

**Stepan Rak**  
Czechoslovakia

Interview.

'I must see pictures when I compose.'  
Published in *Guitar International* magazine.  
(Formerly *Guitar*). January, 1985.  
Venue: Cannington, England.

Lance Bosman

Britain's No. 1  Classical Guitar Monthly

# Guitar

International

JANUARY 1985  
95p

## ŠTĚPÁN RAK

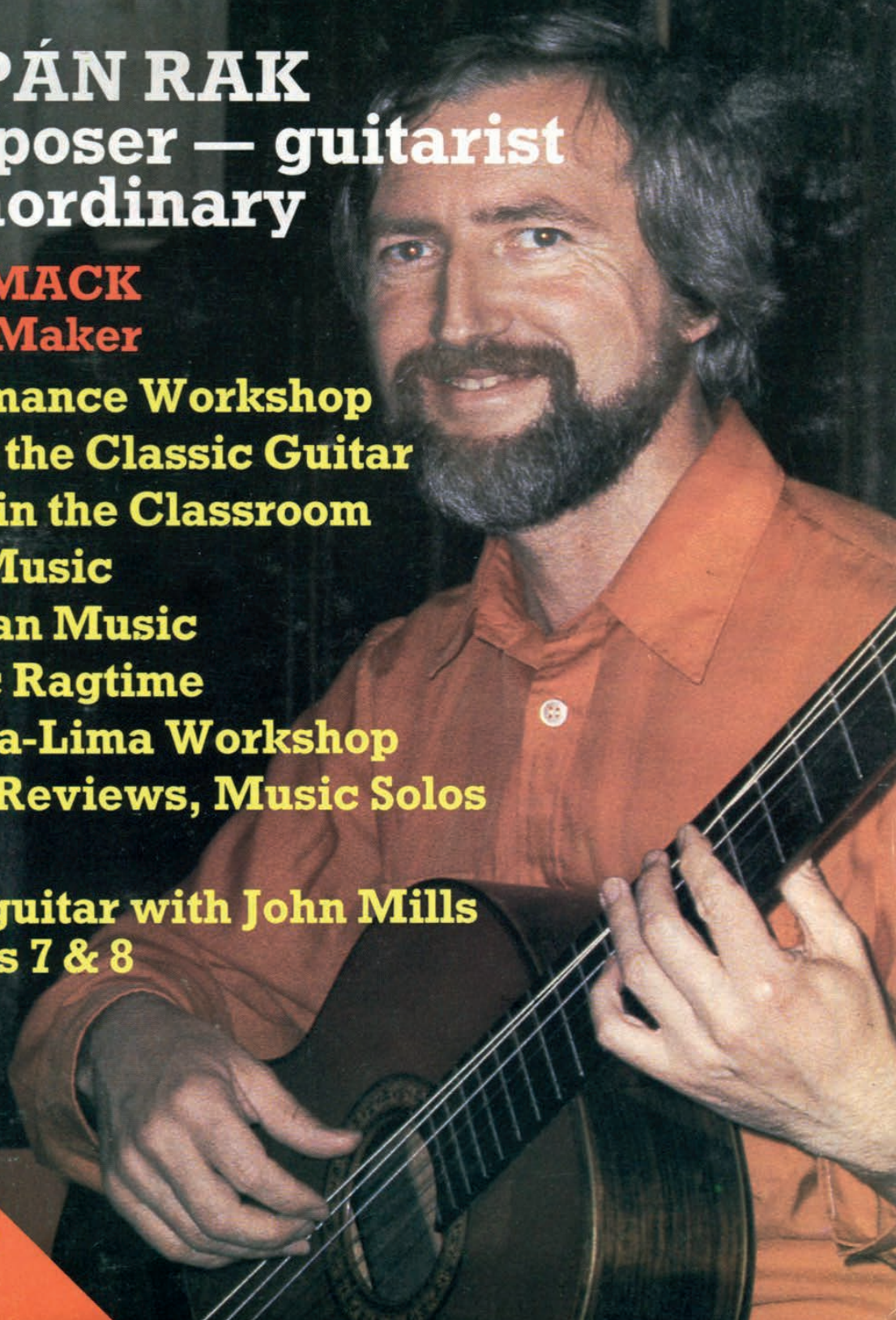
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*"I must see pictures when I compose"*

