

Letter from New York

By JULIA CROWE

THE D'Addario Music Foundation, in conjunction with D'Addario & Company and Spain's Alhambra Guitars have revived their Classical Guitar Concert Series at New York's Weill Hall at Carnegie to showcase winners of the most prestigious classical guitar competitions along with other established guitarists. Jim D'Addario and his wife Janet initially ran the concert series from 1979 to 1993. The first concert had been a solo event at Town Hall featuring guitarist Michael Newman, and the following year featured Ben Verdery in concert at Merkin Hall. The series shifted venues from New York to San Francisco's Half Moon Bay, where the event had been managed by Richard Patterson, who now runs the Omni Concert Series. Past venues have included Georgetown University in Washington, DC, Milwaukee, Wisconsin and then the Netherlands. Artists who have performed in this series include Paco Peña, David Starobin, the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet, David Leisner, Raphaella Smits, Oscar Ghiglia, Baltazar Benitez, David Russell, Laura Oltman and David Tanenbaum.

This year's series opened with a solo performance by Turkish-born guitarist Cem Duruöz. Duruöz, who won first prize in the Turkish National Guitar Competition aged 17, completed his graduate studies at the Juilliard School with Sharon Isbin and now teaches guitar performance at Wesleyan University, Connecticut. His short programme featured Piazzolla's *Milonga del Angel* and *Verano Porteño*, followed by G-H Matos-Rodriguez's tango *La Cumparsita*, and two of Duruöz's arrangements: *Haydar Haydar*, a traditional Turkish piece which emulates the saz with elements of sufi music, and closing with the shifting metres of the classical Turkish piece *Sultaniyegâh Sırto*. Duruöz's playing speaks of subtlety, eloquence and elegance with his tonal range and dynamics.

French guitarist Philippe Bertaud, who has performed at the Montreal International Jazz Festival, provided a contrast with his contemporary, jazz-inflected arrangements of a variety of well known tunes, including *Amazing Grace*, *La Manguiera*, *California Dreamin'* by The Mamas and the Papas, *Smells Like Teen Spirit* by Nirvana and *Canto de Ossanha* by Baden Powell.

Bertaud and Duruöz paired up for a set of duet pieces from Argentina and Brazil, opening with music by Argentine tango great Aníbal Troilo: *Romance de Barrio* and the milonga *La Trampera*. The duo also played Bertaud's Mediterranean-flavoured *Café del Mar*, *Sururu na Cidade* by Zequinha de Abreu and a lively *Brasileirinho* by Valdir Azevedo, ending their set with the classical Turkish piece *Nihavend Longa*, arranged by Duruöz.

After a brief intermission the second half of the evening centred on the Carnegie debut of Spain's



From left to right, Philippe Bertaud, Cem Duruöz, Rafael Aguirre Minarro and Jim D'Addario.

COURTESY: DC NEWS OCT CARNEGIE

25-year-old Rafael Aguirra Miñarro, the 2010 Winner of the Koblenz International Guitar Festival. Miñarro's biography states that his twelve first prizes at multiple international competitions make him the most successful Spanish guitarist in history. He performed the *Gran Jota* by a Spanish guitarist-composer named Francisco Tárrega, whose works were once performed by another Spanish guitarist, some guy named Segovia. It could be said that Miñarro could stand a well-written programme biography more worthy of the subtlety and finesse reflected in his playing skills.

Miñarro performed Joaquín Rodrigo's *Toccata*, written in 1933, the second piece Rodrigo had written for the guitar. Miñarro's artistry shined in his rendition of George Gershwin's *Three Preludes*—*Charleston*, *Blues* & *Foxtrot*—revealing the fluidity of his technique and musical sensitivity. He dedicated an arrangement of *Claire de Lune* to his French-born mother and conveyed every sentiment of the piece with charm and a sweet tone. Miñarro closed with a strong performance of Manuel de Falla's *Dance from 'La Vida Breve'*, and went on to play several encores, including Turina's *Sonata Española* and Tárrega's *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*.

Ben Verdery presented a Weill Hall at Carnegie concert of contemporary guitar works written by Yale composers and performed by Yale graduate students. New music for the guitar seems to have developed its own jargon in terms of searching for new ways to eke unconventional sounds from the instrument, from angular chords to nastily thwapped strings, plinky strums above the guitar nut, percussive tapping, scraping along wound bass strings and playing the guitar with found objects. And then, at the other end of the spectrum, new music can also mean, simply, a brand new lyrical, melodic piece.

