

Matt Geer

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SPEAKERS

Advertiser, Matt Geer, Hattie Butterworth

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Hattie Butterworth

Welcome to Things Musicians Don't Talk about with me your host Hattie Butterworth. I'm a cellist and a writer in my final year at the Royal College of Music in London. And I think we need a new way of talking. I've spent many, many years feeling in the dark about issues in the classical music profession. So often, it can feel like you're the only person struggling with anxiety, depression, career doubts, money, injuries, and so much more. Who do we go to when we feel we've had enough for whatever reason? Join me and guests as we end the stigma with honest conversations about the things musicians don't talk about.

Hattie Butterworth

Hello, everybody, welcome back to another episode. The last few weeks and a few weeks to come, are very exciting. I've got a lot of podcasts lined up to come out and what few lined up to record. And I just feel like there's a lot of unknowns in the world at the moment and a lot of darkness. And what I've really felt in the last month is the bravery of people who want to come forward and share with us their stories to help others and to bring about change and connection in our community as musicians and creatives and whoever else is listening. You're all still incredibly welcome. And especially in this episode, because I think, aside from the fact that my guest is an amazing composer, organist and pianist, the issues he has struggled with go far beyond being a musician.

Hattie Butterworth

What he has suffered with is something that is incredibly stigmatised still. And it's something that I have become more and more passionate about speaking openly about. So today, I'm interviewing Matt Geer, who, as I say, is a composer, pianist, and organist, who has recently graduated from the Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London. And he has suffered with schizoaffective disorder, which he'll talk more about. But it basically is a combination of both bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. And is

something that he suffered with for many years, but has, since his undergraduate, become more difficult. And we speak about this and how he's managed his diagnosis, and also how he's turned a traumatic time in hospital into an opera. Through his writings, in his diaries and composing in a time of mania, and we talk about why perhaps there is this stigma and what we can do to break it, and especially how we can educate younger people about it. But not only this, we also talk about Matt's faith journey, and his discovery of the Franciscans and becoming a brother in the Third Order of St. Francis. And we talk about why, you know, we've we've both had a complicated faith journey within the Christian church and why that is, and how the rise of more evangelical right wing churches within the youth church and within universities can not always be in line with young people's views and can cause young people to hold perhaps misinformed views about Christianity and about Christians. And so yeah, we had an incredibly amazing, insightful discussion about that and about how faith and mental health, although they can serve one another, how actually they are separate in a lot of ways and how Matt's mental health in some ways actually caused his faith to be, in a way, confused but yeah, we talk about that, and I just really urge you to listen to this episode. And yes, if you want to find out more about Matt, you can. He has a website, which is www.mattgeer.co.uk. I feel like I need to double check that, but I think that's right. And yeah, please enjoy this episode and keep in touch.

Hattie Butterworth

Hello, Matt, it's lovely to be talking to you today. How are you doing?

Matt Geer

I'm not doing too bad, thanks, yeah. How are you doing?

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah, I'm, I'm fine. I'm, yeah, having, having a good week, actually. I'm incredibly excited to be talking to you, because this conversation, I mean, we emailed about it a few months ago. And, you know, it's been kind of ... I've been thinking about it for so long. And I just think this is going to be one of the most important conversations that is had on this podcast. And I just want to say thank you so much for agreeing to talk today because I know your story is going to help a lot of people.

Matt Geer

No, it's an absolute please.

Hattie Butterworth

Thank you. So I just thought maybe, if we could start, maybe by you telling us a bit about your musical journey first of all. Musically, who are you? What do you do? And where have you come from in that respect?

Matt Geer

Sure. I didn't come from a musical background ... seems to be quite a common phrase and that's true of me. I was born in Hastings, right next to sort of beautiful Ecclesbourne Glen and Fairlight and I still stand today, it's ... the walks over there are just the most beautiful places I've ever been. I know it's because it's home, but also it's just incredibly beautiful. And I had a fairly normal upbringing. Father was a firefighter, and Mum was ... worked in admin, and had come from an utterly sort of non-musical

background. I think music for me was probably quite an isolating thing growing up, which appealed to me. I often just sort of sat in practice rooms and wrote music or played the piano. So ... and that's obviously come alive today.

Hattie Butterworth

Following this, you know, you say you played the piano and composed. Are those the sort of main musical outlets you've had?

Matt Geer

Yeah, I don't play any other instruments. I started playing the organ at the age of about 14. And that was, that was sort of a really positive experience. And then conservatoire, going to Guildhall where I studied was quite an impulsive decision as well. Um, nothing has ever felt very planned. And yeah, I think that I've never real... I've never really had that sort of long-term ambition to do anything. I've been, might be hard being brought up, but I'm much more comfortable with sort of living day to day rather than living ... to looking towards the future.