## Š·T·Ě·P·Á·N R·A·K

Interviewed by Lance Bosman

*Photos: George Clinton*

Strange, that certain sounds which might otherwise strike the ear as repellent, can have a stimulating effect in a descriptive context. The abrasive discords that jar the senses in an abstract musical setting, may stir the imagination given a narrative form, say in that of *The Miraculous Mandarin* or *The Rite of Spring*. The orchestral outbursts and percussive eruptions that surge through these works stir up pictorial images, regardless of the barbaric and pagan implications in their titles. Less vivid, but equally stimulating are the mood pieces of Delius and Debussy. The forms they created elude sharp focus, their tunes and harmonies are often vague, yet they appeal immediately through their atmospheres, impressions and moods.

Instrumental effects and orchestral techniques are summoned for expressive purposes. They are drawn into compositions of tonal pictures, soundscapes, possibly as delicate as Holst's vision of Venus or as heavy and threatening as the movement Mars. Yet, if with quite different aims, those sonorities are chosen for their acoustic qualities only, with no descriptive associations, they may sound alien and perplexing to the listener. But used to depict a sequence of images they take on a definite meaning: they activate emotion and imagination more than exercise the intellect.

This intriguing aspect of sound — its different roles hence the varied responses to it, has entered the domain of the guitar. Through seeking novel descriptive effects and a new sound vocabulary, the classical guitar's acoustic capacity has been extended way beyond its former compass of normal plucked notes. Its percussive range, originally derived from flamenco and through recent innovations, now covers crossed-string drum rolls, multi-string tremolo and a new scope of tonal

shades produced from muted notes and chords. Audience reaction to these developments seems to depend not so much on the strength of their impact as on the extent and purpose of their application. They can disturb but may also be generally acceptable in being scintillating too. From one extreme is Pavvo Heininen's solo piece *Touching* (1978) recorded by Jukka Savijoki on 'The Contemporary Finnish Guitar'. Here a multitude of tonal-percussive techniques are stretched to breaking point in music tough and uncompromising, its meaning lying within.

Where similar sound elements have been applied expressly to convey tangible imagery is in a lively strain of contemporary guitar music from East Europe, particularly Czechoslovakia. A forerunner in this field, Václav Kucéra, heightened the emotional and revolutionary spirit of his 5-movement suite *Dairio* with percussive extensions and all kind of melodic distortion. Comparatively more restrained, but equally imaginative, is Jana Obrovská's *Homage to Béla Bartók*. One memorable sequence in this piece is the rasping bass melody resulting from right-hand fingers striking the fingerboard while the left counterpoints trills in the treble. More recent, and with growing favour, are the musical graphics of Koshkin and Rak. Championed by Vladimir Mikulka, these composers' works have been received by highly appreciative and, at times, infatuated audiences. Koshkin's *Prince's Toys* is already known as a vivid portrait of a fairyland tableau, drawn from a unique concoction of timbre and tone. Also coming into wider prominence is the Czech composer Štěpán Rak. From present hearing, Rak's music seems to cover a variety of styles with apparently three main thrusts. One reveals his fondness for early music, hence the *Renaissance Temptation* (1981).



