

**Jukka Savijoki**  
Finland

Interview.

‘On striving for musical excellence.’

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Lance Bosman

# JUKKA SAVIJOKI

## ON STRIVING FOR MUSICAL EXCELLENCE

Lance Bosman



Photo: Robert von Bahr

Over the last year or so, Jukka Savijoki's repertoire has both broadened and reverted. From being a proponent of new guitar music, especially by Finnish composers, he has since turned towards Romantic idioms such as the works of Ponce and Mertz. Against his earlier progressive and astringent musical inclinations, exemplified in his disk *The Contemporary Finnish Guitar* (BIS 207), Savijoki's later departure into romanticism would seem as a reaction. At least this was the impression conveyed by the mellow tones and restrained projection of his performance at Cannington, 1985. With equal delicacy is his playing on another disk, *Guitar Music of Ponce* (BIS 255). But now, having steeped himself in both extremes, Jukka has reached a position where he can sit back

and assimilate them. No longer do they stand at opposite poles in contradiction. With due reflection, the involvement with one has shed a fresh insight on the other.

Between times, touring and teaching have gained steadily in scope. On the strength of his record *Baroque Suites* (BIS 176) he was invited to Japan, and around this venture have been concerts throughout Europe. In addition to keeping a standard repertoire ticking over, plus his appraisal of new music, Jukka is presently examining particular aspects of South American guitar pieces. Of especial interest is the way in which Latin composers exploit the guitar's colours and resources in their idiomatic modes of composing for the instrument.



Having just completed a summer school, and with an impending concert at King's Lynn, Jukka snatched a few days at my place to gather breath. As a guest he fulfilled his domestic obligations admirably, contributing to the vino stakes and smoke-haze, and taking the mongrel Jet out for walkies. As well, over the course of his stay, he cast some enlightened views over the pitfalls besetting the concert guitarist, impediments in guitar technique, and the need for reasoned motivation and clear objectives.

"What I'm aiming for is beyond the limits of the instrument. Where my thoughts transcend the physical movements of producing music, and enter absolute musical territory, free from the bonds of technique. I intend to sightread without physical limitation many styles of guitar music, and across all ranges of difficulty. For if you have a schedule to learn a certain number of involved pieces in a given time, you can't afford to spend weeks getting to grips with them. If a composition has a movement which calls for speed, a tempo which your fingers can't match you have to work them up to meet it. Whereas if you already have the facility through good technical backup, it would grant you time to do other things, to refine. As a committed guitarist you can't be hampered by problems of fingering, the inability to express dynamics and colours. It's common sense, the first thing to work for – security, precision, clear tone and versatile technique.

"I find in my teaching at summer schools that pupils don't have a firm technique; even the most simple pieces seem difficult for them to play. I pose a question, to play me a piece that they can always do without mistakes. Your technique has to be such that there are certain pieces you know you can perform faultlessly. A question often directed at me is can technique be improved by playing difficult pieces? Well I think you develop amazingly little technique with difficult music. Say for instance a work you are engaged on has many slurs which present problems. You are unlikely to master these playing them over and over to meet the speed of a musical context. The problem and its solution is more fundamental than that. You are doing something basically wrong, the finger movement faulty, the pressure on the fingers too strong. So in playing those passages your faults will only be compounded. So go back and play simple slur exercises and polish these, thinking of the pressure of the fingers and ensuring even tone across both notes. And when you're satisfied with these, progress through more difficult exercises. Then instead of following a laborious routine, you're constantly taking stock of your actions, not just pounding away with the expectation that things must improve.

"I've met many players who practise 8 hours a day. I doubt if they can do this effectively without extending it to 12 hours, that's a fact. You can do over an hour but then take a break. You can't work clearly without these breaks because your brain is so active during the sessions. Every minute you practise you should have a goal for the exercise. Is it to express a particular musical idea clearly? When you have a clear image of that you are applying exercises to maximum effect.

"Let's say that your note runs are not fast enough. So you play scales for an hour a day to a metronome. That will not solve the set back as much as considering *why* you are not fast. It could be a bad sitting position, the wrong way of striking the strings, tension in the shoulders or back, poor co-ordination of right and left hand. Sometimes these defects manifest unconsciously. There are certain habits that players pick up to avoid, for example, a bad tone: they use apoyando in tricky passages where they could get an equally sharp tone from tirando. Okay, you play apoyando, but what happens, you exert an accent as well.