Hattie Butterworth

I'm definitely like you in that way. Yeah, I'm really bad with like, these five year plans that people have and ... I'm not, yeah, I don't have that kind of view of it either. So with Guildhall, have you now left? When did you graduate from Guildhall? Or are you still there?

Matt Geer

Yeah, I graduated in this July.

Hattie Butterworth

Okay.

Matt Geer

...which, so that was... it took me 25 years to do an undergrad, which is fine. And I've just started a new course, a PhD at Belfast Queen's Uni, where I'm doing a bit of composition, bit of sort of aesthetics, philosophy, things like that.

Hattie Butterworth

That's amazing. So, but you're doing that based in London still, is that right?

Matt Geer

Yes.

Hattie Butterworth

So is it all online? Or...?

Matt Geer

Yeah, pretty much. Yeah, I feel like ... I was thinking of moving over to Northern Ireland, and it really did appeal to me because I thought "I just...it's such a phenomenally beautiful place." And I can sort of ... I

found a little two bed cottage about 30 miles out of Belfast. I could just sort of live a quite sort of hermetic life and, and get the bus in every few days.

Hattie Butterworth

Oh my goodness.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah.

Matt Geer

I decided to live in London.

Hattie Butterworth

Fair enough. Maybe that will come later.

Matt Geer

Yeah, hopefully.

Hattie Butterworth

I'm sure it will. You know, through ... I've actually read a bit of your blog that you have online and I, you know, read what you'd written to me and also looked about and it's quite clear that composition for you has been a very important part of not only your way of expressing yourself, but also as a means of communicating your mental health challenges. And I'm wondering whether you could speak now about how your mental health has affected you in the past and what it is you, you struggle with?

Matt Geer

Yes. So it was ... started sort of brewing from about the age of 14 or 15, but I didn't know it was a problem with my mental health. I didn't really think of it in that way. I started hearing voices when I was about 14. And I didn't know what voices were until about the age of 19/20, when I ... it sort of clicked actually: "maybe these are voices". And they were just very sparse voices, saying things like very, very mundane things like sort of, "oh, the sky is blue", or "the tree is over there", or "someone is behind you". And I thought everyone had them to be quite honest, I thought they were just ... they were, they were sparse enough not to be noteworthy or to ... not be noteworthy. So they, I started Guildhall, and I think just the combination of a new environment, and also having really bad food poisoning, which really stressed me out and confused my eating habits and everything, caused the voices to just grow and get worse. And in 2016, late 2016, early 2017, I started suffering from psychosis. I had various manic episodes, which I didn't know were mania. I wasn't receiving any support or anything. I just sort of went and bought things like a two grand bike, £1500 bike and various instruments. I went to HSBC and asked to take that 30,000 pound loan, I think, at one point, and it wasn't picked up or anything, because it was ... because it's episodic.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah.

Matt Geer

And when, when you're sort of in it, you don't know you're in it. Whereas with depression, I've found that you know, you're in it. And it's almost a little bit more clear how to deal with it. So, yeah, the, the mania just got worse and worse, and I ended up in hospital for about five, five and a half months in a psychiatric unit. Goodness knows how I didn't get sectioned. I was really, really fortunate enough with a really good team to remain as a, as a voluntary patient. And, yeah, so I've got, I got diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder in 2018. And then ever since, just sort of slowly started to recover.

Hattie Butterworth

Thank you for, yeah, sharing that with such openness. And I think, this is something I'm so passionate about talking about, purely because I think there's so much people don't realise about it, and people don't understand about it. And even me, you know, just things I've seen in the media about Schizophrenia or Schizoaffective Disorder, have, you know, there aren't very many positive stories about I mean, there are coming out, luckily, but I mean, five years ago, or whatever, when you started suffering from extreme...you know, mania and psychosis and things, did you feel like, there was this huge stigma? How did you get over that feeling of ...? How did you come to terms with the diagnosis basically, is what I'm asking?

