

Angelo Gilardino
Italy

Interview.

'Style is the essential foundation of all artistic results.'

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Lance Bosman

ANGELO GILARDINO

'Style is the essential foundation of all artistic results'



Francesco (standing) showing the finer points of right hand technique



A gaggle from the course

Angelo Gilardino, born in Vercelli 1941, began the guitar at the age of 13 after hearing a concert by Ida Presti. From his debut in 1957 up to 1968 he performed the standard repertoire with progressive success and increasing dissatisfaction. His objective then was to establish a position in the guitar hierarchy, without giving real thought to his will and personality. At the end of 1968 he abandoned concert life and dedicated himself to the music with which he felt most affinity, namely 20th century guitar works and that of the early 19th century Italian guitarists. During those three years of deliberation he collaborated with Castelnuovo-Tedesco and publishers Bérben commissioning contemporary pieces for guitar. These now amount to over 200 works covering all modern idioms. Selections from this range can be heard on his three records, *Contemporary Guitar*, under the Bérben and Rusty-Record labels.

Solitary by nature and averse to travelling, Gilardino has no



inclination to extend his boundary of concert performances beyond Italy and suffer the attendant discomfort and financial loss to gain an international reputation for which he cares little. Consequently his playing and tuition is most active around Vercelli, North Italy where he teaches at a local academy and runs a summer school, and Sweden which he tours from another summer school base. From Angelo's standpoint, the evolution of the guitar's full potential in art music can be traced from the early 19th century Italian guitar school through Villa Lobos to Dodgson, represented in the latter's 20 studies. To meet the technical and stylistic demands of these works, Gilardino has consolidated a technique, a system of musical analysis and a method of teaching, factors which he also regards as essential to the concert performer in securing a convincing interpretation and audience rapport.

Lance Bosman

My former teaching activity had always been a very tentative one. From this level, much from instinct, I then set myself the task of formulating a system to apply to pupils. That experience was priceless, because I have learned from those pupils that it's not enough to know something solely in terms of doing it; I must also know how to convey it through a developed systematic approach. There are many guitarists who do things; there are others who know how to do but not practically; and then, very few who know and can apply themselves. The first category is a very common one; everyone can play instinctively; on the other side we have intellectual people, very keen observers who have ideas how things should be done, but for different reasons cannot carry them out. This is an imperfect, theoretical level of teaching, because it leaves the pupil alone with himself. Then a few people have evolved a complete standard of teaching; they are very responsive to each and every passage, theoretically and physically. This is the kind of teacher I am trying to become. It is my greatest commitment.

As a concert player, my life revolved around two separate and opposite points. One was in my practising room, alone; the other was among the audience; and there was a big jump in between. Well I always sought for a communication, an intermediate, and I found that teaching fulfilled that ideal, filling the distance. At the far end is the accomplishment, that being the presentation of the results to the public. Through pupils you travel to this end, from first ideas to the ultimate realisation. With them you communicate, and in this way attain that result; because you must expain under controlled reason the way from the initial ideas. And this has been a great experience for me.

For instance, I have a work before me in my study. If it's difficult it will take a few days to understand how it is built, its accessible points, and those that need special attention. After that I consider it finished; but there are an immense number of details that I have taken for granted as definite, but really they are not yet figured out. Should I need to explain this piece not to myself but to a pupil, I cannot discount things sensed earlier by me because I am obliged to explain every detail. I must start with factors instinctively known to me but unknown to the pupil. So I have discovered through this procedure that I am obliged to voice what are, in many cases, details I would otherwise accept unconsciously. It gives deeper understanding because it is not only a matter of absorbing the material by scheme, but also assimilating its details through an explanatory procedure. As a recent example, there is a piece by Bernard Stevens based on a popular theme. I played the theme objectively, then each variation with its own atmosphere, its own climax. A pupil asked me as to the structure of the piece, if it is a narrative, a novel, and what I should say in descriptive terms for each variation. To expound this I had to put in strict relationship—along the lines given by the composer in the Foreword—each movement to the events behind the music. Because of that I became more conscious of the work and have since played it with a different approach, with more responsibility.

Transcriptions don't seem to figure in your repertoire.

Really I cannot say that I don't believe in transcriptions; more exactly I never considered them in a definite way because I was always interested in music written for guitar. I haven't finished my study of six-string guitar music for Ferandieri and Moretti to Donatoni, though I'm now beginning to put in perspective the works of Giulio Regondi with Giuliani and Sor. But there are still a lot of questions to be answered. For sure, I feel little pushed to play, let alone transcribe, Scarlatti or Couperin when there are so many pieces waiting to be restored in their original text, correctly understood in style and historical perspective, and then performed with dignity. And when I think about the new pieces written for me, I wonder how many lives I would need to fill my responsibilities with them. So it's not a question of being against transcriptions, it is that there is enough original guitar music. Incidentally, most guitarists have positive ideas about how bad early 19th century Italian music is . . .

If you could expand on that point.