The evening programme opened with Kathryn Alexander's humorous *FanFar-Esque* for guitar quartet. The piece opened with robustly angular strums traded among the guitars followed by percussion and harmonics, randomly spoken vocals

with a bit of vocal, birdlike trilling, percussive tapping against the neck of one guitar and lovely bent notes with a Middle Eastern-flavoured melody that ended in a thunderously unexpected foot stomp in unison. Alexander teaches composition and music technology at Yale University.

Ben Verdery performed Ezra Laderman's beautifully tonal and pensive solo piece, *On Vineyard Sound*, on the classical guitar. The piece opens with a travelling bass and driving rhythm. The *Andantino* movement featured accented bass notes which ended in a long *glissando* across the fretboard. The last two movements of the piece conveyed a textured, orchestral sound. Laderman had been Dean of the Yale School of Music from 1989 to 1995.

25-year-old composer Samuel Adams' piece, *Tension Study No. 1*, featured electric guitar with percussion and conjured the mood of an eerie, late-night, road trip for its shimmering spaciousness punctuated by chimes and kickdrums. Adams recently completed his masters degree at the Yale School of Music.

Aaron Jay Kernis' inventive piece, *100 Greatest Dance Hits*, had been performed on classical guitar accompanied by a string quartet to create a pastiche of popular dance music rhythms from Muzak to funk to rock n' roll to soul and disco. The Pulitzer Prize-winning Kernis has been teaching composition at the Yale School of Music since 2003.

Martin Bresnick's solo guitar piece, *Joaquin is Dreaming (Joaquin Soñando)*, had been commissioned by Ben Verdery and was written in honour of the composer's grandson, born in 2007 of American, Ecuadorean, Jewish, Catholic, Russian, German, Spanish and native South American heritage. In a thoughtful performance by 2011 Master of Music student Ian O'Sullivan, the three-movement piece is full of rich tones and sweetness that marks it as one of the newest gems in the solo classical guitar repertoire. Bresnick is a professor of composition and is the coordinator of the composition department at the Yale School of Music.

Ingram Marshall's *The Mentioning of Love*, for guitar and alto flute, is a tranquil and measured piece where the guitar's rhythms ground the resonant flight of flute melody. Marshall, who has received awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and the American Academy of Arts & Letters, wrote the piece in memory of his old teacher, Indonesian composer Pak Tjokro, quoting melodic snippets from his teacher's Javanese gamelan pieces.

David Lang's *warmth* is a duet for two electric guitars, originally commissioned by the Cygnus

ensemble of William Anderson and Oren Fader. Performed by Yale graduate students Graham Banfield and Trevor Babb, the tone quality sounded like a fuzzy, electrified trudge of melody locked in tandem, like machinery pieces.

Jack Vees' *National Anthem* for electric guitar and tape, performed by Ben Verdery, is a chiming, ambient and spacially galactic piece with the electric guitar floating over the top of pre-recorded backing tracks from The National's *High Violet*. These isolated sound clips were run through a processor with electronic and acoustic elements and then played into a grand piano with the sustain pedal held down, creating a tuned resonance and harmony which accompanied the electric guitar in performance.

Benjamin Verdery's *Give* for eight guitars (a 9th guitar had been added this evening, doubling a part) had been conducted onstage by the composer himself. The work is lively and cheerful with a marching rhythm that switches textures fluidly to strumming mirroring a shimmering bassline, accented by a melody of bent notes.

The memorable quote of the evening came from a guitarist who had nudged me to ask, 'Do you know what this is in the programme—where it says 11 and 12 millimetres after people's names?'

'They are class graduation years for Master of Music degrees.'

'Oh, I'd thought it might be a new fretboard size.'

With new music, one never knows.

The Lincoln Center Library for the Performing Arts recently presented a concert by members of the Association of Adult Musicians with Hearing Loss, featuring guitarist Charles Mokotoff. Mokotoff performed *Dance of the Hounsies* by New York-based Haitian guitarist and composer Frantz Casseus, whose music merges Haitian folk idioms with traditional European art music styles. Hounsies are Voodoo priestesses and this short work depicts their dance during a religious ceremony. His programme also included *Prelude in the Style of S.L. Weiss* by Manuel Ponce and the New York premiere of both *Morphos* and the dreamily jazzy *Pasaje Abierto (Preludio & Danza)* by Costa Rican composer Edin Solis.

The concert, which included performances by other gifted musicians with profound hearing loss, was followed by a Q&A panel where the performers answered questions by audience members as to how they could possibly perform so beautifully, given that most are led to believe professional musicians possess elite and superior hearing abilities beyond those of the average mortal. The answers



Ben Verdery at Carnegie Hall.

