

Burgess and Bohuslav Martinu

By [Anthony Wilkinson](#)

I first met Anthony Burgess in 1967. An already established 'great writer' he was establishing a further reputation as an erudite television performer, a frequent contributor to the BBC2 evening revue programme, 'Late Night Line Up'. I responded to his entertaining and informed view of the arts world, and was aware of his great knowledge and love of music.

I was in the final stages of completing a dramatised film of the life of the then little known Czech composer, Bohuslav Martinu, who had been born at the top of a church tower in Bohemia. Because of ill-health he rarely left the tower until he was six years old, and then only for violin lessons. From these inauspicious beginnings Martinu won a scholarship to study in Prague, played with the Czech Philharmonic before suddenly abandoning his homeland to study composition with Albert Roussel in Paris. With the onset of war he moved further west, to exile in New York. He finally returned to Europe, not to his occupied homeland, but to live out his final years in Switzerland. My film, shot on the locations where he lived, was told in a patchwork of dialogue scenes in the appropriate language, first Czech, then French, and some English. It required an insightful narrative commentary for the English-speaking audience to know what was going on.

Watching Anthony Burgess one night on 'Late Night Line Up', I thought that he was just the writer for the job: someone who had experienced exile, and written about artists in exile -- and little did anyone know that he himself would soon return to a further life in exile. The film on Martinu was appropriately titled 'Music of Exile.'

The production was already in fine cut stage by the time Burgess first saw it, watching a small flickering image on a noisy editing machine in the cutting room.

I explained the story, and the precise moment in the film where I thought commentary would be appropriate, and, where the dialogue, or musical sequences should take over from his narrative. Anthony took notes of the timings of various in and out points, and we retired to the club for a drink. On parting he said he would get back to me very quickly. I suggested he shouldn't start to write until a fee had been agreed, and as BBC policy very sensibly kept creatives a safe distance from the negotiating of contracts, that he should wait for a call from the business affairs department in the course of the week.

By lunch time the next day Burgess arrived hot foot with a dozen typed pages. A few drinks later we found our way to the cutting room to try reading his words against picture. I remember it as something of a farce. As soon as the first image was on the screen he was away, like an over eager race horse bolting from the starting gate, getting faster and faster as it ran away from the pack... and he wouldn't stop even as I tried to rein him in! He finished reading the entire narration for this 60 minute film, while we were still at the top of the hundred and ninety eight steps of the church tower of Martinu's youth.

When the dazzling flow of words eventually stopped, we both took deep breaths and then applied ourselves for the remainder of the working day to going over words and pictures in the minutest detail, with Burgess making copious notes (more on this later!) for the re-write. We celebrated with a further drink before he went off home, promising a quick response.

It came mid morning the next day! Living at that time just down the Goldhawk Road he beat me to the BBC cutting room in Shepherds Bush. When the first image hit the screen, he was silent -- a musical sequence: fade music: narration began, and finished miraculously as the next music began. Fade out to narration: precision stuff... And so it went throughout the sixty minutes. Perfection born out of yesterday's chaos. Wonderful.

And the critics thought so too: *"The Music of Exile", wrote Henry Raynor in the Times of Oct. 9th 1967, "investigated the life and work of Bohuslav Martinu through a script in which Anthony Burgess found in a strangely romantic life story the genesis of*

many of Martinu's works. This method is extremely suspect nowadays (because in the past it was often applied to composers to whom it is totally inapplicable), but Mr. Burgess's urgent exposition made it entirely valid"

For a while afterwards I went to Anthony's home for a drink at least a couple of times a month. Thursdays come to my mind. His small dark room, at least what I remember was a dark, if not black room, dominated by a large black bar. The room was lightened by his sparkling conversation.

One visit, in an act of generosity, and friendship, Anthony gave me the originals of his first and second drafts, adding (no doubt with first hand knowledge of this fickle business) that McGill University collected his original manuscripts if I ever found myself in need.

Four years later, after I left the BBC for a three picture deal with MGM which didn't seem to be bearing fruit, I was one evening in my study, contemplating my library of books, worrying about mortgage payments and school fees and seriously considering having to pack everything and move. My eye came to rest on Anthony's drafts, and McGill University came to mind.

I had no idea of the value of the manuscripts - just that Burgess had received £ 50 for writing them. Photocopying was not readily available in those days, so I wrote to McGill with a description of the drafts. That Anthony Burgess's signature measured five and three-quarter inches. That the first type-written draft was thirteen pages long, and contained numerous hand-written notes. That the second draft -- with equally bold signature -- was just eleven pages and contained no hand written notes at all. There was a response by return. Yes, McGill were interested, How much did I want?

I'd never thought about "how much" -- so I visited a mature and wise writer friend just down the road, the distinguished Leo Lehmann. "Ask a thousand" he advised. "Pounds" he said. But I bottled out. 'A thousand dollars', I responded. 'Yes' flashed back the reply. Take them to Bernard Rota in London for authentication, and there would be a cheque waiting.

That cheque saved my house, and I lived there, and worked happily in my study until 1995 -- when the house was sold to another writer, Penny Vincenzi.

I met with Anthony Burgess from time to time sometimes in Monte Carlo, or when he visited London (he gave a memorable talk about Stravinsky at the South Bank complex). I came clean once, and told him that I had parted with his manuscripts, and has made several times more than he had received for writing them. He shrugged, and told me about 'A Clockwork Orange'.

Anthony had once assigned to me the rights to make a film of 'A Clockwork Orange' - a Thursday night present in that dark room down the Goldhawk Road. But I readily gave them up when he telephoned to say that the celebrated Stanley Kubrick wanted to make a film of it.

Sorry to say, I didn't much like the film. Not sour grapes, but Burgess's book was so much better -- and I felt no emotion during the film when that dreadful lobotomy took place (in Burgess's original it was one of the great achievements in all literature). And I was even more sorry when Burgess told me that he had been paid only 'a thousand' (pounds I hope, not dollars) for it, whereas the esteemed director was reputed to have made a fortune counted in millions from it. The way of the world!

Thank you, Les Amis d'Anthony Burgess, for this chance to salute a giant among writers, and a man generous in kind and in spirit.

A musician, writer and director, [Anthony Wilkinson](#) has enjoyed an active career in many branches of the media: drama, documentaries, music and arts, commercials, television, radio and theatre. He has directed major productions for several international networks including the BBC, ITV and Channel Four in Britain; NBC, ABC and PBS in the United States; CBC in Canada; and TF1 in France.