Recalling the character and form of lute music, this piece, however, is supercharged with tremolo and sharp dynamic contrast. Other pieces take the shape of impressionistic sketches, in particular *The Sun* (1981). Tracing its rise, zenith, descent and rise again — the complete circle, the sun's movements and corona are portrayed first by a slow angular melody which gradually expands into a sustained hue of arpeggiated chords and rasgueado. From quite another angle are Rak's personal dramatic laments and essays. Often taking initial form through improvisation, these fully exploit the tonal and percussive timbres of the guitar. Applied in a most striking way, they give rise to all manner of illustrative detail, actions and moods ranging from foreboding to frenzy, and never more remarkably than in *Hiroshima* (1973).



Štěpán Rak (left) with Lance Bosman, Cannington 1984.

Besides improvising as an initial impetus for composing, Štěpán derives inspiration by way of the analogy he draws between music and colour. Graphic art and painting, a former study, he regards as having an essential bearing on his present music. Harmony and melody are perceived not just as potential components of musical animation, they also have individual visual colours. So it's hardly suprising that his music should reach out in several directions, for there is such a diversity of impulses within it.

"Everything I do in music is affected by my years of painting studies, before I took up the guitar. It was a time when I was full of ideas, I appreciated everything, people, landscapes, atmospheres, depressions — everything was for me an inspiration. I tried to put all of those feelings into my painting, and later through the camera when I took up photography as a hobby. I remember till today all expressions, impressions from then. So now, in harmony and chords I visualise different colours; and melodies are the lines in the painting. Sometimes the colour combinations come before the sounds, sometimes the other way round. Different inversions of chords — even they are shades of one colour. I see in these chords C major 7, D major 7, nostalgia, of the autumn. Major 7ths have this kind of radiance on the guitar, I think not present in other instruments."

If these visual-aural associations can suggest the material for a composition, its actual starting point is another matter. Rather than just fancifully plucking notes from the air, ideas are consciously sought, either through improvisation or from stimuli outside music. "When an idea has formed, I keep it in mind, but during the process it might change; it changes often but not basically. If I suddenly discover a series of promising notes I always explore them for potential. For example, *The Sun* started just like this; and there are other pieces like *Hiroshima*. The impetus for this originated when I was asked on an occasion to play some contemporary Czech music. At that time I didn't know any so I improvised, beginning with an overlapping of strings to produce a drum roll effect. From that I thought, for contrast, to give another drum roll, but in echo now, on lower strings. Yet from another position the drum roll

grew from nothing to a furious full strum across all strings, two minutes long. This all began with improvisation.

"I don't believe in walking around thinking out ideas. For some pieces the idea comes just suddenly, but there are few cases like that. It is more that I have learned different styles of composing, and I set out to write in these or improvise them, and the ideas come. I believe only in work and work. When I started at the Conservatory, I didn't think I could write for more than one instrument; by the time I finished I'd written for chamber orchestra. I set myself the task of writing one page of music every day. If you do what you want, then it grows."

Variety is certainly not lacking in Štěpán Rak's compositions. Casting wide, they embrace styles of the present day, *Toccata* (1970) and an astringent 5-movement *Suite* (1974); to those of the distant past, the *Renaissance Temptations*. Alongside these are the up-tempo folk-slanted solos *Rumanian Dance*, *Moorish Dance* (1979), followed chronologically by the classically based *Variations on a Theme by Klemperer* (1976). Traditionally styled, these pieces are nonetheless impressed with Rak's personal stamp, which often means injections of vibrant tremolo and incisive dynamic alterations. No more so are these demonstrated than in *Cry of the Thumb*, probably called as such because that's what it finishes up doing after pounding away at a bass tremolo while a spirited movement is sustained in the treble. Recalling the recent past are the romantically inclined *Remembering Prague* (1981), Štěpán's answer to the 'Spanish Ballad', and the swooning sentimental *Romance* (1981). More involved in form and content, and with several facets to them are the Spanish evocations *La Guitarra*, a tribute to G. Lorca; *Homenaje a Francisco Tárrega* (1982); *Crying Guitar* (1979) and *First Love* (rev. 1984). These pieces are dislocated in structure, the result of mixing diverse characteristics and impressions that both blend and conflict. Incongruous references to Villa-Lobos and Tárrega — that Castle in Spain looming up then receding — are set between personal melodic and harmonic touches. Overall they come across as musical montage, bearing a familiar Latin flavour yet disrupted by inner contradictions.

