

BERKSHIRE GUITAR SOCIETY

SUNDAY JULY 25TH 2004 – WORKSHOP AND CONCERT WITH RAY BURLEY

I was asked to put down my “views from the floor” of the workshop and subsequent concert given by Ray Burley. Let’s start with the workshop.

There were some 15 of us mustered at the Dance Studio; of assorted standards and capabilities. I think we were all looking forward to a good day’s playing, learning a lot and spending time in the company of other guitarists.

We started with warm-up exercises – yes, I trail the leading finger in the scales across the string too, so the crossing the string exercise was particularly useful. Indeed I have used it since the workshop. I was rather surprised by Ray’s view of scales: I have always regarded them as foolproof right hand training for even pacing, tone control, evenness of striking the string, all the sort of things I can’t do, so his view that (if memory serves correctly) he felt they didn’t contribute much was a bit of a surprise.

Then, divided into our orchestral sections, we got ready for the prepared Poulenc “Suite Francais”. It is my personal opinion that many guitars playing the same thing (ie more than one to a part) spells D-I-S-A-S-T-E-R. Anyway, Ray got us to play each short movement through at one to a part then by all the sections. Now the Poulenc was written for piano and scored up for all sorts of combinations, the main one being for chamber orchestra (according to my Grove’s) and you could hear the orchestration of the parts (for example the trumpet calls in the Marche Militaire and the even paced viola accompaniment in the Pavanne). So I expected to spend a little time working on the voicing and the texture of the sections, much as an orchestra would: when to bring a voice forward, hardening the tone; bringing in a voice and so forth. But we didn’t, we just played it through in sections.

After lunch we moved to Masterclasses. I enjoy watching a good Masterclass, but it would have been nice if we could have had the music ourselves beforehand so that we could appreciate where the difficulties lay. Anyway, I got a number of things out of it; little on technique obviously because I wasn’t playing, but Ray talked about developing the music, as opposed to playing the notes, and about the background to the music, the composer and his approaches and so forth; all most interesting and applicable to my own pieces. But we did lose some of our number; one visitor nodded off to sleep. In future we must make sure that we don’t lose attendees along the way: a short Masterclass might have been better targeted at one piece we all knew and Ray take it at our own level. We were at a participative workshop after all.

Moving back to the Poulenc, we repeated the formula of the morning. Our section had swapped leaders a couple of times by now, so we had all had a chance of playing one to a part. I don’t know if other sections did; one visitor didn’t and left the workshop having played seven times: each Poulenc movement in section once.

So on reflection what was the day? I felt it light on actually playing and rather heavy on listening and watching. I don’t do listening and watching well. I thought the Poulenc was a good choice but there was more in it than we got out. I got value out of the preliminary exercises, pleasure from the small group work and great fun talking to and with other players. Should we do it again next year? Probably, but we should ask some of the less capable players what improvements we need to make for their level.

Ray's evening concert was not so much a set piece as a demonstration of the workshop Masterclasses. Every piece he played illustrated something that he had talked about to us in the Masterclasses. Rather than just list the pieces, I thought that I could comply with my brief by adding my commentary as we go along.

Firstly, Ray didn't stick to the published programme. I understand that at events such as this he tends not to, so if I miss a piece, blame it on my faulty memory.

Ray started with some lute pieces. Although he split the lute section with a Baroque guitar piece, I will lump them together for the sake of this report. The pieces included Bach: the Andante from the Lute Suite BWV 1003 and Weiss, "Tombeau on the death of Logy". Ray commented that Bach wrote, "nothing original for the lute, his extant works being arrangements of the violin partitas and the harpsichord works". Not strictly true, there is the lute solo in the St John. But close enough. Bach actually had 1 lute valued at 21 Thalers in his possession when he died, (compare this with his Stainer violin valued at 8 Thalers), so I think it is fair to view the lute as something Bach played himself. His mentor on the lute was (Sylvius) Leopold Weiss (1687 – 1750); court lutenist at Dresden and regarded as the greatest lutenist of his age. But here we need to be very careful: the baroque lute is not the lute that Julian Bream and Tony Rooley popularised, the renaissance lute and the baroque lute are effectively different instruments. The baroque lute used by Weiss had a different tuning to the near - guitar tuning of the renaissance lute: he was using the "new French tuning" of the German revival C D E F G A d f a d' f'. This naturally leads to a very arpeggiated writing style. This all has two problems for the guitarist; how to manage the open bass strings and whether to retune. The increased tension on the lute of this tuning totally changed the character of the sound and the music; the music should (to my mind) smell of dry leather.