This music is not respected because the style at which it must be approached is not acknowledged by the majority of present day guitarists. There are three prerequisites: we must know its text, we must have the technical facility to carry it out, and we must be aware of its aesthetics. Considering the birthplace of guitar composers and teachers, well we should really say that the guitar was mainly born in Italy and then travelled in three directions.

The first was Madrid where Moretti published his textbooks and methods. Then there was the Paris line, represented by Molino, Carulli and Carcassi; they invented a way of playing the guitar. Then there was the King line of Vienna. Giuliani went there, to a very good school already in life by local players. I think that all these masters had a healthy idea about how to treat the instrument, and established it into the general musical life of the times. I must say that only later in our century, and not to that degree, has the guitar played an active part, having guitarists playing in terms of brotherhood, fraternity. Those earlier guitarists were very conscious about how to handle their instrument, along the same lines as a violinist or pianist; they were virtuosi and natural players; and their music was full of style. The point is that, generally speaking, the near totality of guitarists have not yet studied this style seriously. Consequently they appear to be saying that the music is undeserving because they have not appreciated it in that role. To approach Giuliani as though it was Beethoven is a gross stupidity. It must be played natural to itself; otherwise you can't understand it, and it is the misunderstanding that is ugly.

In technical terms, what points do you bring out in Giuliani?

In this you must consider the approach as well as the technique. It was very much a matter of letting the instrument go in a spontaneous manner, rather than impose on it a technique invented from outside. In Giuliani you have the instrument very fluent, brilliant, very warm and full of sound; the virtuosity springs from the natural play of your fingers. It was a music completely, functionally made to please the audience in an aristocratical way. So it must be spontaneous, strong, and everything awkward and not fully sounding was excluded. Giuliani was not always a composer of first class imagination, but his music is always pleasant sounding. As for technicalities, I think you need dexterity in right hand playing. If you haven't a good ring finger you can't reach Giuliani's music at speed, with the brilliance it demands. Secondly, rather than a guitarist vibrato, you must produce a singing-like vibrato, similar to that from a bow instrument, like that of a violin. We read of the marvellous singing lines of Giuliani; this must be obtained with the sustained and very considered use of left hand vibrato. Then there is the matter of psychology. The man in front of an audience during that epoch was very theatrical. He had to bring into direct contact strong sentiment, immediate communication, not an intellectual one. So the instrument has to be warm, something that puts you in a frame of mind different from present times. Nowadays it is a question of creating an intellectual aura; then it was a matter of presence.

Was this music meant to be listened to rather than serve as aural wallpaper? And even if that's so, it may be asking too much of today's audience to sit through a whole programme of early 19th century Italian music.

Today I think we should provide style programmes independent of any commercial suggestion. By this I mean give a concert of a cultural account of a historical period. We don't need programmes that start with 17th century music and end with contemporary. This is pretentious and out of the question in terms of artistic substance. Programmes now should be directed towards conveying a musical story or a specific style. To give a concert of say, early 19th century music for flute and guitar, I'm moving much towards this; having monographical programmes of either an older single composer or a group of composers with a solid foundation. It is not a problem of how the programme is received; this is a premature question, for we should think more about how the programme is to be played. Then we can concern ourselves how it is received. It's dishonest to pursue programmes that in 70 to 90 minutes compress 400 hundred years of musical change, most times wrongly approached; playing Roncalli on the same instrument and in the same style as Albeniz. We need worry about an audience's negative reaction when the product we produce is false. In regard to 19th century music, specifically Giuliani, the transgression is wider because these composers have seldom been represented by their original compositions. The texts upon which the performances have been based are false, or are undesirable mixtures of different pieces. If a pianist combined such pieces he would be regarded as criminal; but guitarists can do this without stirring audiences into a revolution. So we must be honest even if the audience is not yet ready to accept its validity. It's much a matter of nurturing the culture of

our audiences; not fooling them into believing that the mixed programme is the acceptable one.

Indirectly related to this, I understand that you consider Tarrega's music irrelevant.

As I mentioned, I do not see guitar in isolation from music history. In these terms I see a dignified connection between Giuliani's music and his time – he lies between Paganini and Schubert, Rossini and Hummel. Though of course he looks a minor figure in respect of them, but he has quite a style, and he reflects nationalistic cosmopolitan culture. I see nothing of this in Tarrega, who was provincial more than nationalistic, and whose works cannot be compared to those of his contemporaries. Really, I don't dislike Tarrega, but view his work from a historical perspective, and the result cannot be proportionally equal to Giuliani, or Sor for that matter, in relation to their epochs. This opinion is not unfair nor is it solely mine: already in 1934, with his 'Diccionario', Domingo Prat gave the first 'historical' outlook of Tarrega's position and pointed out that his music could not be compared with the more important of Sor's. Of course, if you sever guitar music from history and see it as an independent channel, Tarrega may look a great man. Placed in the historical line his music appears minor and second rate. This is not to dislike his work. On the contrary, I have affection for his very human figure, and I am sure that his modest and Christian lifestyle would have not felt disturbed by fair and honest criticism.

