

A very talented and promising guitarist recently asked me: Is our repertoire inferior to that of the piano? In order to take into account all in my opinion significant aspects, I chose to answer this question in form of a fictional interview.

Is our repertoire inferior to that of the piano?

Bingo! This is the fundamental question concerning classical guitar. But to begin with, we must begin by asking: What makes a musical instrument attractive? The music you play on it! Are we, as classical guitarists, attracting an audience and organizers with the music we play, our repertoire? Can we compete with other classical instruments like the violin and the piano, and the music they play!... Let's talk about it! You picked the piano, so...

Is our repertoire inferior to that of the piano?

To answer the question: Yes it is, absolutely, no doubt! No way our repertoire comes even close to the vast amount of brilliant and genius pieces composed for the piano during the last three to four centuries. Answer number 2: No, not necessarily.

- That's not an answer. The question requires an evaluation of the repertoire - is it inferior, yes or no? Or, if you want to be more precise you can mark it from 1 to 10. But 'not necessarily' is not an answer! Necessary or unnecessary is not an assessment, an evaluation.
- Well, it is. Not necessarily because it depends on the guitarist.
- What do you mean? How can the quality of a composition depend on the player?
- Do you know John, the artistic director of Wigmore Hall in London? The Number One venue for a guitar recital. At least that's what it was when I was studying, which is ages ago, I admit. But obviously now it is no more. A successful Wigmore Hall recital could make you a name as a guitarist in the music world. No more so! Do you know why? Because they no longer do guitar recitals. Well, John said classical guitar proposals go right to the trash can, wastepaper basket, he said actually - we're in London. Because all the guitarists are offering Villa-Lobos thinking that they play it better than the guitarist before them and believing this makes them attractive. Do you have an idea which repertoire, all sorts of chamber music and solo stuff John can choose from? String Quartets and Trios, Octets and Serenades from Mozart, Schubert, Beethoven to Debussy and Bartók, Schumann or Chopin recitals, you name it. How can you think to gain John's, or some other artist director's attention, and drive an audience to the hall offering Villa-Lobos?

To be clear: I don't think Villa-Lobos is a good composer. His guitar music annoys me, I feel insulted by it to be honest. With the exception of the Concerto. But that is a piece for the studio and not the stage. Only in the studio the voices be balanced - on stage you drown and there is not enough variety in dynamics and instrumentation, orchestration if you will. Anyway, insulted, yes! When he wants me to go up and down the entire fingerboard with the same fingering... this is not musical thinking but a mechanical idea, nothing "compositional", nothing creative, zero inspiration! And he does that in nearly every piece!

Some time ago I played at a Chilean Government event with the Chilean ambassador present. As I got ready to perform, a young chap, manager of some company, approached me and said (in Spanish), "I studied guitar for four years. Do you play Villa-Lobos?" Oh no! I thought, but of course I was polite. Isn't there anything else on their minds? Is that all? Is that the fruit of four years of studying classical guitar?

- What else should there be?
- Education! Knowledge, a survey of our 800 years of European classical music! What we consider High Culture. Just take a look at the music of the last three to four centuries in order to be able to find and detect the good pieces which there are! Notice the difference, feel the difference! If you think that Tárrega, Villa-Lobos and Mertz are pieces good enough to compete with other chamber music or solo repertoire, you will never be taken seriously. You can't honestly believe that Mertz, Sor & comp. are valuable pieces once you have analyzed a number of Mozart Piano Sonatas. OK, Mertz and Sor often have beautiful openings, but

then the variations go right into the most mediocre and repetitious standards, boring, annoying. Look, I worked on the Tansman Cavatina recently and understood that this is really one of the great, outstanding original guitar pieces, the piece is grand! When I read the score, I mean to hear Tansman's intention, his intuition, his inspiration. I hear the piano opening the first movement with the chords accompanied by the repetitious bass line: data ditti data ditto, doto dong - then Cue! the Violin jumping in on the high ,g'! - di-da, dong dong, di-da...it's a motive and response opening, and the piece is going, right away, straight forward, lively, rousing, invigorating and carries one away. What a great piece. I am still striving to reach the level of interpretation which it bears.

- OK, but that is just one piece. I understand Tansman was very educated and had brilliant mind.
- And he loved the guitar!
- But you cannot make a guitarist career on just this piece.
- Of course not. But look, I searched on YouTube to see if any guitarist playing this piece. And there are! There were several, and one chap gave a very decent performance, flawless, no problems or difficulties at all in his playing, technically everything under control. But when he was finished, I would have loved to ask him 'What is your idea about the piece, what are your thoughts?' There was nothing, no fantasy, no idea to be felt behind his playing, his finger work. Franz Liszt told a student, "Play this Sonata like a rose between two heavy rocks." I love it! It gives you a tremendous amount of material to play with using the sheer power of imagination. Or Alexis told me that he told a student to play the second movement of the Ravel Piano Concerto "like the blue of Magritte." It worked! When the student came back a year later, an intelligent, educated boy from Korea, Alexis said, "that's it, you got it!"

When you have a certain degree of education, a certain level of thinking, you will recognize the good composers. The mediocre pieces will not satisfy you. You will instantly identify the good pieces, the pieces which bear substance, which there are, like: the Dodgson Partitas, Britten, Walton, Petrassi, Ponce and so many others. OK, this is all modern music. But cool, we have a whole bunch of superb modern music, Takemitsu, hu! And we have the old stuff, Albéniz, Granados etc. Did you ever try Rossi? Give it a try, you'll love it. Holy cow, there are so many others!

