

PFINGSTSEMINAR KOBLENZ 2004

By THÉRÈSE WASSILY SABA



Front row: (left to right): Vladimir Mikulka, Alexander-Sergei Ramirez, Thérèse Wassily Saba, Georg Schmitz, Manuel Barrueco and David Russell.
Second row: Frank Haunschild, John Abercrombie, Günter Schillings and Pirai Vaca.
Third row: Ralph Herrnkind, Andreas von Wangenheim, Robert Brightmore and Carlo Marchione.
Back row: Zoran Dukic, Aniello Desiderio and Tilman Hoppstock.

KOBLENZ is famous for many things. It is at the intersection where the River Mosel meets the Rhine, famous in history for its wine and beauty. One of its most famous residents was the travel guide publisher, Karl Baedeker. There are many travel guide books these days: Rough Guides and Lonely Planet, but Baedeker's guidebooks were first published in 1827, when travel was a much more difficult exercise; it was Karl Baedeker's guides that people would walk around clutching as they explored unknown cities. I do not imagine many of the 154 active participants in this festival from 36 different countries brought Baedeker guidebooks with them to Koblenz. In any case, the week was full of masterclasses, concerts, lectures and seminars and, of course, the international competition, so there was hardly time to sit drinking wine along the banks of the River Mosel, watching the plentiful river craft pass by or to sit in the Italian ice cream cafes on the terraces of the town, where the names of the ice creams were even more exotic than the collection of international students attending the festival this year. There were noticeably more young Russians this year, and many Bulgarians playing music by contemporary Bulgarian composers. An adventurous young 16 year old called Francis travelled from

Singapore; he was self-taught but had learned a lot of his repertoire from listening to recordings.

Due to the large number of students attending the course from 24-31 May 2004, and the limitations of concert spots, there were many fine guitarists there this year in a teaching capacity only. The Czech guitarist Vladimir Mikulka, who has been such an important figure in the guitar world, was there to teach. Mikulka has lived in Paris for many years, but it was he who introduced so many of the old Eastern Bloc contemporary composers to the West at a time when borders were closed for much of the cultural exchange that we enjoy today and almost take for granted, for example his pioneering recordings of the works of Nikita Koshkin such as *The Prince's Toys*. I sat in on one of his masterclasses where he discussed the use of cross-string fingering by a student in some Ponce. Mikulka spoke of the gains and losses of the technique: the cross-stringing gives sustain, but then you cannot use vibrato and you cannot control the identity of each note. He compared cross-stringing to the use of the piano pedal. He left the choice of fingering up to the student naturally, but said he should think about singers and how they can only sing one note at a time, but into that one



Matthias Müller and Pablo Garibay.

note they must put all the expression and articulation.

Hubert Käppel gave a discussion on vibrato for one of his masterclass students. He said he learned to do his vibrato from violinists. He does a complete roll from side to side, which he calls a finger vibrato. He moves only the finger, not the hand. The second type is done by rolling the finger but includes some hand movement; the arm however, stays still. Then, for the third type, the finger rolls and everything moves with it. Two further strong points that he made to the students were that they should not be satisfied too early, and that they should always self-criticise and evaluate their playing.

This was a special festival for Käppel. Although he was unaware until the formal announcement was made at the award ceremony for the competition, Georg Schmitz, the director of the Koblenz Guitar Festival and director of the Guitar Academy, had decided that, from this year onwards, the name of the competition would be the International Koblenz Guitar Competition 'Hubert Käppel' in honour of Käppel's contribution to the guitar in Germany.

There were 85 participants in the guitar competition. The six finalists were: Matthias Müller (Germany), Pablo Garibay (Mexico), Anthony Hatzinikolaou (Greece), Stefan Schmitz (Germany), Masao Tanibe (Japan) and Vladimir Gorbach (Russia). These six finalists had the opportunity to have a masterclass with Manuel Barrueco. He focused on tone quality and the spirit of their performance, advised that it was better to play in a musical way rather than in a virtuosic way, that rasgueados in Ponce should not be done in the same way as flamenco rasgueados, and that when listening to the performance of a piece one should not be hearing all the interpretational ideas, but be hearing the actual piece of music. Manuel Barrueco drew comparison with watching an actor perform; one does not want to be aware that they are acting. Then, of course, there was a dreaded question: 'Do you have a metronome?' Not dreaded because the student does not have or has not worked with a metronome, but that the rhythm was so out

that Manuel Barrueco should need to ask. Ouch! But he was good-humoured in all his criticisms: 'We guitarists have a reputation for being bad with rhythm, and the reason for that is that we are bad with rhythm!'

