical side of it. I enjoyed seeing my music done in that theatrical way, I was like, “Wow, this looks like I should be doing this all the time.” But the process, I think, is actually quite a traumatic process, to be honest, writing an opera, yeah.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Can you explain like, maybe what people don’t understand about writing an opera and what it takes out of you, and maybe where that trauma come from.

**Gavin Higgins:** Yeah, so probably naively, I went into this, not really knowing what was ahead. But it took me three years to write that opera, and I didn’t really do anything else except write the opera. I had to give up all my teaching, I had to give up any other commission coming in and just couldn’t take them. And you kind of give yourself completely over to this thing. And it’s all consuming, every day, all the time, just this one piece of work that you do.

Lots of false starts. Writing nearly two hours of music is no small undertaking. And I got really…I got shingles halfway through writing this, and also I’m sure I was the first person composed to say this, but you don’t get paid enough to write, or certainly, I didn’t.

And so, the longer it went on, the harder and harder and harder finding it to just simply do basic stuff, like eat and pay rent. And yet, I was still having to write this opera for the Royal Opera House, because it was going to be on stage in seven months.

Luckily, I have an amazing partner who fed me for that last year. But if I didn’t have him, it wouldn’t have happened.

**Hattie Butterworth:** That’s terrifying.

**Gavin Higgins:** That opera would have stopped, because I just had no money, and I had to eat, and I was so stressed. And like I said, so the whole process started off really positively, and just got progressively more difficult as time went on. And I think that is the process of writing opera, it is all consuming.

But the last thing I was wanted to be concerned about was like, how do I pay my rent? Because I had to give up all my other work to just focus entirely on this thing to get it done. And then we finally got it on stage, and it was this amazing run, really loved it, sold out theatres.

And then the other thing that I wasn’t expecting that happened is at the end of the run, which is probably worse than the creation of it itself, is on the last day, the day after we finished, the conductor was off doing a new thing, all the singers were off doing new shows, the director was doing a new show, Francesco was writing a new book, everyone was off doing new stuff.

And I had nothing, I had no teaching, I had no work, no commissions, there were no other performances of opera lined up. I’ve never really felt like I’d been sort of chewed up and spat out a machine in that way in my life. And it took months and months and months and months to get anything.

Because all the people I’ve been having conversations with about potential commissions and stuff, sort of pick that back up and try and get that back on his feet, but of course, you talk about a commission, it’s not going to happen for another year maybe, or eight months.

So, it really was a proper eye opener and quite depressing, actually, quite a sort of a bit of a dark time. Such a high after that opera and the success of it, to this kind of like, all mighty low where… And I sat there thinking like, God, three years of my life for what? three years of my life for that, was it worth it? Will I do that again? I mean, I’m a glutton for punishment, so yeah, probably I will at some point.

But it’s certainly like me and Francesca and Tim, the director, have been—we started discussing a new opera on the second night, the Opera had run. We saw it in its entirety. Of course, I say this to everyone, the first time I ever know, if one of my pieces work is literally when it’s performed in front of the audience. It’s the first time. Rehearsals, they don’t really mean anything.

You only know if the piece works when it’s in performance, at the right tempos with the orchestra and the singles or whatever, playing properly, then you know if it works. And you know if the audience enjoy it as well. So, it’s always a bit of a back to. Anyway, we were like, “Okay, great, it works, we could do this, let’s do another one.” It’s completely stupid.

And we immediately started discussing other ideas, and there was an opera company that did want to commission us, and we got a bit of a way through the process, and then they just completely cut the whole thing off and said, “No, we’re not going to do this anymore.” Which is not a bad thing, I’ve had lots of other things to do in the meantime and actually, it’s great to do that. But it also gave me a bit of, I was like, well, do I even want to go straight into another opera? I don’t think so.

And we’re having discussions about operas now, and every discussion I have, I really want to be super enthusiastic about it, but in the back of my head, I’m always like, I know what this undertaking is, I know the kind of thing it’s going to be, I know how poor I’m going to be, I know how stressed I’m going to be, I know I’m not going to do anything else, I know that I’m going to be in this world for the next three to three years, or whatever.