"Whatever the case, go back several stages and look for the

fundamental fault. You might need a teacher to tell you, but it's dealing with the problem and not perpetuating it. When you analyse your actions realistically you are thinking with your brains and not with your arse."

*Perhaps some of this can be put down to obsession, grinding away to surmount a kind of insecurity.*

"It's clear that away from the guitar you have to be in good balance. It could be a striving for ambition. You want to succeed quickly, so you run into the danger of devoting your life to it. It's then a dilemma because you are placing so much at stake on success. You don't have the patience to develop; and what happens is that you're building a house with defective bricks. And one layer of bad bricks is dangerous in a high house. So you need patience in constructing a solid technique, but it takes more time. In many ways you can almost get there with expedience; but there will always be little things wrong, small mistakes occurring unexpectedly or a variable quality of tone. Your fingers generally work, but you can't fully trust them, maybe susceptible to nerves. If there's tension then, well playing in a concert is a strain, and it's then that you need the reassuring feeling that you can trust your fingers."

*Take the average guitarist who has a normal job during the day with limited time in the evening to practise. Especially so at the early stages of playing, how would you think they should apportion their time in regard to exercises and repertory?*

"I say concentrate on exercises. Okay, you might think at first you are deprived the enjoyment of the music, but you will recoup time for that later. Once you've gained a firm technique you'll cover so much more musical ground."

*Alright, but with the same player, and many of us are in that situation, should time be given over to studying style, theory and analysis?*

"Again I would say that it's more worthwhile to keep the fingers working. I'm often confronted with this question when I teach at summer schools. I recall one instance where a student was playing a baroque prelude. Of course there was much to say on the style of the period. But to hear this player, and considering the intricacy of the subject of style, well from an amateurs point of view, style is not the priority. I see he has all sorts of problems playing, and it would be irresponsible to talk of anything else."

*You mention on the train here that you're looking into guitar music which gives full expression to the character of the instrument. In other words truly idiomatic music, intrinsic to the guitar and playable only on it.*

"This is all to do with my return to classical music and Romantic composers, Villa-Lobos, Barrios. I've found their music very inspiring, written for the guitar by guitar players, those who understand it. To create the most imaginative compositions they draw on the guitar's resources such as combined open and stopped string chords, glissandi. It's these, emanating from the guitar, that sound so right on it, displaying its idiosyncratic colours.

"To focus my attraction to these aspects, I concentrate on the guitar music of Latin American composers, Villa-Lobos, Brouwer, Ponce. If you think of other Latin composers who have written a lot for the guitar, add Lauro and Barrios. The first three represent different strains: Villa-Lobos is traditional, Ponce is classical and Brouwer modern. Of the other two, Lauro is very much folk while Barrios is folk cum European Romantic.

"Why do I draw Ponce into the net? Well, geographically



he's not connected, but when I think of South American culture I include Mexico as part of that. True that Ponce tends to be Classical in his thinking, following the sonata forms of Sor and Weiss. I would also say that Ponce differs by not writing idiomatically for the guitar, whereas the others do. Just how much Ponce's musical language is South American I'm not sure, but he does have these little triplet ornaments, hemiolas. I understand that Ponce had a pleasant personality but it seems not the courage to draw without inhibition on folk influence. By comparison Carlos Chavez, a pupil of Ponce's did seize upon Mexican nationalism, Indian themes, rhythms and themes of open 5ths and triplets. Against Ponce I would say that Villa-Lobos is far more of the earth, the soil; and Brouwer also goes his own way with a modern original style. And here are other differences: Ponce didn't really exploit the guitar; Villa-Lobos uses it to maximum effect, as does Brouwer. Whereas Barrios doesn't exploit it as much as it could be – but that may have something to do with the syntax he used, the harmonies."