Matt Geer

It felt very much like saying the 's' as a swear word, when I thought that. When ... and I didn't really use the word schizophrenia for quite a while. In hospital, I'd sort of got used to the term bipolar. It's still, I mean, I ... there's no ... I don't really have an answer because it still feels like a dirty word. It still feels like a bit of a scary word. And I think, I think the one thing that does ground me a little bit is my psychiatrist told me, she said, it's most likely a lot more that diagnosed cases, it's about one in 100 people hear voices, and most of them are through schizophrenia. You can hear voices through anything, you can hear voices through having a panic attack, generalised anxiety disorder, ... depression, anything. A lot of people with OCD have hallucinations and things. So, I think just the fact of knowing it's a little bit more common than then I thought it was, was, was a little bit consoling.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah. I think you're, you're really right there. And I mean, for me, you know, I'll be really honest that I, my OCD, which I have been quite open about, my OCD has often been around the fear of having schizophrenia, just because it feels very often like, voices, like intrusive thoughts, and I'm sure you probably have dealt with similar kind of intrusive thoughts and things like that through it. They feel sometimes incredibly loud and incredibly real. And I've often thought, you know, "is this the start of something...?" purely because, you know, I don't, I haven't heard or we're not told about people with schizophrenia, and that they can live amazing lives, you know, that isn't something that is very often talked about. So a lot of people can develop this huge fear of, of, "mad people", just because there isn't the enough exposure to people that have these symptoms and have these experiences, and live amazing lives. Like, as you say, one in 100 people, that's a lot of people, and that's just the diagnosed people. So a lot of people are living with these symptoms, but we aren't taught ... they aren't, they aren't talked about and that you're so right, it is like a dirty word. And that's horrible...that's a horrible thing to have to, to have to say in 2020, isn't it? Like, it's still a dirty word for one in 100 people something they suffer from,like?

Matt Geer

Yeah, I mean, it's ... and it's interesting you say that, with OCD and I think there's a ... I mean, this has no real backing whatsoever, but it's just sort of my opinion that I think psychosis sort of is a bit of a spectrum. And you can get things like magical thinking.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah.

Matt Geer

...in OCD, where you, you know that something isn't going to happen. If you do an action or if you have a behaviour, you have a reinforcing behaviour, you think that something might, something bad might happen, but you know, it isn't gonna happen, but you have to do anyway. In psychosis, you're doing something because you absolutely firmly believe that something bad is going to happen. And we all have those sorts of thoughts and feelings. And so maybe it's just understand it a little bit like that.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah.

Matt Geer

And, and that also sort of shows how easy it is to, to develop things like psychosis, because often reinforced behaviour can lead to sort of paranoia, paranoia can lead to unusual beliefs. So ...

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah. I'm just wondering if, you know, how have you managed your mental health since your time in hospital? You know, how has the recovery process looked like for you? Do you still suffer from symptoms? Do you take medications? Like how, how have you managed that recovery?

Matt Geer

Yeah, I mean, I still suffer symptoms every day. I've ... I, there's very rarely a day where I don't hear voices.

Hattie Butterworth

Okay.

Matt Geer

The medication, I've got to be honest, medication is probably the single biggest thing that's helped unfortunately, or fortunately, depending how you look at it. I take antipsychotics, which have kept me out of psychosis. And lithium, especially, really does help with the mania. I've been on antidepressants, but they haven't worked as much for me, I found that more holistic things, things like talking therapy have really helped the depression. And it's strange because psychiatric medication, unlike it's sort of a little bit singular in its medical discipline, that medication hasn't really changed in the last 20, 30 years. We're still prescribing things like lithium for for mania, which is sort of good in a way that we know it works, but also unfortunate in that there's not really much we can we can do about it. We still don't

really understand how ... why people hear voices. So it's much more about looking towards more holistic approaches. Things like mindfulness, obviously...really, really beneficial. I've been doing it every day since hospital and in the hospital. And just talking about it as well, just being really honest, knowing what your triggers are, recognising them.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah.

Matt Geer

Things like that.

Hattie Butterworth

So yeah, do you find that a stressful period of time will usually aggravate your symptoms?

Matt Geer

Absolutely, yeah, I used to have a sort of daily, or monthly rhythm, where I'd fall into... I'd have about 10 days of mania, 10 days rest, 10 days depression, 10 days rest, something like that. And now I've got a little bit better. Episodes only really happened when I'm stressed. Or when I'm ruminating on things that sort of snowball out of control. So a lot of it is stress management.

Hattie Butterworth

Also through, you know, reading more about you, and actually, we have a couple of mutual friends who have talked to me about this opera that you wrote, called Sane and Sound. You know, everyone I've spoke to that was part of this project has talked to me about how great it is. And even before I'd heard of you, people would talk about this opera to me. And, you know, it was written as a response to your schizophrenia. And I was just wondering if you could talk about the process of writing this opera? And what was the process of composing it like, and what did you want to put across through writing it?