And so, I think very, I mean, it’s self-care and all the rest of it, it’s like, actually, am I mentally prepared to even do that yet? Do I have the energy to do that yet? And it’s a shame actually, because I really enjoyed doing it…

**Hattie Butterworth:** And it worked.

**Gavin Higgins:** And it worked, and I would like to do it again. I think this is an interesting thing about the opera world is actually, I just don’t think… The opera world is really good at supporting and giving the time and energy and money and resources to the top tier singers, top tier composes. They kind of get given everything.

A lot of these people have agents and publishers, I don’t. I don’t have an agent or a publisher, so all this is on my own back, all that kind of boring stuff, that pushing and going, no, that’s not enough money, or no, we need more time, or no, that’s not good enough, or we need… I have to do that myself, which is very difficult to do when you’re in the same position as trying to create the thing. But the opera is very good at pushing…

**Hattie Butterworth:** Lifting us.

**Gavin Higgins:** … lifting those people. But for the rest of us mere mortals, it can be a much rougher ride, I think. And I got invited onto… What’s that show on radio called?

**Hattie Butterworth:** Front Row?

**Gavin Higgins:** Front Rows. I got invited on the Front Row not that long ago, when all the art cuts were going on, to talk about why opera isn’t elitist. And I thought, what a strange person to get on the show to talk with. So I’m like…

**Hattie Butterworth:** But it is true.

**Gavin Higgins:** I mean, in some ways it is, and in some ways it isn’t. Opera as a thing is not, but the opera world certainly, certainly lean into that sort of thing. I mean, it’s such a frustrating time, I think, because I think now more than ever, actually what—not just the opera world, but the music world generally—need to be doing, is not falling back on the old stuff, is not falling back on another band symphony, another Brahm symphony, another Regaletto, another **[Laboweb 52:05]**

It’s like, how many of these…? What you really need now is people to be going, no, we need like new stuff, like now, we need new stuff that actually genuinely speaks to what’s going on. Not trying to force something that’s really old to like, we’ll just rewrite this so it’s set in **Laboweb**, but it’s the pandemic.

For me, it just seems like no one’s being brave, and no one’s going, no, this is exactly what we need to be doing, we need to be making new stuff with living composers, with younger artists, younger singers, younger musicians who are brilliant and have these amazing careers. They’re the ones we should be supporting now because all the…

Not that we shouldn’t be giving anyone could get this wrong, not that we shouldn’t be giving all the top tier artists all the love. Of course they should get all the love. But I thought over the last few years, if anyone was going to be able to ride the wave of COVID and all these cuts, it’s those guys.

All those brilliant singers who are traveling around the world doing all sorts of stuff. All those amazing composers traveling around the world doing all this stuff. They’re going to be fine. The ones who aren’t fine, are the ones who are just on the cusp of doing well.

And I’ve seen it—so many singer friends who’ve just languished in the past few years, who’ve been told, “Oh, sorry, we’re going to be putting our energy and resources into these people, these people, these people. Sorry.” And I’m like, “Wow, what a stupid, stupid decision.” Because those are the people, they’re the future. These younger, brilliant singers who just need that thing now more than ever. In a few years’ time, it’ll probably all get back to something...

So, there’s so many frustrations I have with classical music world, the opera world, not necessarily the same frustrations that is being talked about a lot of the time. It’s other things that I’m just like, “Where’s the bold vision? Where’s the risk taking?” I know risk taking is a hard thing to do when money is really tight, but it’s kind of like that’s, really, when you have to do something.

And I’ve talked about this a lot. I grew up in a council estate, very working class, poor, and it’s like class is just a dirty word that we just refuse to seem to want to talk about when it comes to classical music, no one ever wants to talk about out of this.

And I think class is literally the root of all of these issues within classical music. Really, I do think that. And until we actually tackle that, we’re just going to end up in a world of kids whose parents can afford to send them to the best basses, kids whose parents can afford to give them the best music lessons in our orchestra. So all this talk about diversity will be completely pointless, when in ten years’ time, our orchestras are more homogeneous than ever before.

**Hattie Butterworth:** And that’s where we’re headed, you know?

**Gavin Higgins:** Oh, yeah. And it’s like, this is the government. This is what the government’s doing. But goddamn, sometimes I get so frustrated that there are not more people fighting. Like, where is the Arts Council fighting our corner?

