

Jukka Savijoki
Finland

Interview.

'It's like those statues in Notre Dame.'

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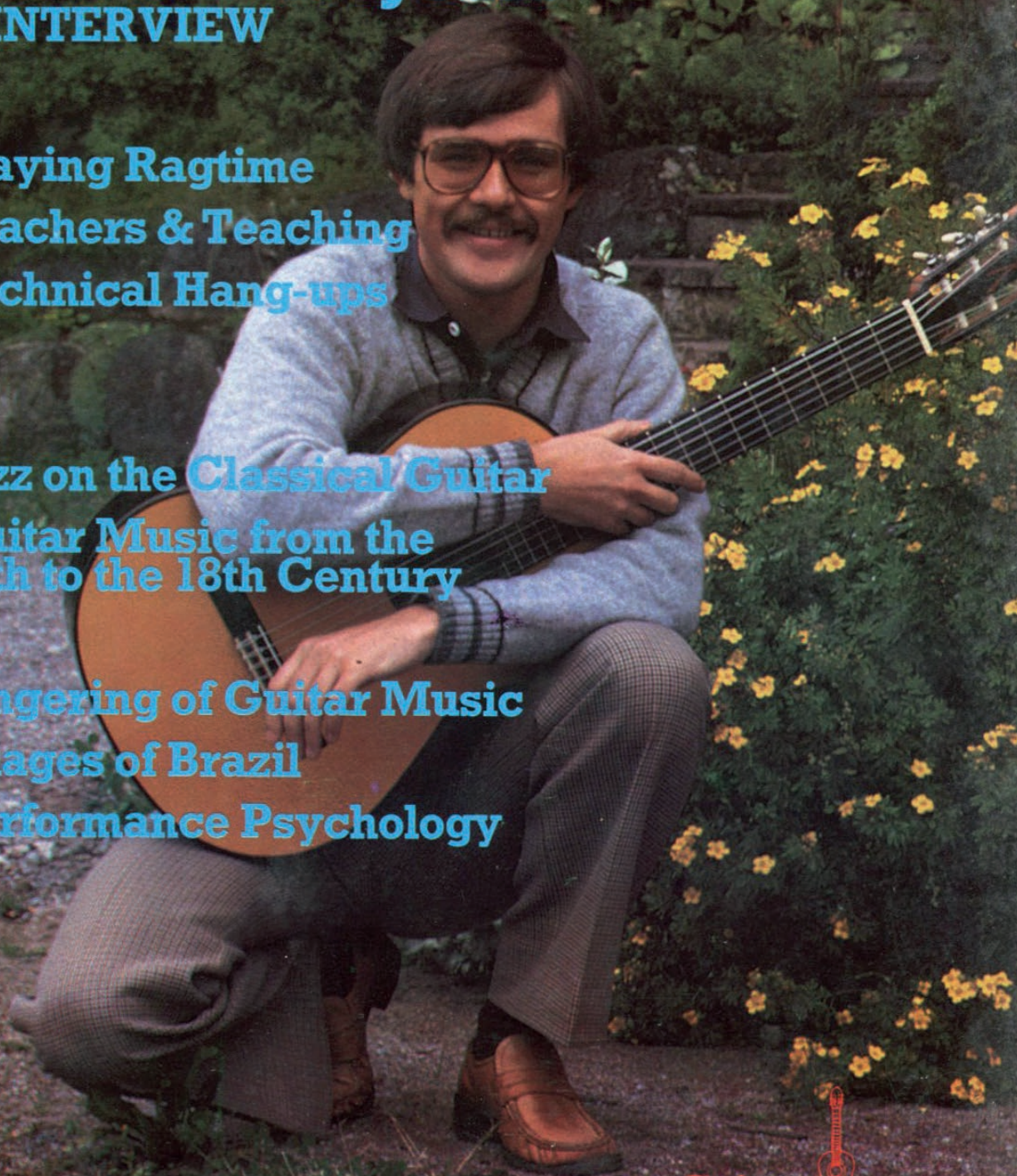
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Jukka Savijoki

"It's like those statues in Notre Dame"

