

Oscar Ghiglia
Italy

Interview.

'The guitar has three dimensions.'

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Lance Bosman



A guitar has
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Lance Bosman meets Oscar Ghiglia

Oscar Ghiglia has managed what many of us have a hankering for. Half the year he spends in Tahiti practising and discussing the weather around the coral reef, the other half touring Europe and the East. And it all started with a D major chord. His father, working on a portrait of the family, handed young Oscar a guitar and showed him how to finger the chord, just to complete the picture. That was the start. From there he taught himself accompaniments to his native Neapolitan songs, then set off for the Conservatory in Rome. Eight years later, attending a master class in Siena, he met Alirio Diaz who was at that time standing in for Segovia.

'I was shocked by the tonal quality of that man. Also, he was a maniac on precision. If he couldn't hear one note in a chord he got quite upset. But he really inspired me: I too became a maniac, listening to everything I was doing. The following year he was there again, and this time I met Segovia. He was a bit reserved at first – I think because of my beard and long hair.'

Segovia's reticence was short-lived. Oscar Ghiglia was chosen to assist him at the Berkeley School in California. Along with this he won a couple of prizes which seemed to open the concert door. He was recently in London for the fourth time, and his tours have extended from Europe to Japan. I wondered if he had noticed any marked differences in the characteristics of audiences in different countries.

'The oriental looks for physical discipline, the handling of the instrument rather than an emotional approach. They have a different history, different ideals. I know many Slavic countries rely on emotion. The same in Italy: they like to see emotion. But it's difficult to satisfy – I go into one country and say what do they expect? So you follow your own style and do what you like.'

'They all appreciate in different ways. The London public is very warm; you can tell when they like it. In Italy I'm becoming a representative figure and they are a very responsive audience there. Japan at first I thought was very cold. Leastways, by the way they applauded. They never clap with any guts, but then they would not get up from their knees – they'll just sit there. Sometimes they are a little unpredictable. A friend of mine, a flute player, was playing with an orchestra. During a solo part he made a terrific mistake. Backstage he had a visit from a Japanese who said, "Velly good, but here" – pointing an accusing finger at the score – "here you make mistake." They're just unpredictable.'

Switching the subject to the master classes he attended, I asked Oscar when he met two virtuosi like Segovia and Diaz teaching together, did the teaching of one ever contradict the other?

'When Diaz was teaching in Siena, he was also studying under Segovia. He had a difficult position being teacher and pupil. If he taught something and Segovia said the contrary then he would concede, should I raise the point. In the end I reached my own conclusions; which is more important – speed, precision, sound – whichever becomes most meaningful, I forget one and concentrate on the other.'

'Segovia and Diaz are different in their approaches. Diaz wanted things to be just right. He wouldn't admit a change in fingering or a faulty position. Whereas Segovia would admit these things, he emphasised musicality. Diaz emphasised both – musicianship and technique. He demonstrated, which was inspiring; Segovia demonstrated but said little and encouraged when necessary. Some students couldn't reach his wavelength.'

Do you think there is a potential danger that someone of your standard is likely to fall into the mould of one of these teachers?

It is a possibility. Some things remain, like the approach to phrasing, but I don't think it's really a danger. After all, you develop your own insight and approach.

Some criticisms levelled at master classes are: a student reaches a certain standard through a general education and laid-down techniques, but there comes a time when, after he's covered

the ground work, there's not much more to be gained from a master. . .

I quite agree with this. After all, the one who has to face the audience is the pupil not the teacher. When a pupil learns, it's by himself. All in all, I don't think a master sets out to crush his pupil's approach. It's difficult to say what a teacher should or shouldn't do. Even the teacher who tries very hard to avoid influencing does so to an extent. But it's usually the truth that when the personality of a pupil emerges, the teacher will not impose his will on it.

Have you ever reached a 'plateau' stage in your mind when you just turn off for a while? In other words, instead of moving ahead, you reach a period when your brain tells you it won't absorb any more until you've digested what you recently learned?

I try to avoid this with different approaches. I might take a guitar score and sing it through, even each part separately. This is quite refreshing; it gives me an insight to the sound without worrying about technical details. You spot intervals and dissonances in the score that you overlook when you play. Another approach might be to finger the piece in a relaxed manner without trying to play it or sound it. Just looking helps a lot – what happens in the beginning, the middle, the end. See it as an overall plan, a visual picture.

Is this how you memorise? Do you learn a piece accumulatively bar by bar, or as an overall picture committing guide points to memory?

I saw some interesting shapes by Arnold Schoenberg. He drew phrases up and down without any notes, just a continuous line. Seeing it like this you know where you should end. But remember where you came from. When you're approaching the end, it's not just the part before the end but a continuation of the beginning. The important thing is not to go from one note to another. If it's a phrase of five notes, it is a whole: a sound shape, a rhythmic shape, a melodic shape. Every note has a specific density. One composition is like thinking of a long trip. You can remember the beginning, the outline and the details like the five-note phrase between.

Let's go back for a minute to your recent concert at the Purcell Room: the first half consisted entirely of music by Bach. There are so many concerts today that the guitarist must be reaching a wider audience, not necessarily guitarists. An emphasis on Bach might be okay for the enthusiasts, but what about the others?

I think there was a great variety in the Bach pieces I chose. I think the audience would find sufficient contrast. When you are faced with the dilemma of so many compositions from different periods, you have to choose – I would play a whole programme of Bach without reproach.

In the second half, the twentieth-century music. The piece by Giampaola Bracali – is the composer a guitarist?

No, but he's a close friend of mine. When he played it on the piano I got scared. After looking at it, though, I found it only needed a few touches.

Do you think it's a good idea to have a programme note from a composer explaining the objectives of a new work? It might involve the audience more, particularly if we are unfamiliar with the modern idiom. . .

Yes, I believe this might help. Today we listen to so many styles of music. Some we understand, others not. So what to do? Every new composer has a language of his own. It's essential to play contemporary music; it's built with ideas of today's life. And it can be expressed with a guitar. A guitar has three dimensions, with a melody, a harmony and a bass. It shows music from all angles. A drawing shows colour, every part of it has different colours, rhythms and shapes, or pitch as I see it. In music, these should be brought out without leaving one for the other. Pitch, that is the intervals, are dressed with rhythm and also colour – not just soft to harsh but the thousands of shades in between. ●