

Preview

Classical Guitar Weekend: a conversation with British guitarist Jonathan Leathwood

by Mike Telin



"Jonathan Leathwood is a genius." Writes *Therese Wassily Saba* of *Classical Guitar [UK]*. One of the few guitarists to perform on six-string and ten-string guitars, Leathwood's innovative programs are a mix of modern and traditional works. His recent recital appearances have taken him to Italy, the UK, Germany, Turkey, France, Belgium, Holland, and the United States. On Saturday, May 25 beginning at 8:00 pm in Mixon Hall, [Jonathan Leathwood](#) presents a recital featuring the works of J.S. Bach, de Falla, Gerhard, Goss, José, and Lindberg. Additionally Mr. Leathwood will give a master class on Friday, May 24 from 1:30 until 4:30 in CIM studio 113.

Equally noted as a teacher and writer on music, Jonathan Leathwood writes and lectures on a range of topics from Bach to Elliott Carter. In 2001 he conceived and edited *Guitar Forum*, a new scholarly journal for the classical guitar published in the United Kingdom by the European Guitar Teachers' Association (EGTA UK). Currently he is a lecturer at the University of Denver.

We spoke to Jonathan Leathwood via Skype at his studio in Denver.

Mike Telin: Thank you for taking the time to talk.

Jonathan Leathwood: No, thank you.

MT: Is this going to be your first appearance in Cleveland?

JL: No, and actually I have a very happy association with Cleveland. It was one of the first places I ever performed in the United States, It was the last stop in my first tour. That concert was actually at the Cleveland Institute of Music. Funny thing is I actually bought my guitar in Cleveland.

MT: Did you?

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JL: Yes, it was made in Portland, Oregon, an American-made guitar although of a traditional Spanish mold. I met Armin Kelly after a concert and he invited me to see his guitars so I did.

MT: Amazing! Can you tell me a little bit about your program? It's a very interesting mix of composers.

JL: The Bach is the lute suite in E minor which I think is the earliest one and it is probably something Bach wrote to amuse himself on a special kind of harpsichord made to sound like a lute. So it's something of a make-believe lute suite. It's very complex to play on the lute or indeed the guitar but it does feature this very famous Bourrée which has received a lot of cover versions by rock bands and folk rock bands like Jethro Tull.

MT: Yes, of course.

JL: I was tempted to use Jethro Tull's rhythm in the concert, but maybe not this time.

MT: Maybe for the encore it could be quite interesting since everyone knows that Bourrée. Did de Falla write much for the guitar?

JL: This is the only piece that he wrote, and matter of fact I was thinking about the program because there are a lot of common threads. There is no common theme but it features two elegies — one old and one very recently written — and the Falla is an elegy written after the death of his mentor in Paris, Claude Debussy.

MT: Ah!

JL: And it is written well. Towards the end Falla quotes Debussy's *Evening in Granada*, like a distant memory. It's very short but I think very moving. For guitarists this piece changed everything because it was the very first piece written for guitar by a significant non-guitarist composer. Up until then all guitar music really of any significance was written by people who would perform on the instrument. During the 20th century that completely changed, and Falla was the very first.

MT: What do you find attractive about the piece?

JL: I think in some ways it's the sheer quality of the piece, but it's also the way in which the piece is so concise. It says everything it has to say in just a couple of pages including the little quotation by Debussy. which is subtly integrated into the whole piece. He also used some of the guitar's conventions such as sweeps across the strings and chords you might recognize from Flamenco. But it's really the jewel-like precision of the piece.

MT: I confess, I know nothing about Roberto Gerhard.

JL: Gerhard is a composer, and there are actually three Spanish composers on the program all of whom were at some point affected by the Spanish Civil War. In the case of Falla, he ended up living in exile in Argentina. Roberto Gerhard went into exile in Cambridge, England and right at the end of the Spanish Civil War. He was very deeply af-

fectured by it, and in some ways never got over it. One of the ways in which he expressed that was by calling himself a British composer. He even anglicized pronunciation of his name. But all of his music reflects these different emotions towards his homeland and his life. This particular piece I think superficially sounds quite modern and you might guess this was a composer who once upon a time worked with Schoenberg. Then, at the very end you hear two classic flamenco guitar chords. Whenever I hear those two chords I suddenly feel like I'm looking over the whole piece and thinking "oh my, what a Spanish piece that was."

MT: Did he write anything other than guitar music?

