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Preview

Classical Guitar Weekend: a conversation with American guitarist Colin Davin

by Mike Telin

Hailed as "the real thing, a player with a virtuoso's technique, a deeply expressive musicianship, and a probing imagination" by the *American Record Guide,* guitarist Colin Davin is quickly emerging as one of today's most dynamic young artists. His recent recital appearances include Alice Tully Hall, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (on historic instruments from the museum's collection), New York Philharmonic Ensembles at Merkin Hall, and venues in Los Angeles, Chicago, Miami, Austin, and Cleveland.

As an educator, Davin has taught at the Aspen Music Festival as the teaching assistant to Sharon Isbin, and in January 2013, he was a guest artist-faculty at the Afghanistan National Institute of Music in Kabul, Afghanistan.

On Friday, May 24 beginning at 8:00 pm in Mixon Hall, Colin Davin presents a recital featuring the music of J.S. Bach, Britten, Erin Rogers and Joan Tower. On Saturday, May 25 from 1:00 until 4:00, Mr. Davin will give a master class in CIM Studio 113.

We spoke to the Bay Village native by telephone from his home in New York and we began by asking him why he chose the two Bach sonatas for his Classical Guitar Weekend recital.

Colin Davin: Both the third violin sonata and the sixth cello suite are works that have been in my head for a very long time as pieces I have wanted to have in my performing life. I read through the violin sonata during undergraduate school, we used it for a group sight-reading session and I found that my understanding of the piece was happening very quickly; I felt an intuitive connection to it. But it was a few more years before I put it into the repertoire. It is monumental in its intimate, unaccompanied way.

Mike Telin: What are the challenges of transcribing a piece written for a single-lined instrument for the guitar?

CD: The thing that is interesting specifically with these Bach unaccompanied pieces is that he builds the counterpoint into the single line writing. So one of the great challenges, and great opportunities for the guitarist playing a polyphonic instrument is to be able to

realize counterpoint. Sometimes there will be an implied line, or clearly there will be a bass note here that just couldn't be played on the instrument. But sometimes what seems like a single melodic line is actually several voices are just staggered an eighth note apart from each other. So you can realize those voices with two eighth notes ringing into the others in a way that you wouldn't be able to [achieve] on a single-voice instrument.

It's incredible how subtle Bach is with that. There is a part during the fugue of the violin sonata where there is only one active voice being articulated but he manages to create this passing off of four-voice counterpoint without ever sounding a simultaneous dyad. It's sort of incredible.

MT: What intrigues you about the sixth cello suite?

CD: A lot of the partitas, sonatas and suites that Bach wrote, are in the sonata da chiesa and sonata da camera styles. But I was interested in making the dance suite go alongside the more rigid adagio fugue and more abstract violin sonata. I have heard the sixth suite performed on cello and on guitar and I have always been interested in the piece. But it was actually one of my favorite novels which makes mention of the piece, and the description in that novel was sort of what brought me to it.

MT: Interesting. What's the novel?

CD: *Death with Interruptions* By José Saramago. The protagonist is a middle-aged cellist who lives alone with his dog. The short version is that death [a female] falls in love with the man…so I felt I needed to learn it in case I ever meet death.

MT: Tell me about the Britten.

CD: It's the *Nocturne after John Dowland* which is his only solo guitar piece and it is the piece that won't leave my repertoire — nor am I trying to get it to leave. It's a theme and variations based on Dowland's *Come heavy sleep*. It's composed in reverse so the theme doesn't come until the very end. It's a powerful complex and dark piece. And we are in the midst of the Britten centennial year.

MT: And you'll be premiering a work by Erin Rogers. I am not familiar with her music.

CD: Erin is an interesting, multifaceted musician in New York. She was trained as a classical saxophonist, and she plays in a group called the New Thread Quartet. She is also a founding member of a group called ThingNY. It's sort of an absurdist "performance art meets new music" experimental ensemble. They do things like an eight-hour opera which takes place around the city and people follow them rather then having stage changes. She also composes both concert and experimental music. I met her through some mutual colleagues and we've been talking for a while about doing a solo guitar piece. She will also be coming to take part in the panel discussion.

MT: She sounds interesting, I'll have to do some research. Then of course the Joan Tower.

CD: The piece is called *Clocks*. She's written two pieces with guitar — this one and a piece for flute and guitar called *Snow Dream*. Both were written for Sharon Isben, and she was my first entry to them.

I did have a specific occasion to learn *Clocks*. It is a piece that I thought about for a long time but it is rather difficult and I was always a little too busy to learn something that hard. Then I was asked to play a concert at the *New York Chamber Music Festival* that was a birthday celebration for Joan Tower. She was there and we all met up and played a piece for her and that was an opportunity I couldn't [pass up.]

So the first time I played it was this past September. It's a fascinating piece that takes the idea of clocks both in their actual sounds — there are some obvious references — but it is also a study in the manipulation of time. There are a lot of subtle metric modulations and you sort of get the sense that you are inside of Dali's *Persistence of Memory* with time just melting a little bit. I guess she was playing a lot of Bach and Haydn on the keyboard at the time, and she pulls influences from both of them as well as Argentine and Spanish music.

MT: This is a fabulous program.

CD: I'm very excited to be playing it. I think there's a lot of great music on it.

MT: I'm very curious about the time you spent in Afghanistan; how did that come about, and how did you find the experience?

CD: It came about as a result of an unexpected invitation. A colleague from Juilliard, who I didn't know all that well, was the cello teacher at the Afghanistan National Institute of Music and every winter they bring in a handful of guest artist faculty to work with the students. They decided that they needed a guitar teacher so I received an e-mail in November and the trip was slated for the beginning of January. The e-mail came totally out of the blue and I thought, cool, this is from Avery Waite, I like him. Anyway he asked if I wanted to go to Afghanistan, and said the State Department would pay for the trip. So that was the initial connection to it and as you can imagine it was a hectic month preparing for the trip, getting the visa and booking flights.

MT: I'm sure it was.

CD: But it was an extraordinary week and a half.

MT: Can you say a little bit about the students?

CD: The youngest were about 8 or 9 and the oldest was 22 and I think about half of them were living in orphanages. In fact, one of the specific missions of the school is to work with some of the more progressive orphanages in Kabul. The one that I worked with considered themselves to be a music and soccer orphanage. So the kids are involved in music classes both there and a lot of them study at the school as well.

Notably for post-Taliban Afghanistan is that about 30% of the students are girls. It's remarkable to think of Afghanistan under the Taliban, when not only would girls not be ed-

ucated, but musicians were run out of the country because music was so immoral that it was punishable by death. It sounds insane to us, but it was a reality there.

So this school is a radical change from that. The students were so eager and smart. They're always going to need more resources, and now I think that is one of the biggest challenges. Honestly, they need more qualified full-time teachers, and better instruments, but it was a pretty great experience.

MT: I had heard about the school and of course the tour they did to the States, but I have never spoken to anyone who has taught there. And the students progressed?

CD: The students all grew musically during the time I was there, and that was fulfilling to see. I left them a lot of photocopies of sheet music, etudes and technique exercises. I had students who would come in early and be practicing by the time I showed up in the morning and would stay after I had left.

MT: Would you do it again?

CD: Yes, and in fact I am going back in June. I'll be there for about two weeks.

MT: What an experience.

CD: It was certainly an eye-opener. It was also nice because shortly after I came back the Youth Orchestra played in Carnegie Hall and the Kennedy Center, so I got to see a lot of the kids again in New York, which was great.

Published on clevelandclassical.com May 21, 2013