First prize in the competition was a hand-made guitar by Michael Wichmann valued at 5,000 euros, chosen in an anonymous ballot from four possible guitars made by him. The winners of the International Koblenz Guitar Competition 'Hubert Käppel' were: first prize to the young German guitarist Matthias Müller; second prize to the Mexican guitarist Pablo Garibay; and third prize to the Greek guitarist Anthony Hatzinikolaou. The 12 jury members were: Hubert Käppel, Vana Vougiouka, Piraí Vaca, Dagmar Tewes, Günter Schillings, Alexander-Sergei Ramirez, Carlo Marchione, Volker Höh, Dr. Klaus Heinen, Jörg Gauchel, George Vassilev, and head of the jury, myself, Thérèse Wassily Saba.

In David Russell's masterclass one of the students played some of Walton's *Bagatelles*. David spoke of Walton's love of 1920s jazz and explained that guitarists often misunderstand Walton's pieces because they interpret his chords as 'contemporary' chords, when in fact they were inspired by jazz. This means that the beauty of the work is lost through an approach that is too aggressive. David told a lovely story of one time when he played this piece to the famous jazz guitarist Ike Isaacs. When David had finished playing, Ike said: 'Hey, those are my chords!' David Russell recommended that the student listen to other non-guitar pieces by William Walton to get a better idea of his style. For those who might have missed this tip before, in a passage that demands more fingers than the usual quota, David suggests the use of the tip of the nose on the sixth string to produce the necessary harmonic.

Equally good were the masterclasses of British guitarist Robert Brightmore, who teaches at the Guildhall School of Music in London, Andreas von Wangenheim, Zoran Dukic, Aniello Desiderio, Piraí Vaca, Tilman Hoppstock and Alexander-Sergei Ramirez.



Robert Brightmore, Vladimir Mikulka and Hubert Käppel.

PHOTO: THÉRÈSE WASSILY SABA

The start of the festival went very well. Marcin Dylla gave the opening recital in the Rathaussaal in the centre of this historic town and was given a well-deserved standing ovation for his four-sonata programme. He played three encores: Mertz's *Tarantella*, the cadenza from Ponce's *Concierto del Sur*, and then Mertz again. I had heard Dylla play the Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Brouwer, José and Rodrigo sonata programme before but after listening I thought that I would like to hear it again, and many more times. I was pleased that the interpretation sounded different from the last performance I heard him play, in particular in the Brouwer and I really enjoyed the José Sonata that Dylla plays so well.

Brazilian guitarist Fabio Zanon gave a challenging recital at 11am in the Musikschule. He played repertoire that challenged the students a little and sought to broaden their knowledge. He started with some of his own excellent but difficult transcriptions of Scarlatti sonatas and then introduced us to a rarely heard but worthwhile work: the *Grand Polonaise, op.24* by Jan Nepomucen Bobrowicz. Zanon explained that Bobrowicz was a student of Giuliani who had written 30 works but then retired at the age of 27 and put his energies into translating Polish poetry into German. *Music of Memory* by British composer Nicholas Maw is a demanding piece of contemporary repertoire, emotionally as well as technically. It requires a player of Zanon's breadth of experience to perform it successfully.

Fabio Zanon's masterclass was interesting because of the language he used to describe his ideas; he spoke of the piano tone quality as needing to be 'fluffy'. When something quite far from fluffiness was required, he said: 'There is so much light in your sound. Imagine it is a long, long winter night.' And one final, invaluable comment: 'Make sure there are no subliminal messages as you play. I'm not telling people I'm making a diminuendo, I'm just making it!'

The respect that we all have for David Russell and Manuel Barrueco is undeniable, however, so many people I spoke to felt particularly moved by their recitals in Koblenz, and I must say I felt the same. There was something extra special; perhaps it was the atmosphere in the Rathaussaal. What is most distinctive is the depth of understanding that they each have for the pieces that they play. It is a musical maturity that comes through sensitivity, intelligence and meticulous hard work.