And I’m sure they will say that they are, and I’m sure I understand difficult decisions need to be made, but the fact that music education has just, I mean, I would say slowly vanished. But it hasn’t slowly vanished. It seems to have happened overnight from our state school. That’s just travesty. What a disaster? Where are all those poor kids that are going to do music? Well, they’re not. They’re not, and they’re not. That’s what’s happening now. They’re not doing music. They’re not ending up in music. If you can’t afford an instrument, how can you do music? Forget it. So there are all sorts of…Like, I love the classical music world.

I think it gets a really bad rap, just to be clear about that. I think more than any other theater doesn’t get this. Theater is full of posh… They never get accused of being elitist and all this kind of stuff, but for some reason, classical music always does.

And it’s frustrating to me when I’m like a working-class person who loves classical music. I know other working-class people who love classical music. It’s not the music, it’s the systems that sort of uphold things and sort of keep the status quo.

And that’s sort of frustrating for me, because I hate this whole conversation about, “Oh, you know, classical music isn’t for the easy price.” Oh, piss off, like, nonsense. It’s just nonsense.

But we all have to…People like me, you, people who are in the industry, just need to shout a bit more about this kind of stuff. I think I’m becoming more shouty, which is an amazing thing to believe, because I’ve always been pretty shouty. But, yeah….

**Hattie Butterworth:** More shouty on podcasts and in the media is exactly where it needs to be. No, seriously, I think we need that perspective on opera. And I’m so grateful for your honesty about that process because I have not heard the truth of contemporary opera and what it can mean for people.

**Gavin Higgins:** It’s grueling, grueling, grueling, grueling. And like I said, we are…I’m having a discussion now about a new opera. Me and Francesca have been talking about this for years now, but a new opera, which might maybe just be **[inaudible 57:28]** It’s the same opera that was going to happen then didn’t happen. It might actually be happening now, but we’re in a different place.

And I’m just thinking very, very, very carefully about what that means for me, how much of my energy and headspace I’m prepared to give to this thing before it becomes sort of like negative on my mental health and physical health.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Because, as you said, that word trauma is not a light word. There were that word….

**Gavin Higgins:** No, no, no. I am traumatized by writing that opera, and that sounds quite dramatic. And if I went back and I was asked to do it again, absolutely do it again, it was an amazing experience.

I really did enjoy writing the thing and I want to do more of that. It’s the systems and funding and support and stuff around that, both before and after, actually. Like, aftercare, which is like…

**Hattie Butterworth:** Never heard of it, honestly.

**Gavin Higgins:** And actually, I had an amazing conversation with Sarah Crabtree at the opera house about this and she said to me a while ago, she’s like, “You know, since we had that conversation, we’ve actually taken all that on board and we have now implemented that in.”

So, having these conversations are really positive things to have. And I would encourage any composer, younger composer, inexperienced opera composer, who is thinking about getting into this, just to think very carefully about what that is and just be, like, aware… Because I just think I went into it quite naively, just thinking it was all going to be, like, fantastic.

**Hattie Butterworth:** It’s got money, the whole vision opera. Did so much money.

**Gavin Higgins:** So much money. I have a complex relationship with opera now, I think. I do feel a bit traumatized by the whole experience. That’s not to say that it wasn’t a positive experience in many ways, and I did love doing it and I’m really proud of that piece.

I wanted to get more performances. I want more people to hear it. COVID happened. Sort of scuppered everything.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Of course.

**Gavin Higgins:** So, yeah, so it’s challenging and I just think, like, everyone just needs to know that before they go into it. It’s a hard slog. It can be really rewarding, but it’s hard.

**Hattie Butterworth:** You need to know that.

**Gavin Higgins:** Yeah.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Wow. I cannot thank you enough, honestly. This has been, like, such a wonderful, wonderful chat. Thank you very much for your openness. And even in the past year, I feel like I’ve seen your name come up and up again and again in the BBC and everything, and what you’re doing and what you’re writing is just really important. So thank you so, so much, Gavin.

**Gavin Higgins:** Thanks for having me. It’s good to be here.

**Hattie Butterworth:** Yeah, anytime.