PHOTO: JULIA CROWE



COURTESY: INCREDIBLY MUSICAL AND SILENT

Guitarist Charles Mokotoff.

given by guitarist Charles Mokotoff, pianist/composer Jennifer Castellano and pianist/stage and film composer Jay Zimmerman revealed that hearing loss is a varying and individualised experience, obviously difficult for those with normal hearing to imagine or fathom.

Just as there exists varying degrees and qualities of vision loss, the same applies with hearing loss and creates no less of an artist than Monet's cataracts made him any less of a painter. Some musicians experience the inability to hear certain octaves and frequencies yet have adapted efficiently to be able to extrapolate and imagine them from what range they do hear and also by relative pitch. Some musicians are entirely tactile and can hear notes internally, just as one can write without gazing directly at a keyboard. Also, sound creates physical waves and vibration, which can be discerned in a particularly resonant instrument, such as the guitar.

New York native Charles Mokotoff holds both Bachelors and Masters degrees in guitar performance with magna cum laude distinction from Syracuse University and Ithaca College and has studied with Michael Lorimer, Carlos Bonell and Edward Flower. Mokotoff has served as a lecturer in guitar at several institutions, including Ithaca College, Wells College, Mansfield University, Northeastern University and Bridgewater State College. He has received recognition as a professional classical guitarist and Renaissance lute player with two Far East tours that garnered high praise from the *Hong Kong Standard* and a well-received New York City debut at Weill Hall at Carnegie Hall, which inspired the *New York Times* to describe him as, '...a thoughtful, gentlemanly artist, technically fastidious and able to coax a range of sounds from his instrument.' His CD, *Autumn Elegy*, features Tedesco's *Capriccio Diabolico*, Coble's *Autumn Elegy*, Rodrigo's *Elogio de la Guitarra*, Yocoh's *Variations on Sakura*, Koshkin's *Fall of Birds* and Rodrigo's *En los Triguales*. Listening to this recording, one would be astonished to learn that Mr. Mokotoff has had severe-to-profound hearing loss since the age of 15.

Mokotoff lost 60% of his hearing and relies upon hearing aids, which help him immeasurably. 'I listen to everything: music, speech, and environmental sounds through the amplification,' he says. 'Thanks to digital technology, aids can now be programmed with sophisticated software that allows me to set the music programme to be as realistic as possible. I know this only because I have spent time matching the sound of my recorded guitar with what I pick up through the hearing aid. The audiologist I work with is, thankfully, fully on board with me doing this and has admitted to being quite amazed at my ability to perceive the difference between one or two decibels in various ranges. Ironically it seems I have a very perceptive ear for music, in spite of the impairment.'

'During my professional career I had kept the loss as much of a secret as possible. I do well in quiet situations, which was the typical scenario for me at concerts, in the classroom and on the phone. In those scenarios, I did not disclose the fact that I had significant hearing loss because I had felt it was unnecessary. Yet I desperately wanted to know what it would be like to throw off the mantle of stigma. It seemed to me a professional musician with a substantial hearing loss was considered odd and stigmatic. What would it be like to be able to just tell people that I had hearing loss? If I misunderstand something it isn't because I am drunk or crazy. I had been covering it up for more than 20 years. Since I did most of my public relations work by phone and postal mail, it wasn't my hearing loss that discouraged. I guess my decision for a break from the guitar had been due to the enormous task that comes with being a full time professional musician: practising, teaching and managing my career'.

During his sabbatical from the guitar, Mokotoff developed a career in information technology which has lead to his post at the National Institute of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Maryland. Last year he performed the Handel Harp Concerto with the NIH Philharmonic Orchestra in Bethesda. The guitar Mokotoff plays on his CD is an instrument built by maker Nico van der Waals of Holland, made in 1980. He currently performs on a Dammann but has, on order, a guitar by Californian builder Randy Angella.

'These last two years I have been amazed at how well I have been able to keep this second iteration of my career going so well,' Mokotoff says. 'It started out as a full time hobby and has bloomed considerably into many performances, both local and some requiring travel. Perhaps in a few years I can give even more time to it and have a second go as a professional performer. But for now, it stays fun and I am thankful for the practice I did years ago that led to the refined technique I enjoy so much these days. There aren't a whole lot of things great about getting older, but this: the ability to interpret music naturally, to build on the diligence of my youth and to understand much better how to best utilise practice time is, for sure, one wonderful thing about maturing.'