"A listener appreciates reference points. If you include familiar musical parts it helps in understanding, it draws the audience closer. The Tárrega tremolo study, this appears in the homage to Lorca and the *Crying guitar*. And I like it if people are reminded of Villa-Lobos. He is such a person that you can't miss him, so big in guitar life. Why make a lie of this. I feel a need to quote him in *First Love* for Villa-Lobos is also my love. That piece is not only a tribute to a girl, it is love of everything, the Villa-Lobos 1st Prelude which had a very big influence on me.

"My way of composing at present is such that I would like to do in music what is done in Surrealist painting, not so much Dali as the early 16th century painter Bosch. He puts ideas together which have practically no relationship. So for a piece like *First Love*, I feel that if I continue in the same way, it would be just common, too normal, the idea would disappear, it would tell nothing. So I have enough of that idea, I have to introduce another one, to find another way and put the next idea against the first. It may be an opposite idea which has nothing to do with the first, but the connection works. I place them at unexpected moments to create sharp change of feeling. As in Surrealism they might paint a normal room with ordinary furniture, and then place in that scene something very abnormal. In the centre of that room is a flame, just on its own. It doesn't belong at all to that house, but to other fire. But it now comes very strange and so it has impact. I believe the same about music, that I put into classical melody or romantic like *First Love*, deliberately placed wrong notes. This happens with me all the time, to place the wrong note in an otherwise harmonious surrounding for new combinations, new atmospheres. Again, in the *Moorish Dance*, there are strange things. Like that fire in the middle of the room, the high speed melody is as a normal piece, but I wouldn't say the whole was



so; there are parts within that clash and yet combine. Like *First Love*, this dance seems like a normal piece but there are reasons that make it not so."

Štěpán Rak's first contact with the guitar came through popular music. Born in Prague on 8th August 1945, it was twenty years on before he began playing, initially at night clubs prior to taking formal studies at Prague Conservatory and Academy. His first tutor was the teacher and composer Štěpán Urbán, who recognised and encouraged Rak's potential for composing. Studies continued with Zdeněk Hůla, to whom Štěpán also feels deeply indebted. Since then his output has been prolific, with many pieces for solo guitar and ensemble with guitar. Of these, the dramatic solo works are continually subjected to revision, reflecting the composer's changing outlook. In addition he has composed for orchestra, including a guitar concerto and a prize-winning version of *Hiroshima*, among other orchestral arrangements of his solo guitar pieces. A virtuoso performer, Štěpán plays the standard repertoire and unique programmes of only his own pieces, sometimes throwing in an improvisation on a theme suggested by the audience. At home he performs in ensembles and is presently working on duets with the marimba player Miroslav Kokoška. Visiting England for the first time he attended Cannington Summer School where we had the opportunity to hear his views. By all accounts his manner was said beforehand to be shy and modest; well perhaps, but not when talking of his music. There is no self-deprecation then: he is confident, expresses his convictions clearly, is conscious of publicity and equal to criticism.

The concert at Cannington was significant in that, instead of regurgitating the trusted repertoire, he played solely his own music. As a player he is dexterous and dramatic, qualities necessary to meet the challenge of his pieces. Somehow the emotive gestures of his playing seem as a physical extension of the indulgence of some of his compositions. On first hearing his larger scale pieces appear over-extended, taken beyond their natural conclusions. In content too, economy sometimes goes by the board, there are so many notes, especially in the rich tonal expanses of *The Sun* and *Farewell Finlandia*. But then, the aim was not only to portray these subjects but to imbue them with a dissipated temporal dimension, an ambience and spirit of place.