*What then would you say are the idiomatic facets in the writing of Villa-Lobos?*

"Mainly the open string pedal tones, parallel chords movements, open and stopped string chords and repeated patterns. These patterns are sequences only in a physical visual sense, because on paper they don't appear sequential. You may have a pattern beginning at high fret but incorporating an open string. This pattern is then repeated a little lower with the same open string. For all intents and purposes these patterns are the same but, in fact, on paper the intervals around the open string in the sequence are different at each position. I'm thinking now of the 12th Study. It's an idea borne of the guitar; and Brouwer's music is full of this too. Of the 4th Prelude I would say that piece arose from its middle passage in natural harmonics. Artificial harmonics would not sound the same, so that's why it's in that key. Transposing it, you could preserve the melody and harmony I expect, but you would lose the colour of that middle passage and the campanellas of open and stopped string chords. All these things count. It would be difficult to quote a passage of Ponce like this, for I don't remember one. So if we consider a musical idea without association to an instrument, Ponce is full of these, on the other hand the music of Villa-Lobos springs from and is imbued with the character of the guitar. That's the difference between the two.

Of earlier composers, Sor and Giuliani, I've asked myself how idiomatic is Sor – not very. Think of Liszt's sweeping use of the piano; but of Sor's guitar music . . . Giuliani explored it a lot and Mertz too, with all his slides into a note and then repeating that pitch on another string to sustain the effect. Also in reference to this period, and as a general point, arpeggios are far more idiomatic to the guitar than scale passages. A scale can be produced on any instrument, but not so an arpeggio. If a pianist was given the middle passage of fast arpeggiation from the 4th Prelude by Villa-Lobos, he would find it awkward to round the open E into, the last of the 4-note groups. That's what I mean by idiomatic arpeggios."

*On another tack, you seem to have diverted quite a bit from the standard repertoire over recent years. I'm thinking of your new music, pretty radical, then a baroque record and now the more serene, romantic side.*

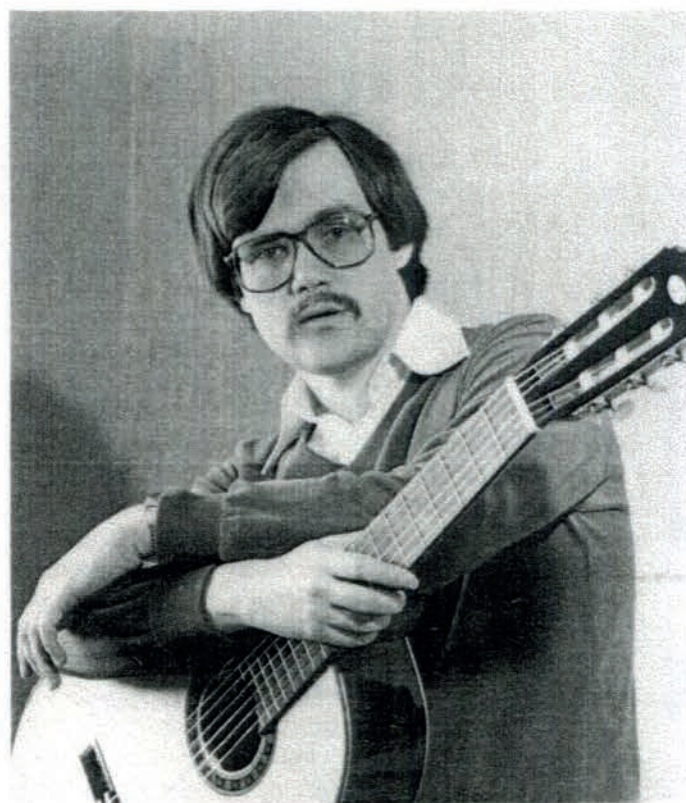
"Until recently I've felt that I could give greater vent to feeling through Romantic music. Now I appreciate this is equally applicable to contemporary music. If I was to record again that contemporary record it would sound very different now. I would inject a lot more warmth and vibrato into it – in

fact, the benefit I've drawn from concentrating of late on romantic music. A flute player told me the same. After playing a lot of contemporary music he then worked on baroque and classical with original instruments. Now he's turned again to new music, but with a very different perspective. And with me: I used to think there was incompatibility between contemporary music and classical and romantic. There are, of course, wide performing differences because they call for individual techniques; but nowadays I feel I can draw from them or invest the same feeling and application."