Matt Geer

Yeah, I mean, I have no recollection of writing it. I wrote it all, pretty much all during psychosis in hospital. I, the libretto just comes directly from diaries that I had in hospital where I was...it was interesting, actually, because you, you'd look at them, you'd have several pages of thinking that I was president of the country or something. Or, and then you'd see the sudden shift in, in the bipolar, and I immediately changed to depression, and it would be very much, very self-destructive writing. So I pretty much took the text from the diaries as is. And then the music sort of just fell in place. I was still manic when I wrote the music. So it's nothing like I'd ever right now. The orchestration is just bizarre and peculiar, and doesn't really work on any level. Yeah, I feel very detached from all ... the whole writing process.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah, what do you think that ... Has that ... I mean, listening to it back, because I'm assuming you went to the performances, you know, was that quite uncomfortable to know that? Or did it change the way that you thought about your composition since?

Matt Geer

Yeah, I mean, the first performance actually, I was staying in a crisis house. At that point, I was really not in a very good place. And I was sort of let out to go and see the performance. And I remember going back that evening to the crisis house, and somehow feeling really comforted, really relieved, because these voices that were just eroding the every single day, were just suddenly up on the stage, and completely detached from me. And I just felt really like, and grounded and in control, that actually, this is me, and that's them, rather than they are me. Maybe, yeah, it made me realised that maybe those thoughts aren't what I'm really thinking. Maybe it's just an illness after all.

Hattie Butterworth

And that, that in itself, reminds or makes me feel so at one with you, and with everyone suffering from mental illness, because that is the one thing I think we all have, is that when you're at your worst, you feel so deep in it and as if it's completely part of you, and there's no way you'll ever detach yourself from it. You know, but that ... what you said there, like that is the absolute kind of crux of healing in a way isn't it? It's to be able to see your illness for what it is. And as a separate part of you, and it's the same with thoughts, it's the same with intrusive thoughts, it's the same with moods and, and all of that. And I think that's amazing that, that you were able to see that on the first night of the performance. That's just ... Yeah. That must have really changed a lot for you to see it like that.

Matt Geer

Absolutely. It was ... it was quite a powerful experience, even if it was quite strange watching your piece.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah, I think also because ... probably, you feel like these voices, I mean, you can't share them with many people just like ... you know, sometimes you don't want to share your thoughts with people when they're dark, and I think there's a lot to be said for just having them ... having them there, having them real...you know, d'you know what I mean? Like, does it feel like you have to keep them to yourself?

Matt Geer

Absolutely. I mean, I, there hasn't, since the voices sort of got really bad - sort of 2015, around, then - I, there hasn't really been a day where I felt ... I haven't felt like I'm putting on an act, almost, in social situations and things. Most... nearly all of the time, when I'm speaking to someone in person, I'm having voices. And I'm not ... I don't really feel fully engaged with the conversation, I don't really feel fully grounded in my surroundings and everything. And yeah, it feels the condition makes you feel very extra in the world, I think. And so to be able to have a sit with a whole audience, as a collective group of people and experience these things, experience these external voices, rather than internal voices was very powerful. And actually, the really interesting thing is how the voice is ... my own voices were shouting back at the voices on stage. And sort of Derek was talking to Derek, and things like that, which is quite...

Hattie Butterworth

That is quite funny. That's really ... that's amazing. Probably, you didn't really understand what was going on. Like...

Matt Geer

So I was like "I've broken the system."

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah! So I'm really interested to hear what reactions did you have from people that were watching it and watched it? You know, how did people respond to this?

Matt Geer

It was really positive. I got a lot of hugs, which was really nice. Which I sort of ... it wasn't really about that. It was, I think, much more just about presenting it. I wasn't trying to achieve anything from it. I was literally just trying to write some music. So it was nice that it had that sort of effect on people.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah, I'm really pleased. The, the wonderful mental health activist Johnny Benjamin also got involved in your opera. Can you talk about, you know, how did you get in touch with him? And what part did he play in all of this?

Matt Geer

Yes, so my mom's school actually, I think, I think she'd have watched the.... He'd written a book and brought out a there's a documentary, I think it was on Channel Four, it's called Stranger on the Bridge. It was released in 2014, I think in May. And it was about a social media campaign called find Mike, where he was searching for the stranger who talked him off a bridge. He was trying to jump off in 2008. And he sort of got quite ... got a lot of publicity for this, but he ... the thing that really interested me with as he was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder, and also started experiencing ... auditory hallucinations from about 10. And then ... which then led to depression, which was pretty much exactly the sort of same journey I'd had in terms of mental health. So, I just emailed him, he agreed to come along and give a little talk at the beginning. And he's, he's a, he's an extraordinary person to ... he does vlogs on YouTube, and he, he, he just pulls out his camera. He's in psychotic depression in hospital, he just pulls out his camera and talks to the camera about how he wants to end his life in absolute tears, which just was really ... is really powerful to watch, to watch someone talk about that ... talk that candidly about their mental health that was really inspiring I think.