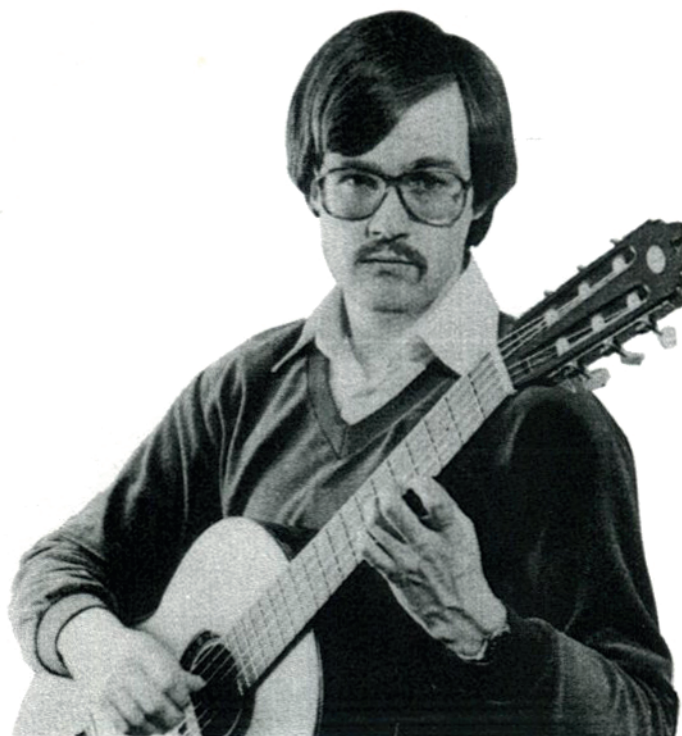
by
Lance Bosman

It is within just the last ten years that the classical guitar has taken root in Finland. Yet already the instrument has good exposure from concerts and radio, and is attracting the interest of local composers. For the past six years, Jukka Savijoki has been Finland's principal envoy, introducing its new music to Europe, and several times in England since his debut here in 1977. From initial guidance under his compatriot Ivan Putilin, then later John Duarte and Oscar Ghiglia, Jukka has developed a tonal sensitivity and expansive repertoire equal in maturity to the best of younger guitarists today. As a measure of his standard and versatility are his two records, one of the baroque, the other, avant-garde. Both are approached with total involvement, yet with individual respect for the character of each period.

Born in 1952, Jukka lives in Helsinki where most of his concerts are geared to the standard repertoire out of consideration for the average conservative taste. This isn't at the expense of new music which is commissioned and does get an airing, but is generally reserved for fringe gatherings and specialist audiences. Between-times he participates in 'Cluster' an ensemble given to mixing the old and new, and plays as soloist for guitar concertos. Concentrating on the Vivaldi, Giuliani, Tedesco and Villa Lobos concertos, he has no hesitation to amplify either a Bolin Tonbord guitar, or his regular Paul Fischer instrument.

Academic guitar tuition in Finland is balanced by suggestions from all quarters, though the curricula set by the Sibelius Academy and the conservatories is autocratic. As head of his department in the Academy, and with extensive knowledge of the guitar literature, Jukka nonetheless determines the syllabus in consultation with his colleagues, thus ensuring it remains fresh and always open to revue.

"The Sibelius Academy has its own system and the conservatories have theirs. As it is, they send me their drafts for criticism, but don't have to do what I say. Although I direct the guitar department at the Academy, we have a couple of other teachers and decide between us a relevant curriculum. Sibelius Academy is our only university-standard institute, so what we do only applies there; but in a way it's an ideal situation, because if you set a syllabus for eight conservatories, you can't meet all those people. But when we decide our own, then everytime we meet, after an exam or something, and we think that this or that doesn't work, it's too difficult, then we agree to scrub it out."



"They don't enter the Academy as beginners. From twenty applicants we take just one or two; this means that when they come in they're already advanced. So the syllabus states that they should play at least one contemporary piece — but not Finnish music at that level; we recommend it for the final exam."

Of Jukka's two discs in circulation, the first *Baroque Suites* was voted Record of the Month by Hi-Fi News and acclaimed by Records and Recording. These recommendations have since rid the reservations harboured by Jukka after the production of the disc. Such self-doubt is surprising in view of his crystal-clear tone and enunciated voicing. Regard for the period is evident by the absence of sharp tonal contrast and emphatic gesture. Rather the phrases begin softly and take on a gradual sharper edge as they broaden out. Overall variety is accomplished by the choice of material: Bach's *Prelude, fugue and allegro* (BWV 998); Buxtehude, *Suite in E minor*; Corbetta, *Suite in A minor* and Weiss, *Suite for lute*.

"In the voicing you must consciously decide what to bring out. It isn't the rule that the fugue theme is the one most heard. Beautiful buildings have something inner besides their outside. As for tone colours, these are very much a question of what music you are playing. In Baroque and Renaissance it's not in character to have too much orchestration; whereas in the classical period we can use more, and most in the Romantic style. Anyway I believe in making the phrases speak for themselves, and in the end all notes and intervals will have their own colour. After the Baroque disc I adjusted my tone production much more to the soft side, different now, but still without orchestration. And when you think, by developing a graduated range of softness you increase the potential of the louder tones.

I learned baroque music from several sources, reading books on interpretation and ornamentation. I also listened to recordings of it on original instruments — which was most useful. Today I would ornament even more, or extract some of the ornaments from the first repeats."