"Let me say that you can construct something simply for use, with no design. Take a car, it's enough if it has four wheels, a motor and it goes — or would I prefer a Rolls Royce? Everything has its own reason. From the beginning, people try to make their house better. For example, you can see paintings in the caves of early man, as a personal expression in their home. It's in the nature of people to elaborate. So if I design a chair, one that I feel personally for, I ornament it. In music it's the same for me. First the statement just bare; then I insert mordents, then put it to counterpoint and elaborate in many other ways. *Farewell Finlandia* is like this, and is a form of chaconne. There is the main theme, a song, continued almost throughout, in the bass or treble, and around this is an ever-changing atmosphere which changes gradually — typical of the Northern states. I have been there for five years and so I now understand this, the nature, and it needs time to convey this in music. It's not possible for me — I tried many times — to abbreviate that piece. Immediately, I abbreviate it in one area it becomes too long elsewhere. Then if I cut that, or any part, it's too short overall, so nothing told. It needs such time, an interpretation, it's not music for everyday. You should hear it there in its environment, be present in the church, or the rocks around Helsinki. It is a piece of this atmosphere, not a piece for common use on all concert platforms. There are people with certain temperaments that wouldn't understand that music at all. Like the Italians for example, who like to move, to dance; but the kind of brooding, the reflection, is more in keeping with the temperament of Nordic Europeans."

Over natural phenomena is Štěpán's concern for human

nature, particularly in regard to its deviant and destructive sides. Sound dramas of scenes, actions, events are emotionally and graphically described with the guitar's full acoustic palette, from the softest harmonic to arpeggiated frenzy. One example of such extremes is that mentioned, *Hiroshima*. Opening with distant drum rolls, signifying impending doom, it escalates into a turbulent rasgueado, the ultimate carnage. Though this piece is largely self-explanatory, others are less obvious in intent. Even so, allusions are perceived from the music's perspective, its tone colours, contrasts and mood. To convey these, some established techniques are applied, others have evolved with the music. In a liturgic manner, the *Czech Hymn* (1979) has a widely spaced contrapuntal texture with a peculiar three-dimensional projection. The theme, a sombre dirge, is introduced with a strong bass vibrato, and is then developed as variations. In a way difficult to describe, these are first contained within the guitar, so to speak, as melodic counterpoint, and are then thrust outward as though ejected from the instrument by percussive timbres and muted tremolo. Another ominous, moody work, *Voces de Profundis* (Hidden Melody) written this year, also alternates sharply in texture, from furtive melody to violent chordal sweeps. Hardly a party piece, its pervading atmosphere is about as genial as that of a Black Mass. Among many effects in this piece is one in particular, a shrill, demonic chatter, produced by rubbing a spoon evenly along a treble string with the right hand, while hammering notes with the left. There's something creepy going on in these scenes for sure.



"I wanted to write a piece which would speak of such a terrible thing: of schizophrenia from the films *Psycho* 1 & 2. That's why there are abnormal things in it, the wavering bass line, the percussive strikes which keep breaking into this bass which keeps continuing. Then comes a hardly pronounced treble counter melody that slowly grows more distinct. This is a conflict of ideas, like the waltz that enters, but distorted and obscured by harmonics, very music box and in a vague period style.

"It is in the future of the guitar to do things like this, I think. And it might inspire other composers, for there are all sorts of untried possibilities. Like in *First Love* I use an original idea, a thumb tremolo across two treble strings, best accomplished when the right hand is kept rigid. There are a lot of things like this to invent; as another instance, a thumb tremolo but now on lower strings while the upper ones are struck with fingers. This is my right hand technique of the *Thumb Study*. And you can also play tremolo in counterpoint. In *First Love* I produce a contrapuntal tremolo playing melodies in counterpoint with the left hand in the normal way, but with the right hand sounding these with a multi-string tremolo, the fingers alternating a,m,i, in upward sweeps across the 3rd, 2nd and 1st strings. For *Renaissance Temptations* I wanted very subdued colours for the introduction, so the melody was played with just the right forefinger, well to the left of the soundhole and over the frets. Where the variations liven up, the thumb



tremolo enters in the bass, very hard, with a superimposed melody on top. These of course are not authentic Renaissance techniques, they are my own interpretations — the ones I was tempted to write."