JL: Oh absolutely. He is, I think maybe due for a revival. He was a composer of great importance in his native Catalonia and then when he moved to Cambridge he had to start again. But by the time of his death he was a very important figure in the British musical landscape, writing symphonies, a concerto for orchestra, some extremely interesting chamber works. In fact I haven't been able to figure out what made him write this one guitar piece.

MT: I'm assuming the third Spanish composer is José?

JL: Yes, and perhaps the most tragic as he was shot in 1936 in spite of the fact that he was completely apolitical. He would have been 34 years old at the time. He came from Burgos in Castile and was trained classically in Madrid. In his 30's he returned to Burgos and became a choirmaster. From what I can understand he had a very difficult life because he had been immersed in this very cosmopolitan culture in Madrid with the opportunity to hear all sorts of music and was very influenced by composers such as Ravel. But again from what I can tell, he did this with this incredible spirit and was one of those inspiring figures. In fact I even wonder why his life hasn't been made into a film.

MT: The horrible thing about the Spanish Civil War, and of course we are all familiar with de Falla's story, but recently it seems that scholars such as yourself are really championing other composers that are completely new to some of us. Like the resurrection of Montsalvatge and Mompou. It's quite sad how that war kept so much great music away from the masses for a very long time.

JL: Yes, as well as the music that was never written. You know, Ravel is reported as saying that Antonio José would be the greatest Spanish composer of the 20th century. Of course he could never live to fulfill his potential. Now there are other composers who were already too famous or too important to be forgotten as a result of the war. Then you have people like Roberto Gerhard who had to re-begin his career from nothing. But in the case of José he wasn't yet well known enough for his music to really survive. In the case of this particular sonata, my connection with it is a rather personal one because it was written for my teacher's teacher, Ricardo Iznaola, a Cuban born guitarist who studied in Madrid with one of the greats of the 20th century, Regino Sainz de la Maza.

MT: You're also premiering a work by Stephen Goss and you've performed some of his music before.

JL: Yes, I've actually been a close friend of Stephen's since I was at university. He's written for me before and this particular piece was written for this concert. It's rather unusual because it's all based on a concerto for guitar and orchestra that he wrote last year. That piece is in 3 movements. He made a solo guitar piece out of the slow movement of the concerto and later on did something with the first movement so I asked him to finish it off and make a 3 movement work. So this is the first performance of the last movement and the first complete performance of the work as a whole.

It's this piece that actually features the other elegy. Only last year, Richard Hand, a very important guitarist in London died very young and suddenly of leukemia, and the middle movement of this sonatina is an elegy for Richard. It's called *Marylebone* Elegy because he lived in Marylebone in London.

The language that Stephen used for this elegy owes a lot to the music of Edward Elgar. I think it creates that sense of soaring melodies and that sense of nobility you get from Elgar's music.

MT: Finally the Magnus Lindberg.

JL: This is a piece originally written for the guitar it's called *Mano a mano*.

MT: I love the piece.

JL: You know it?

MT: Yeah!

JL: Very impressive.

MT: Well I love Lindberg's music.

JL: I love Lindberg too and it's been very interesting to see how his music has evolved over several decades.

MT: Yes, I would agree.

JL: There's always this very special interest when you see a composer as substantial as Lindberg come to an instrument like the guitar for the first time.

MT: How so?

JL: Sometimes, a composer will just write a very short work, but sometimes you really see this really powerful mind being invited to this genre, this rather problematic instrument that's difficult to write for. [Like Falla], Lindberg is somebody who has really taken up the challenge and has written something of symphonic scale and it's a piece you can really lose yourself in it contains so many things. But one of the things it contains in a sense isn't there at all — at a certain point he asks you to improvise a cadenza which I've never seen in the 20th century piece.

MT: How long did it take you to get comfortable doing that?

JL: Well I haven't decided what I'm going to do yet.

MT: [Laughs] well that's improvisation.

JL: It's a particularly interesting question because I did most of my learning of the piece over the Christmas holiday and although the piece is harmonically accessible, almost impressionistic at places, when you look at it very closely with a professional eye you notice that he is using all kinds of very unusual scales that recur in cycles throughout the pieces and that help him organize this sprawling work. I'm not sure the listener needs to worry too much about that. It's very helpful for the person learning the piece to be aware of these things. But of course when you come to the cadenza you're suddenly faced with this question: should you be trying to work with these same scales? That's very challenging because these are things you've never encountered in any piece before. So you know you got some interesting choices to make.

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