Matt Geer

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Matt Geer

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Hattie Butterworth

Totally and, you know, it must be so important for anybody suffering with schizoaffective disorder to have somebody that candid and that, you know, open about their struggles, because I don't know if before him there were many people saying it on that level, expressing their symptoms on that ... on his level that he has.

Matt Geer

No, I, I, I hadn't grown up ... I haven't experienced ... the only, I'm pretty much like everyone else, the only sort of experience of having schizophrenia is through the media, through ... Yeah, crime.

Hattie Butterworth

Literally. Yeah, there was this video he did that I watched, that I loved which was called some... I think it's called "sometimes I'm schizoaffective, sometimes I'm normal" or something. Have you seen that?

Matt Geer

Yeah.

Hattie Butterworth

I absolutely loved that, that changed so much for me about learning about the disorder and everything. Because he's just like, "sometimes I have cereal, sometimes I don't". And then it's sort of like, the next part is like him suffering from a symptom, but it's just all it's all quite... it brings humour in really well, doesn't it? And it's like, it just shows the day to day, like reality, that sometimes it's very dark, but sometimes it's just normal. And sometimes it's funny, and yeah, I found that really powerful.

Matt Geer

That's the thing. It's, it's just a normal illness, like every other illness in the world. Yeah, and there's, there's symptoms, just like you have pain in your leg, sometimes you haven't pain in your head.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah. But why do you think there's still such a big stigma related to schizophrenia and psychosis because, you know, other mental health issues like depression and anxiety, you know, we're seeing so much awareness for them all the time. But, there ... I feel like the, you know, awareness around schizophrenia feels behind. And, you know, what, why do you think that could be?

Matt Geer

Yeah, I've got no idea... I don't know if it's maybe because it's slightly less common. I ... obviously, there's, there's much more historically, that's much more of a fear, I think, around the conditions. You have these sort of images of people in asylums, that sort of locked up. I was speaking to my nan and granddad actually, and my nan recalls, in an old hospital, going down to a sort of massive, great corridor that they just used to keep the people ... I think they called them 'The Uncurables'.

Hattie Butterworth

Oh my gosh.

Matt Geer

Yeah. Who ... Yeah, had, if they were here today probably be under the intervention team, diagnosis of psychosis and be on some fantastic anti-psychotic medication that really helped them. But I think there is still a little bit of a sort of underfloor feeling about, about psychotic illness and about psychosis in

general, I think. I think that that both when you're in it, and for the people around you feel completely helpless and out of control maybe.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah. It's probably the the fear as well of, you know, you becoming someone else, not becoming but like presenting as something different from what you are in a way that probably scares people? But, you know, it's an illness. It's not...Yeah.

Matt Geer

I mean that's the thing, I mean, having spent time in hospital, around people with quite severe paranoid schizophrenia and psychosis and everything, it's very scary. It's very scary for the people around you as well. There is a risk, there is always going to be a risk of, if you're paranoid and you think someone's going to hurt you and you're in psychosis, you're going to potentially try and defend yourself, and that is a risk, and that's a reality. But if you're in ... nowadays, if you're in that state of mind, you're going to be in hospital most likely. Day to day, that's not going to happen. Day to day, I'm just going to maybe talk ... accidentally ... talk to myself occasionally. And things like that. It's perfectly harmless.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah, that's the other thing I read about, that there's this huge misconception that, you know, your paranoia might, you know, lead you to be dangerous or to hurt somebody else. But quite often, it's actually the opposite and it's more aimed at yourself. I learned that actually, these voices are more likely to tell you to either hurt yourself or ... rather than being directed at someone else.

Matt Geer

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, nearly all of my voices are around hurting myself, injuring myself, and ending my life, even when I'm feeling pretty much okay. And actually, I mean, I do have horrible, intrusive thoughts, just like anyone does feel like standing on a train platform. I think you wouldn't be human, if you didn't have the intrusive thought, "oh, my gosh, imagine if I fell and puled someone on the track or something." That the fact that we're scared of that thought makes us ... makes it okay. And I have those thoughts and voices a lot, and I'm really scared of them. And, yeah, that sort of proves, I think it's okay.