Aniello Desiderio's evening recital opened with a truly melancholy *Melancholy Galliard* by John Dowland. This led nicely into the *Nocturnal Op.70* by Benjamin Britten which he played with great attention to detail and the shaping of the single melodic line and taking pianissimos to their extreme. This approach carried over into the second half of the programme with works by Pujol, Falla, Turina and Albéniz, but his interpretational style became too much for this Spanish



Matthias Müller and Manuel Barrueco.

repertoire. Desiderio is a dedicated musician who, despite his already high level of musicianship, is striving for even greater depth in his musical interpretation, but in focusing so closely, the wider perspective of the music is sometimes lost. It is a matter of striking the balance between interpretation that exposes the essence of the piece and allowing the music the possibility to speak for itself.

Zoran Dukic is a generous performer too. The three movement *Sonata* by Vojislav Ivanovic was dedicated to him, as was the *Lullaby for Sarah* by Iannarelli. I loved the character that was so vibrant and colourful in his interpretation of the *Six Balkan Miniatures* by Dusan Bogdanovic.

Carlo Marchione's lecture on Bach's *Chaconne* was full. The lecture opened with a performance of the *Chaconne* from the *Partita in D minor for solo violin* by Marchione. In his lecture he discussed why this piece has such a legendary status among musicians, not only among guitarists. In 1720 Bach was working for Prince Leopold, and after going away for a year with his employer, he returned to find his wife, Maria Barbara had died. Marchione presented Professor Helga Thoene's theory that the *Chaconne* is the musical epitaph to Maria Barbara. He mentioned the superb reference book by this German musicologist from Düsseldorf where she has published a detailed account of her theories. The book includes CD entitled *Morimur*, recorded by the violinist Christoph Poppen and the Hilliard Ensemble in 2001; so it is still relatively new research, and a controversial theory. Marchione presented many of the details which were thought provoking and which will hopefully encourage people to look further into the piece.

I had a personal nightmare on the night of John Abercrombie's gig. When the time came to go, my hotel door just would not open. They tried all sorts of methods from the other side of the door. Then the master key for the hotel snapped inside the lock. A locksmith managed to release me one and a half hours later, so it was the second half of the gig that I heard of this legendary American jazz guitarist. He performed with guitarist Frank

Haunschild, bass player Gunnar Plümer and drummer Wolfgang Ekholt at the Café Hahn, an old jazz venue in Koblenz. Over his 30-year career, John Abercrombie has worked with many other fine musicians and in differing jazz styles, but his most recent work and recording has been in the quartet format in a freer form improvisation and composition based on his years of experience.

The German jazz guitarist Ralph Herrnkind gave a talk on the history of jazz in Germany. Two student concerts that were particularly impressive were the piano students of Sheila Arnold and the young guitarists class conducted by Günter Schillings. Both concerts presented players from around nine years of age. They performed a variety of solo pieces by Diabelli, Brouwer, Käppel and Kellner with remarkable confidence. Sheila Arnold's young pianists were even more impressive. They played works of considerable length and very musically for their age.

There were a number of guitar makers with their instruments on display: Gert Petersen, Stefan Schlemper brought in his guitars and his renowned amplification system, Armin and Mario Gropp and of course, Michael Wichmann whose guitar was the first prize in the international competition. Chanterelle with Michael Macmeeken set up a shop at the Musikschule with a wide range of scores and recordings.



John Abercrombie (guitar), Wolfgang Ekholt (drums), Gunnar Plümer (bass) and Frank Haunschild (guitar).

The 13th IPS Koblenz Guitar Festival will be from 10-16 May 2005 with an impressive list of guests: Manuel Barrueco, David Russell, Pepe Romero, Hubert Käppel, Aniello Desiderio, Stephen Goss, Dale Kavanagh, Alexander-Sergei Ramirez and Andreas von Wangenheim, among others. There will be an international solo guitar competition as well with no age limit on entry.

Contact: director Georg Schmitz, Musikschule der Stadt Koblenz, Hoewelstrasse 6, 56073 Koblenz, Germany. Tel. +49 170 311 5446.

e-mail: info@koblenzguitarfestival.de

Website: www.pfingstseminar.de