These are hugely difficult works to characterise for the guitarist; Ray brought them off very well; he had shown us in Masterclass how and when to change colour and in these two pieces he demonstrated the tone changes remarkably well. Being written in tablature, the performer must make the decision about suspensions. In renaissance lute there is no stopping of the bass string as there is on the modern guitar: given the resonance of a modern instrument compared to the Baroque lutes, the decisions of sustaining tone must be very difficult and probably depend on the acoustic of the performance hall. Julian Bream once said that it was pointless to practice in the performance hall, the acoustic would all change as soon as the audience arrived anyway. I liked them both: I look forward to being good enough to play Ray's transcriptions.

The Weiss was a tribute to Logy: Logy (or Comte Johann Anton Losy von Losimthal, to give his proper name) was a travelling aristocratic virtuoso, who always had a lute by him in case he wanted to play. His music is actually quite interesting; it survives in manuscripts across Europe. Weiss was influenced by Logy's playing style and composed the Tombeau on Logy's death, which occurred in 1721.

Interleafed, Ray played a well known Suite by Gaspar Sanz. Sanz wrote for the Baroque guitar: which was gaining fashion. Pepys owned a tutor for the guitar among his music collection at his death, but there is no record of an instrument; he preferred (and wrote for) the baroque lute. The baroque guitar was a very light thing, and again carries a different tuning:



5 courses strings and re-entrant tuning; more like trying to play the ukulele than a modern guitar. Again, it gives huge problems for the guitarist playing a standard modern E tuning.

What all these pieces have in common is the need for decoration. Ray had given a Masterclass that largely hinged on decoration and strong left-hand technique: he had demonstrated some ideas of how to decorate and get the best out of a guitar. In these early pieces he gave a real, live Masterclass on decoration, coupled with the implied “lessons” on overcoming the difficulties of tone, tuning and other issues surrounding the use of Early Music: brilliant.

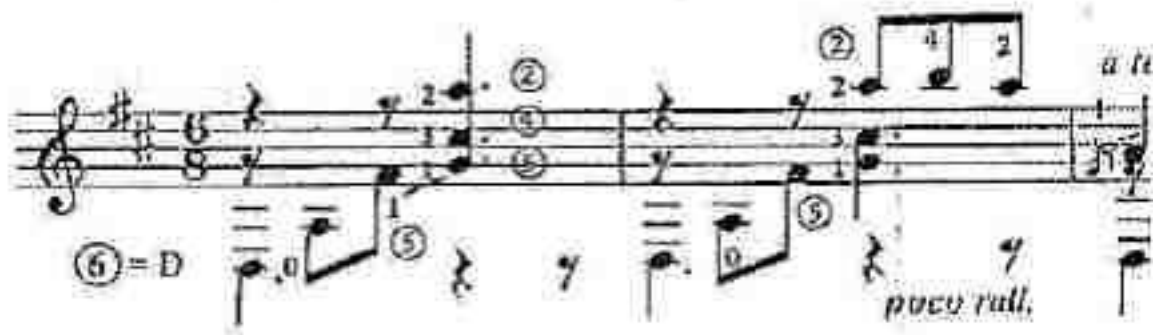
After these lute pieces, we moved into the Standard Repertoire: Sor; Falla arrangements and modern works by Theodorakis. Theodorakis (of Zorba the Greek fame) seems to be undergoing a bit of a revival at present, which I suspect is not related to the Olympics. Ray played his four Epitafos. Wonderfully evocative music, which coupled with the Iberian Chanson du Printemps, made a nice close to the first half. Lessons: tone control; decoration; evenness of playing.

The second half felt like a gear change from the first. Of the pieces he played, I would like to refer back to the Masterclasses.



I want to pick up the Barrios and the Julia Florida in particular. Ray had spent some time in Masterclass going over the intentions of the composer and the interpretation the performer places on them. We surely have all had a go at Julia Florida, and Ray is one of the few guitarists who has made Barrios’s work available and playable. Thank you, Ray, even though I can’t play it.

The version that I have lists it as a barcarolle. Ray played it more 2 in a bar than a 6/8 rocking motion, again a lesson in interpretation. I can’t see it any other way; I wonder how Julia herself saw it (it was composed for the niece of a patron).



The use of voices in the melodic line of *Julia Florida* is critical and again Ray had talked about this, although not in this context, in the masterclasses. I wish I had his control of the separation!



And so we round off the evening with Villa Lobos: "One day," I tell myself, "I'll play the Choros like that." One day.

Graham Cooper
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