Hattie Butterworth

And it's totally normal. Completely. Yeah, and this is sort of the other thing is, you know, it's kind of going off topic, but because it's such a united experience. And, you know, I've suffered with, you know, those thoughts on a very extreme level around my OCD, and it started for me, when I was eight years old, I'd have really intense harm thoughts about hurting other people and hurting myself. And I just kind of, now looking back, I knew how helpless and terrified I was as a young child and not knowing that fear was, in a way, normal. And I mean, I don't know if you have an idea of how we can talk to younger children about mental health, or raising awareness that these intrusive thoughts or whatever, are something that can be treated, because I think there are a lot of children that really do suffer in silence still.

Matt Geer

Yeah, I mean, I think we've just got to be much more specific about how we talk about mental health. It's fantastic talking about sort of a general mental well being and everything. But I think just talking more specifically about different illnesses, and different symptoms, as well, not necessarily illnesses, but different thoughts and feelings and behaviours that people can have that may be upsetting for some people in the people around you. And how we can maybe best deal with them.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah, and actually, in a way, protecting children from that. You know, what I think that's what happened to me is my parents or whoever around me wanted to protect me from, you know, the realities of mental illness or what some suicidal people might do or whatever and, and I think, because I only knew parts of the story, I didn't really know that they were suffering from an illness that would probably be cured or helped. I think, then my brain made up the rest of the story, that this was an endless struggle, and you know what I mean? And I think that's something that's really dangerous is we try and protect children, maybe, but then we ended up causing more harm, because there's so much they don't then know or don't realise is hoping you know what I mean?

Matt Geer

Absolutely.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah. Um, so, I was just wondering, many composers, in the past have very clearly suffered with mental health issues. And, you know, it's very well known that Tchaikovsky was incredibly, you suicidal, with the thought about being gay, and I mean, Schumann didn't come to a very good end in that way, either. But why then, in the classical music profession, we have all of these incredible composers who made amazing music and we play it all day every day. You know, why then, is it still really hard to talk, you know, about mental illness in the classical music profession? You know, do you think that suffering is kind of glamorised in the composers a little bit?

Matt Geer

Yeah, I mean, there's, there's definitely the stereotype: the tortured composer. And the more sort of mentally unwell and reclusive you are, the better your music's gonna be, which is just a load of rubbish. I think collaboration's like the best thing in the world. But yeah, I don't I don't know if there's a biological link, biochemical link between creativity and mental health. There might be, there might not be, but I feel like ... I think we, we often see like, all of these extraordinary composers have mental health problems as well. That ... I feel like that might be just because they were well known, and a lot of people had mental health difficulties that just weren't diagnosed. And we sort of diagnose them because we know them.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah.

Matt Geer

I'm not sure.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah.

Matt Geer

But, um, I feel like it was a lot more common. It's not like mental health has necessarily rose massively. It's I think, our diagnosis, our ability to diagnose has risen.

Hattie Butterworth

This is the thing, isn't it? Like, the thing that really angers me sometimes is, you know, I remember being on a music course and talking to the tutor, the cello tutor on that. And he was saying, "Oh, it's disgusting, you know, how many young people are taking antidepressants these days." And I was thinking, "Oh, my God, like, that is not ... that is amazing. You know, okay, it's terrible that they've suffered. But it's amazing that there's something they found to help." you know?

Matt Geer

Absolutely.

Hattie Butterworth

And I think that view isn't as clear to some people. It's, sort of, often like "Oh, god, that's terrifying how many people are dealing with it. Yeah, that's just, that's just awful. That's horrible. Like, they clearly haven't found, you know, meditation." It's like, oh, this is a illness. Like, it's it's not as simple as that. And it's actually kind of wonderful that we have the resources to be able to provide mentally ill people with health, you know?

Matt Geer

Absolutely.

Hattie Butterworth

So kind of to finish on this sort of topic, what do you wish people would understand about bipolar and in general, schizoaffective disorder? Like, what is the thing you're always wanting people to know about it? Or know about how it feels to suffer with it?