*Turning to performing, you've covered a fair bit of ground on the concert circuits. How do you see yourself in terms of motivation, and of other players taking the same steps?*

"I did a lot of jobs cheaply in the beginning. Now I have engagements to keep me busy. But I sympathize with players who don't have these, and respect them if they carry on. I've known those too who have stopped working. I can understand this also, because why sit at home and practise if you don't have any work to do? You need the stimulus; I would be a fanatic to practise for 5 hours a day and play once a year. So you need the interaction of an audience and a repertoire; that I feel is the only way to develop. For me, big engagements are very important because I have to concentrate on them, and they also represent stages in my development. It often happens during the lead-up to one of these concerts that I encounter several points in my playing, and I say to myself that when this concert's over, I'll take time off and look at these things closely. At the time of them coming to my attention it's too close to the event; but it was working for that which forced them out.

"Concerts are not just for the money or getting famous, they are a stimulus. Conductors say that if they work with amateur orchestras only, they never develop. And that is because there is no challenge – you learn to accept the poor quality. It's the same when you get into hazardous situations: in doing that you discover hidden reserves, you meet the schedule because you've got to."





*What about seeking work; any tips there?*

"It seems to me that guitarists are not widely accepted in concert halls. In some countries like England the guitar enjoys the popularity, though not so much in others. Ideally guitarists would get work if orchestras employed them two or three times a year for concertos; or that season ticket holders could attend solo recitals as they do for violin and piano. Festivals have guitarists, so these seem to be okay except that we must have other players in besides the couple of famous names.

"Certainly you hope that a manager will get jobs because it's really a pain writing and promoting yourself. Generally, a manager who deals with violinists, pianists and quartets has contacts. But these contacts would probably not be of much benefit to his guitarist. A manager should also have special contacts, music and guitar societies, those contacts. Maybe this is a reason for so many guitar festivals, because it's very much an inside business – that we tend to create these festivals to generate jobs for each others. Maybe that's an indication that there's not much work around. To my knowledge the majority of guitarists who have even made records still have to teach part-time."

*As you say, rather than striking out on your own which involves all this graft and uncertainty, opt for a manager. But you said something in passing which suggested you have reservations.*

"I think you should have a manager. But I've been disillusioned because, and I've heard this from other guitarists, some managers don't bother to get work, and maybe they are dishonest too, which has happened to me. It seems that nowadays a management goes for stars. So obviously when you have established a career, several agents want to take you on. The situation they like is where they sit back and receive phone calls; when they have to make them, that's too much effort. I would avoid the agent with big stars up front. The others tend to be just on the list so that it looks nice: of course we have a guitarist as well, if someone happens to ask."

*Spending so much time with the guitar, your life must revolve around it. So you must surely have to weigh this commitment against other values and relationships. Otherwise it could monopolise and may get you like the great seducer?*

"The guitar wants to mould you to her character, to be faithful to her personality. But what you want is not just a projection of the instrument, you want to produce the music. It's not only the presence of the guitar in the foreground; eclipsing that is the music, and it's very much bigger. But this doesn't detract from what I said earlier: the guitar is a vehicle and so you must consider the level of your ability and control over it. That means facing the problems you have with it and not deceiving yourself by suppressing them.

"It always surprises me that private pupils and even those at summer schools ask very few questions. It's as though they're trying to hide their faults by playing something they know well. I think they choose this work to impress the teacher. To profit from the situation you should play a work you are struggling with. Alternatively, don't play anything in particular, just demonstrate the things you find difficult. Accept, admit your problems to the teacher. Yet this happens seldom, people are almost embarrassed. They think that I'm there to disapprove. Whereas my purpose is to concentrate on the weaknesses. So don't look for compliments and try to impress the listeners. It's a nice ego trip thinking that you played it well, but you don't learn very much. All in all, as a personal attitude, admit what you can't do but don't get despondent; acknowledge your good points too and feed the

positive. Both sides matter."

*What of transcriptions and edits? Murmurs of sacrilege, assent and preciousness stir the air around these. Where should the originals be preserved, or enrich the repertoire to the point that Yamashita brings on a bass drum and the 1812 is all his?*

"I consider transcribing and editing from several angles. Some transcriptions involve a lot of the player's own personality. And they can justify them by playing a very subjective version of the piece, playing well and convincing. It's very intimate and individual, like Segovia has done. As for editing, a lot of publications have been changed unnecessarily. Dynamics, slurs, accents are added and sometimes these conflict with the style. Editors do this to stamp copyright on it. So go for the facsimile, which after all is music for the guitar.