Ranking with the innovative contemporary guitar music from East Europe, is that on Savijoki's record 'The Contemporary Finnish Guitar'. A recent contribution to the field, it nevertheless enters at the vanguard of the guitar's new literature. Advancing progressively in style, the first two tracks have strains of the exotic and traditional, distinct from the other side entering extreme, uncompromising idioms. Of the

first pieces, the introductory *Butterflies* (1977) echoes influences acquired by the Finnish composer, Pehr Nordgren, after a visit to Japan. Set in five short movements, different moods evoke koto music, Buddhist hymn and marshall rhythms. Fascinating in sound and conception are Einojuhani Rautavaara's *Monologues of the Unicorn* (1980) with its companion suite *Serenades of the Unicorn* (1977). *Monologues* allude to four composers in turn: Bach and his B.A.C.H. prelude; Debussy, Schoenberg and Stravinsky. Each is conveyed by distorted impressions of these composers' musical idiosyncrasies. *Serenades*, a group of various descriptive pieces calls for utmost dexterity to carry out on the fingerboard the cavorting of nymphs and other bizarre events. For added effect, an eerie sort of tremolo is produced by vibrating a spoon along the treble strings whilst the right hand reaches across the fretboard to hammer-on. Another descriptive effect is a high pitched tremolo from rapidly pressing and releasing the strings with the left hand at given positions, while the right hand is again engaged on hammering bass notes.

Entering a far more radical sphere, Erik Bergman's *Midnight* (1977) grows from a sombre ascending passage which, each time it re-enters, takes on different forms: chordal, harmonic, and is extended by pizzicato and percussion. The Finnish composers on this record seem to have a thing about tremolos for other peculiar ones crop up here. For these the right hand thumb nail, or sometimes the index, serves as a rapid 'plectrum'. Also featured is a rasgueado-like technique with right hand inclined leftwards with the index finger only, agitating the string.

Finally, Paavo Heininen's *Touching* (1978) redolent of Nordic gloom is a challenge to all. If it has barriers they will be those imposed by aural inhibitions, for it is otherwise a 15-minute maelstrom of tonal and percussive extremes. And yet no movement is random: each note is calculated down to a specific timbre, their range increased by those deliberately half-pronounced. It is aggressive music, thrusting and moody. So why stop and listen to such a portent in the refuge of four walls, when each day we must face a world ominous enough?

"I have heard that high in Notre Dame there are several fine statues. Nobody sees them but they are present there. I think that this is good music and that the composer wants to compose like those statues, and to bring his music into existence. What this composer has said is, as long as there is one person who likes the piece and is prepared to play it, that's good enough. I get into discussions about contemporary music, and find that people tend to be aggressive, in that there should be permission to compose in a certain way. This piece doesn't harm anyone except me maybe, because I have to work a lot to play it. But you know, it is there, it's art for art's sake, in a way. As I said, those little statues up there in that church, they're something that have been created. You could say that because nobody sees those statues, they don't exist."

A valid point; for how can a vocabulary be enriched without composers oblivious to immediate and favourable impressions. Ultimately they must widen the horizons for both themselves and listeners. But the path here is obscured by the internal working of the music, its inconspicuous formal development. "This piece is not based on big material. There's a certain rhythm and a glissando; the motif is in the beginning: a very loud then very low note, then a high staccato and a glissando. This germ is getting wider — when you play it and learn it, it's like a statue: you can look at it from different angles. I know from conversations with the composer that in this piece there is no note you can change. I know that if he composed a part which couldn't be done on the guitar, and that it needs to be changed, he wouldn't change that part, but come next week having re-composed the whole piece.

"No, it's not perfection ... it's structure; because you can't change one note without distorting the whole idea. This note has to be here, and that note there. If we change one note then we change a passage, and that will not then relate exactly to

others based on it. The main argument that people have, is that composers today throw in notes, you know, anything. A very important part of contemporary music is playing it. When they listen they think you're playing anything you like, but if you did, then I think that it would sound messy in the end; and it means that all contemporary music in the end would sound the same. Take for example the difficult time values of the *Royal Winter Music*; when you begin to play these freely, then the result in the end is nothing; it doesn't have profile. That's why it must be played exactly as possible."

Recently Jukka returned to England for the Cheltenham Festival in which he accompanied the tenor Ian Partridge on Schubert songs. Ensembles and combinations he enjoys, taking the focus off the solo guitar. At home he tours with a regular group 'Cluster' who blend light relief with heavier stuff. "We work combinations of flute, guitar, sax, percussion, mostly of Finnish and Scandinavian music. In between there are duos with guitar and another instrument. We play a movement of a Baroque sonata which acts as a prelude to modern piece. People like this because it makes them calm down. So we do the concert without an interval; as the last chord of one number fades away, then someone else begins a new piece."

And what is in store next. "Well I would like to make a record of one composer, Ponce. I've played a lot of his pieces and I know the ones that would suit me best. As to contemporary music, I'm going to drop specialising. I've worked in it a long time as soloist and in chamber groups; that's why I wanted to do this record we discussed as a document of something. Now I'm going to shake off the contemporary coat, for it's the end of a chapter, in a way."

'Baroque Suites (BIS 176) and 'The Contemporary Finnish Guitar' (BIS 207) by Jukka Savijoki are available from Grammofon AB BIS or from BIS Agents.

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