Matt Geer

I think I'm more concerned about just people recognising ... recognising difficulties in their own mental health, and making sure that they don't fall into the same trap that I did, because I put off getting help for so long. And that definitely led to my mental health deteriorating a lot quicker. And also, dealing it ... dealing with it this young was incredibly important. I mean, if I'd have had the same sort of ... I hate the word 'breakdown', but I'm gonna use it anyway... breakdown, as it were, then it ... sort of the age of 40, if maybe, maybe I'd had sort of family and job and things, I mean, I can see things falling apart very easily. But all I had to really do was just defer my uni course by a year and move back home for a bit. Which, which and I had a student loan that I was living on, which didn't stop and that was all fine, so I think just making sure that you recognise the symptoms in yourself, is really important. And also if you sort of come across people that are struggling, just give them space and time, and it'll be okay.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah, thank you so much for that, that's really important. And I think the way you talked about it has just opened, so many ... so much of my understanding, and I'm sure a lot of other people's. And I just kind of want to talk kind of briefly, just because I think it's also important about, you know, your faith and your identity as a Christian. And I know, we've spoken on email about it, and we both kind of in a similar space with our faith and that it's something that is very important to us, but also feels quite difficult to talk about because of maybe the misconceptions people have around Christians and, and all of that. I just wondered if you could maybe tell us a bit about your faith journey and, and how things are going in that way for you now.

Matt Geer

Yeah, I mean, it's, it's definitely a ... it fluctuate, I'd say. I've, I've been ... I'm currently being sort of on the journey of becoming a tertiary, the society, the Federal Society of St. Francis. Just because I found ... I was finding it really difficult to find a segment of, of the church that really resonated with me. So I, I found, I came across the writings of St. Francis and, and found that his emphasis on treating individual, I think individual to individual contact was probably the single most important thing that we can focus on, rather than sort of creating tribes and things like that. So at the at the moment, and I'm sort of exploring that.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah, and can you talk about why, you know, you were struggling to find your place in the church? I mean, what is it that the Third Order of St. Francis, you know, gives that maybe some other parts of the church don't?

Matt Geer

I think it gives you the, and I think if, if someone asked me the, "what's the one thing the Bible's missing?" which is probably the worst ... I'd say, scepticism, the ability to question is one of the most fantastic virtues of human life. And I think the Franciscans have given me an... have presented me with an openness and ability to be able to be sceptical, as a human, be able to question convention, and quench and question what we believe. Whereas I feel like quite a lot of religion that's going around, especially in universities is much more quite authoritarian, I'd say, and very much ... I don't think people really understand how right wing and how evangelical a lot of young Christian movements are in the UK.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah.

Matt Geer

And there's, there's a big disparity that.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah, it's taken away a lot from mystery that is, at the heart of the Christian faith, I feel. You know, it's taken what should be a kind of individual journey to, you know, peace and love and your connection with one another, and it's made that into, you know, a sort of binary view of what's wrong and how you

can avoid eternal hell. And, you know, and then sadly, that is the loudest voice, perhaps, at the moment. And that's the voice that most people will hear. And yet it's not really the reality of most Christians in the UK, I would say, you know.

Matt Geer

Absolutely not. I find it really difficult how, how divisive I think these things tend to be. I think we've almost in these movements lost the ability to criticise ourselves. It's, it's very much non-confession religion. My, I've gotta... the church where I'm an organist at, one of the choir members often says that the people that point fingers and wave their fingers at other people don't realise that there's three fingers pointing back at them, which I really love. So yeah, and I also find it really difficult that the disparity between the, the general aesthetic of these churches, the fact that if you go to, for example, the Anglo Catholic Church with immense amount of spirituality, I'd say, and openness and, and liberalism, acceptance of, of various causes, quite often pro same sex marriage, things like that. And yet their, their liturgy is very much traditional, high, lots of Latin, things like that. And yet the the student churches, the young churches, with no real fixed structure, and are with lots of sort of praise bands and flashing lights and everything are often the most right-wing, conservative, evangelical, anti-semitic, homophobic, sexist, misogynistic places ...

Hattie Butterworth

You can keep going!

Matt Geer

... I've ever visited.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah.

Matt Geer

And I think the problem is they have programmes and they sort of draw people in, and ...

Hattie Butterworth

Yes.

Matt Geer

...they don't necessarily realise that ... students don't necessarily realise that that's what they're going into, and then they only realise when it's sort of too late and ...

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah.

Matt Geer

...sort of become a part of the problem as it were.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah, I mean, what were you brought up in a Christian household?

Matt Geer

I was, but it was very open. We like ... we were never, we never really spoke about it. My mum and dad never forced anything upon us. And always, I think, gave us the option and openness to question things.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah.

Matt Geer

And, yeah, we never really spoke about things...

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah.

Matt Geer

... in the house, unless we wanted to. Which I think is the best, best way to bring someone up.

