

BATON CHARGE

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Ballet, conducting seasons on tour both in this country and abroad. He conducted well known pieces such as Swan Lake and Sleeping Beauty, as well as several seasons at the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden. All seemed to be going well until the ballet was struck by a major financial crisis in 1971. The touring company was reduced by a third and Christopher was one of those let go.

Things then took a somewhat surreal turn. "I entered a slogan competition and won," he says. "Around the time I left the ballet there was a craze for early music played on authentic instruments, like crumhorns, shawms and rauschpfeifens, which had caught my interest. The first prize for my slogan was a few thousand pounds and it allowed me to buy several of these old instruments. I ended up starting a group called the Praetorius Consort. It was great fun but extremely hard work. Every early music group had to have their own arrangement, even for the same pieces. The original scores did not specify the instruments to use, so groups at the time played

pieces on whatever they had."

Christopher had to write the orchestrations for each player, with each member playing several instruments. "I well remember sometimes spending an hour trying to get a group member from the last note on one instrument to the first note on the next one," he says. "With that sort of music you have to do so much research, and running the ensemble took up the next 10 or 11 years of my life."

In the early days, the Consort enjoyed success at home and abroad. The group's popularity led to Christopher being asked to compose some original music for the BBC Midland Radio Orchestra. That long forgotten catchy slogan had led Christopher to an eight year successful career with the Consort and now what turned out to be 10 years regularly writing, composing and conducting for the BBC.

Most of this creativity was based around interpreting other people's music, but the time would eventually come when Christopher would want to compose his own works. When that time did arrive, inspiration came – as things tend to with Christopher – from an unexpected quarter. "Michael Parkinson was interviewing Quincy Jones," he says. "I didn't know his music or anything about him, but I thought he came across as a really attractive human being. Parkinson asked him, 'How do you write all this music, where does it come from?' The answer he gave changed my life. He said, 'Whenever I need a piece of music I just ask for it.'"

The legendary African-American songwriter and producer explained that before going to bed he would ask questions like, what mood does it need to be, how long is it, what instruments does it need? "I just ask the ether, ask my subconscious, and then I forget about it," he told Parkinson, and usually about a couple of days later he would wake up and the music was in his head.

"I thought that was absolutely

extraordinary, the most interesting thing I had ever heard on a chat show," Christopher recalls. "At the time I was trying to write a concerto for the recorder. So I thought, why don't I just ask for the music? About three days later, halfway down the stairs from my flat, the tune for a slow movement came into my mind, just like that. One second there was nothing there, the next it was like something playing in my head."

He rushed back up the stairs, got a recorder and played the tune through. It ended up being the slow movement for the concerto. Once he had that start, the rest of the concerto flowed. Of course there was still a great deal of work to be done, but the core was there and it turned out beautifully. "Ever since then I have often done that when I need a piece of music, and I always think of Quincy Jones when I do so. Now most of my tunes come to me when I wake up in the morning. They are already in my head."

Christopher later recorded that recorder concerto in front of an audience in a small town called Adderbury. There was a local doctor present that night. A week later he called to tell Christopher that it was the best piece of new music he had heard in 25 years – and commissioned him to write a piece specially for the orchestra. It was Christopher's first orchestral commission, and a new chapter in a long and varied career had begun. It is a facet of his career that shows no sign of slowing down. He wrote three concertos last year. At the moment he is very excited about his latest project.

"My two latest cello concertos are to be recorded by a wonderful 23-year-old Croatian cellist called Stjepan Hauser, the last pupil of Rostropovich. We will record them this summer." As I sit while Christopher enthuses about this latest project I can almost see that 11-year-old boy pestering his parents for that first clarinet. None of that excitement and passion has diminished. Hopefully it never will.