You once described past composers as working within a gravitational force, meaning that they compose around an organised and established basis of classical laws. You also see a direct parallel with the modern composer's approach, that they gravitate too, along an individual and perhaps a specific path, but which is also restricted. So freedom in modern composition is an illusion.

Freedom is an illusion. I think that freedom is no more than the opportunity to choose how to lose our freedom. You cannot be a composer or an artist without seeking for a style. Style is the essential foundation of all artistic results. And when you have arrived at a true style, partly inventing it and partly deriving it from your models, you have given up all the other options for being another sort of person; even then, you can never be sure, no one can even tell you, that you have found your true identity. To be free from all preceding artistic experiences – an illusion is this also – will not free you from the obligation of aiming for one single stylistic identity. You cannot get over this limit: so does it look like freedom to you?

To what extent can you say that you combine conscious application with unconscious inspiration in composition or interpretation?

I think that the first conception is always an instinctive one, and seems such in nearly all guitar performances I have heard. But if your object is to play in a truly artistic way, you must build up intellectual procedures that initially stem from your culture, historically mainly, and from your own technique – one for understanding and analysing the material structurally, and one for handling the instrument. Another factor is a kind of 'togetherness' which is an amalgam of instincts and culture, synthesising as a 'style'. There are so few 'styles' in guitar performances nowadays and so many 'manners'.

Do you find that formal analysis of a composition helps you to sense it visually; observing the symmetry of phrasing in classical music or the asymmetry of new idioms?

A lot indeed, because I am sure that the art of interpretation, no matter of which music, calls for all the energy and application. It is impossible to interpret fully without devoting all your instinct, love, intelligence and analytical strength. There is no way of escaping from this involvement without omitting something. So I couldn't apply even the smallest corner of my energy without first delving into the analysis and interpretation of a work. *Do you seek for, or find naturally, a relationship between music and other art or the elements of nature; to be inspired by these other forces, transmuting them into musical terms?*

I have realised that my contact with things is very much intermediate. I don't seek objectively, but the subjective comes out in observation. So I seek to elaborate on natural phenomena, all significant contacts into a personal life, transformed into a composition of images. In no other language, of colours, of forms, in figurative art, do I feel deeply. And specifically, more than sound itself, I would say that the essence of my thoughts is conveyed in what I think as vibration. This is my way of

participating, absorbing elation, suggestion, and sounding back vibration.

I do believe in history, and think that the affinity between nature and art ended with the Mahler symphonies. It was the last immense human attempt to draw together Man and Nature. Since Schoenberg, Art can only be the expression of a subjective elaboration of thoughts, and how much 'nature' is still in them is a searching question. As for connections between arts, I think there is no separation in philosophical perspective, whilst there are great differences in language and style. Poetry is perhaps the closest art to music, for when I am listening to Winterreise by Schubert, or from quite another point of view, La soleil des eaux by Boulez, I cannot see a difference of identity in music and text, they are exactly the same thing.

Schoenberg deliberately strove to detach his personality from his music at the serial stage. If composition were to continue from such a standpoint it would become further removed from natural expression and develop as a mathematical process, out on a limb.

Schoenberg makes a strong statement affirming that all of what he did arose from feeling. The connection with nature is one of the first paragraphs in his harmony book. He says that art, at its least degree, is the sheer reproduction of nature and then becomes progressively more art as it transcends the simple imitation of nature into its theoretical elaboration. I think that after the Vienna school, and since the movements from Damstad, it is not that the being is no longer present in art, it's more a sort of testimonial of material events. Sound is no longer considered as a means of expression, but as something happening as a clinical, physical creation. The task of the composer now is more that of an observer. For example, the guitar piece Argo by Donatoni: this represents a material evolution from a basic event, it goes through a process of addition and then division of material. This is not abstract because it is a human way of looking at it, the way of giving account of it. We have changed and cannot step backward to Romanticism which was an outward expression of inner feelings; yet our composers still express themselves with equal power of description.

You mentioned before that you are totally involved in music, but can it be that you never feel moments of saturation, and that you must escape from its sound and find social outlets?

I have more and more disassociated myself from musical and social merry go rounds because these involvements would be poison to me, and would destroy my art and ultimately myself. I do not mean that I feel superior to those that have created a strong sense and practise at 'politics'; I simply mean that I am different and that this doesn't work for me. I am ready to pay, and indeed, am paying my price in not being a very 'successful' artist in terms of publicity and sell; but this is no problem, let alone causing sorrow.

In many ways I have felt saturated by life. Art in general, music specifically, is my reason for living. I couldn't accept world or life, nor my own person if art and music were not steadily inside me. I do not remember being separated from my artistic identity, because in myself there is nothing else; and my association with God, in whom I believe, is represented by my musical breathing. I know I am a problem to people dealing with me, but I cannot change these convictions which surprise me still.



Barney Kessel

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