Hattie Butterworth

I think, as well, though, you know, I, I've never really talked about it on here, but I was brought up in a vicarage. And until I was 10, my dad was, you know, a vicar and then he retired. And now I feel that, in a way, I'm privileged in that, because he was... he is and was very liberal and very open and accepting of all people. And that was the sort of church that I knew. I didn't really understand then when I was getting older, why people would then view my Christianity as something negative. Because I was like, "but I'm just like you, like, I believe the same things as you." And I think what's hard is that if you haven't been brought up in a Christian environment, it's kind of like people that don't know classical music, like you're not going to be likely to know the churches that are going to be in line with what you believe. You know, you're not, you're going to see the Evangelical churches first, if you're interested, because that's the loudest voice and that's what's shining out. You know what I mean? So I feel privileged that I know, I've been brought up to know kind of the levels and how to be in a church service, because that's also something that's very alien to a lot of people.

Matt Geer

Absolutely, yeah. I mean, and I think the thing is, as well, the the role of these sorts of churches, that isn't necessarily their ambition quite ... I mean, to quote a old employer who I worked at, always used to use the quote, "preach if necessary, use words", which think is the most important thing we can, we can remember about, about living in sort of constant, and [...] to our actions, rather than sort of just trying to get as many bodies as possible.

Hattie Butterworth

Exactly. And there's a lot to be said, for, you know, the power of prayer in that way, as well. And how prayer leads us to each other. And I think that's a big part of maybe being Franciscan or that outlook is

it's not so much about forcing people in, but putting out this message of love and watching people come back to you or come to you, I think.

Matt Geer

That's, that's the thing. I mean, prayer is such an important part of my life. I'd say ... I'm, I've I don't, it's probably been seven or eight years, since I've actually sat down with my eyes closed and my hands, hands together. I never ever do that. Prayer for me is is a continual, daily thing that I do ... and it's much more about trying to live presently, in the present moment, much more akin with things like mindfulness, and about doing good and about trying to do things through the right sort of motivation rather than the wrong sort.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah. Yeah. Did you feel that your mental health experiences made your faith stronger?

Matt Geer

Um, I, I would say so. It's, it's difficult to say that because I'm quite often told, "Oh, well. A lot of people find religion as it were after, after they experience some sort of grievance or tragedy or loss or something." But it was very much continual through it. I ... I think it definitely made me question how I currently practise my religion. And it... for a period, for quite a long period of time, it made me quite unsure about things. And that probably led me to the Franciscans because ... experiencing psychosis, you're bound to think you're God at some stage, you're bound to have ...

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah.

Matt Geer

... to have grandiose thoughts. And so to realise how, how easy it is to, to believe something that is absolutely ludicrous, and then come out of psychosis and not understand how you could possibly believe that was, was very confusing.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah, oh my goodness.

Matt Geer

So it can't be through....I think my faith now is much more ... is much less about emotion, and much more about the humanity side of it.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah.

Matt Geer

And trying to be humble and things.

Hattie Butterworth

I totally agree with that. Because I think there's this kind of feeling, for me, at least at the start of my faith journey, as well of like, looking for those nice emotions, the sort of squishy, like, spiritual emotions. But you're right, like when everything is horrendous for you, when everything is going wrong, you know, it's, it's in that moment, when you sit to pray that you kind of learn the most. It's like, when you feel you can't, when you feel most sort of stuck, in a way is the most important time. That's what I've learned anyway, and I think that's such a good point, to take emotion less seriously in faith, and it's obviously a positive thing sometimes, but it's not everything.

Matt Geer

No, absolutely. We've got ... for me, it has to be continual, daily, hourly, minute-by-minute thing. I don't ... that, I mean, that's why I don't go to churches with lots of sort of loud exciting music and everything and lights because I don't confuse the Holy Spirit for people singing and shouting and getting excited around you because you're going to feel happy no matter what. I think I, I am much more interested in how we can live with faith outside those moments than inside those moments.

Hattie Butterworth

Yeah, that's really, really interesting. I ... Yeah, I'm just completely..urgh! Yeah, uplifted by talking to you. Your story is so important and thank you for, you know, sharing and giving us the opportunity to talk about this, and to talk and to break what is the most irritating stigma. And, you know, I hope it goes on and especially in the classical music profession. You know, people are ... we're going to have, naturally going to have people that are sensitive and struggle, and that is, of course, it leads us to some very difficult places, if you struggle with mental health, but also it's an amazing thing and I, I want us to be able to accept all ... all spectrums of struggle. And just thank you so much for sharing yours.

Matt Geer

Oh no, it's pleasure. Thank you so much.

Hattie Butterworth

No problem.

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