Look, whenever I played for the big guys, like Alexis, Alicia - OK, she's an exception because we got together particularly for Albéniz and Granados - or the Amadeus Quartett guys (Martin Lovett and Peter Schidlof), they all loved the arrangements for guitar. But you have to arrange the pieces well, damnit, and not skip the climax simply because it's hard to play. There are too many bad transcriptions published, too much bullshit on the market, and the students buy it, because they're not taught to know better.

- And so do the teachers.
- Even worse!
- Do you think the audience will recognize a good arrangement? Will they be able to distinguish between a lousy and a sophisticated transcription?
- Sure, they will. Not by a single note of course. Very few people will notice that the bass note in the original score is an F-sharp while the guitarist is playing the open D string instead. But doing this work, arranging the piece with the full conscience, knowledge, and respect for the original, it will come across during your performance. This will surely be perceived. And unfortunately, as things are, you will never be happy with the result, because you'll always be looking for better.
- There are no upper limits to the arts - a Russian saying.
- Exactly! All this together is what convinces an audience, and makes a musician attractive, and his performance satisfying, because he plays with meaning, and that is what we perceive, what we want to perceive in a performance.

- And you arranged music by Leonard Bernstein.
- Yes, that was Leonard Bernstein's idea. He knew my recording and scores of his kid songs and asked me to arrange a whole series for solo guitar. This was very important to me, but I wouldn't consider that common guitar repertoire.
- Right. But back to perception. Perception of an audience. How about the critics?
- Thank you for bringing that in! Also a great problem is the perception of guitar playing within the guitar world, of how the guitar recitals and recordings are reviewed in the guitar media. There were several guitar magazines, when I studied, are they still around? Not the ones I knew. Anyway, the way guitarists were reviewed there was partly atrocious. For example, I remember one American guitarist being portrayed as a brilliant guitarist, Eduardo Something, forgot his surname, "he is very fast," the review said. Give me a break, please! That says a lot about the person who wrote the article, if you ask me, but nothing about the musician he wrote about.
- What does it say about the critic?
- That he is impressed by fast fingers, fast scales or so, and doesn't listen into the music.

I was with an American opera singer then, she said, "I heard him play. His voice leading is great!" Have I ever heard the term voice leading from a guitar teacher or professor at the university? Not in six years. See what I mean?

I would have loved to read a review comparing several recordings of Benjamin Britten's Nocturnal, focusing on the nuances, the different styles and personalities of the artists - like who's Chopin do you like best? Arthur Rubinstein's, the old school, Murray Perahia's, gosh, wasn't he wonderful? Thibaudet or whoever - all first class interpreters, top of the top, but all very different, everyone plays "his personal" Chopin. Listen to Casals playing the Bach Cello-Suites, Fournier or Yo-Yo Ma. Forget about Milstein's Bach, listen to Szeryng. Such things never happened in the guitar world - it simply was not on their minds. A mindset, an intellectual level which is totally absent in the guitar world.

- What do you think can be done or should be done?
- I recently gave a masterclass at a conservatory in Latin America. All the students were very nice, very open and interested. Some played arrangements, but no one had taken a look at the original score or even had it with them. No one could read or work with the score professionally. When I said please start again from bar 71, they had to go further back, some right to the beginning, in order to play the part. All muscle memory, nothing mentally controlled. Go to an orchestra rehearsal. The conductor says, "horns 126, upbeat please." They start right away, and if a soloist is with them, he joins in right on the spot, even without looking at the score, by heart, at any note. That's what you are supposed to do and learn at a conservatory.

Or music interpretation. Do you know the Giuliani Rondo, that little, simple piece? I've never met a guitarist paying attention to it. It is a nice piece, and you can learn a lot from it. You can make an experiment. If you have a student who plays it - in my class it would be mandatory - tell him, "think it is a piece by young Mozart" or "Think you are young Mozart when you play it." And you'll see, they'll play it differently. They'll pay attention to the little nuances, the poetic beauty here, the joyful and humorous elements there, a dynamic progression, the repetition of a motive, etc. Then it's really a lovely piece. It helps, it works. I mean, look, if an actor can go on stage 'being King Lear,' why can't you go on stage being 'young Mozart?' Psychology, that may be a bit far-fetched - let's call it attitude. With your attitude you change your presence. The Talmud has an allegory for that: "If a young boy wants to be a Rabbi, he first has to believe he already is a Rabbi. If he believes so, he will think and act differently, not as a child anymore, but more like a Rabbi."

- A religious aspect in music making?
- We're dealing with a tremendous amount of excellent musical thinking, produce of centuries, repertoire throughout the ages. It needs an effort to capture that.

A pianist will not be able to play through the entire piano repertoire during his lifetime, it's just too much for one life span. We guitarists can, there is not so much material. The attitude of a performer, his stage presence, his personality, builds up according to his knowledge, his education and forms his substance as a musician. And that knowledge makes us choose the repertoire and the level on which we perform. At the end, this is what comes across to an audience. This is what makes the repertoire valuable. There is a whole lot of excellent music for the guitar. Not as much as for the piano, true. But our repertoire is not necessarily inferior to that of the piano. The question is what we do with it. It all depends on us.

For Rachel

names mentioned:

Alexis - Alexis Weissenberg

Alicia - Alicia de Larrocha

both world leading pianists of the late 20th century