The ultimate aim in combining these techniques and resources is to express objects, incidents, sound pictures. Even then, however illuminating the evocations, the most they can do is to allude to the subject behind the music; for sound effects are music matter, without verbal or visual powers of decription. Yet so striking are these compositions in perspective, connotation and detail that the difference between the composer's perceptions and the listeners envisagement of them seems only that of personal interpretation.



Perhaps this could be illustrated in the light of the background information given after Štěpán's performance of his *Last Disco* (1983). Without the advantage of an explanatory narrative accompanying the programme notes, the impression gained from the actual music was of a series of events moving from light to dark, from serenity to disaster. The soft, lullaby tune at the opening is gradually overridden by an advancing rock riff, building up aggressively to an obvious confrontation. This is followed by an urgent, oscillating wail and then a sombre, apparently funereal, death scene in deep counterpoint with harmonics signifying the tolling of muffled bells. Then the soft opening melody returns, but this time against the rumbling echoes of rock riffs. Uneasily on these the music fades out. The feeling of open-ended form here, as we discovered, reflected the inconclusiveness of the actual tragedy depicted in this piece. After its performance there lingered a sense of indictment surrounding the music, that an act of folly had taken place, but with no happy ending and no lessons learned.

"If I could say I was satisfied with any of my compositions, it would be with this piece. It relates to a true story which happened about five years ago. A girl was abandoned by her

parents, lived with her grandparents outside town. They lived in isolation and when they died she was left completely alone. At the age of fifteen she went to Prague and tried to locate her father. When she found him he was a criminal, and even he tried to misuse her. So with no family contact, and innocent and shy, she found herself in the middle of Prague drawn into discos, drinking all night, going with different men. But inside she was always the same girl. In one disco two men fought over her, and when she tried to placate them one killed her. This is a true tragedy of recent times.

"The music begins with her life in youth, a slow soft tune in harmonics, nursery-like. Then from this is another distant, ominous thud, a rock beat that gets louder signalling the approach to the disco. I got the idea for this rock sequence from John Duarte's *Sua Cosa*, and variations of it convey scenes and images of rock night spots and atmospheres. From the initial rock motif it builds to a crescendo of intensity leading to the death thrust. The call of an ambulance is heard and a sigh, the last breath is conveyed with a slow bass and a sigh, the last breath of conveyed with a slow bass glissando. From there the funeral scene follows, a descending bass line, dark colours. And to contrast, the disco beat returns, imposing itself again, determined. Why it didn't end at the death scene is because life carries on and so does the decadence. So it ends just as it starts, with the soft melody of youth against a background of that distant rock riff.

"But such stories I have for nearly all pieces of mine: a programme with a series of episodes. The thought for *Hiroshima* was long in mind because I was born on the 8th August 1945, two days after Hiroshima and one before Nagasaki. So I always meant to express my ascent into life at the same time as many thousands died in a different place on Earth. It was somehow a duty to write this piece, I had to, but it was much later, with the initial improvisation, that the form took place.

"I can't write music just for effects; it is always for a reason, a realisation of something inside. My painting pastime is strongly joined to this: that I can't imagine writing music without a picture. Whether abstract or concrete, I must see pictures when I compose. From the point of view of doing a concert of only my own pieces, I know that some of these may be criticised, like the easily sold *Remember Prague*. But if I play only those involved works, it would exhaust the audiences' ears. A standard programme comprises different styles, and therefore so does mine. I also play classical programmes, but I wanted to introduce myself in England as a composer-performer. In that role I would like to be known."



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