"Editing lute works like Weiss often necessitate a change of key and omission of ornaments. Then how faithful to the original must you be? In changing the key you have to omit some of the ornaments. Weiss often voiced minor 2nds and suspensions which sounded effective on the baroque lute with combined open strings, but they can't be played like that in transcription to the modern instrument. Ornaments, like the other idiomatic aspects I mentioned, are peculiar to their instruments. This means that in a transcription for the later guitar they can lose the vitality they have on their baroque counterpart. Must we as Spanish guitarists feel obliged to superimpose them on our instrument? They work easily and naturally on the lute and baroque guitar, but on the present one are often cumbersome. It's stupid to try so. Far better we omit them and enter those suited to the classical guitar where they readily sit, given respect to style. So this is a factor in transcription: a liberty with ornamentation."



There are also the other dimensions to consider, voicing harmony, what you leave in or have to subtract. I mean, some of those ambitious arrangements of Jobin, Gershwin and the classics. You can almost visualise the finger-busting stretches and the puffing as they try to crowd in all the parts.

"I've accompanied Ian Partridge on Schubert's song cycle *Die schöne Müllerin* several times here. Duarte made a magnificent version of the piano part for the guitar; it's also magnificently difficult. I happened to come across some of these songs in early 19th century transcriptions, and it was amazing to see how they compromised them. All the difficult instrumental interludes were simplified to perhaps just one chord. There was a good reason for this in that the music would be more acceptable for general circulation and domestic playing. That aside, the other extreme is to try and put in all the notes of the original which may well sound worse than the omissions. Also remember that the guitar is capable of bluffing. I played this song cycle to a pianist and he asked how was it possible to play all those successive 3rds so fast. Yet it wasn't solely 3rds he heard, but alternate 3rds and single notes. It's deception but it sounds okay on the guitar. So if you transcribe cleverly you can achieve effective results."

*Is there a line to be drawn, even though a work may transpose in the main. I mean, it might lose much of its colour and atmosphere in the transfer.*

"For Spanish music the actual idiom helps you. I would draw the line there. Music that is truly instrumental is debatable. Chopin would be, and so to the orchestral music or solo piano of Debussy and Ravel. Pieces that radiate their atmosphere and fluidity from the character of a given instrument should be left alone.

"As for these large transcriptions of late, I've thought a lot about these: that there is a sort of inferiority complex surrounding them. That if we play a version of a generally well-known work it will somehow make the guitar a more acceptable instrument. We are guitarists and not imitators of something else; we must make the most of what we have. I'm not against transcriptions, I play them; but to give you a questionable example, I heard a de Falla ballet on three guitars and it failed because of lack of dynamic projection. This sort of thing seems like a justification for playing a big work in the second half of a concert. If you are playing a long piece written for the piano, you need a piano to carry it through, on account of that instrument's huge range of dynamics. That is one of the piano's strengths and it doesn't exist on the guitar. That's why I say it wouldn't work. As a show piece, of course, it's spectacular; but I feel devote your energy to something more worthwhile.

"The transcription of *schöne Müllerin* has, I confess, its shortcomings. Some moods aren't conveyed too well because they require more power. On the other hand, many of the movements do work well through the intimate sound of the guitar, its colours and vibrato. After several performances, Ian Partridge and I are really refining our approach to the end of the cycle where, lapsing into slow songs, we set out to generate a soft and intimate atmosphere."

So in all, the sonic and expressive powers of the guitar serve best its own spectrum of music or that ranging naturally within its scope. Though as you said at the opening, the instrument is primarily a means which, through mastering technique, you aim to liberate the essence of music.

"It is for every instrumentalist to accomplish that. Through your knowledge and skill with the guitar you will ultimately think in terms of absolute music. If your technique restricts you, your dexterity doesn't allow you to play as you desire, then you haven't excelled the limits of the instrument. It may entail a new start, an admission, a lot of work and problems to be solved. As I said, one option is to throw the guitar over a bridge; another is continue as you are, but always with that sneaking doubt that something is wrong. When you acknowledge this, and then aim to rectify it, you enter a new level. In the course of study or professional life you are bound to enter these stages. Each time for me they have had what I could best describe as a spiritual effect. Then you are approaching the heart of the matter: a refinement of nuance and sensitivity, and musical articulation. This higher relationship is really edifying, it awakens fully your musical consciousness.



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