

KOBLENZ 2006

By COLIN COOPER

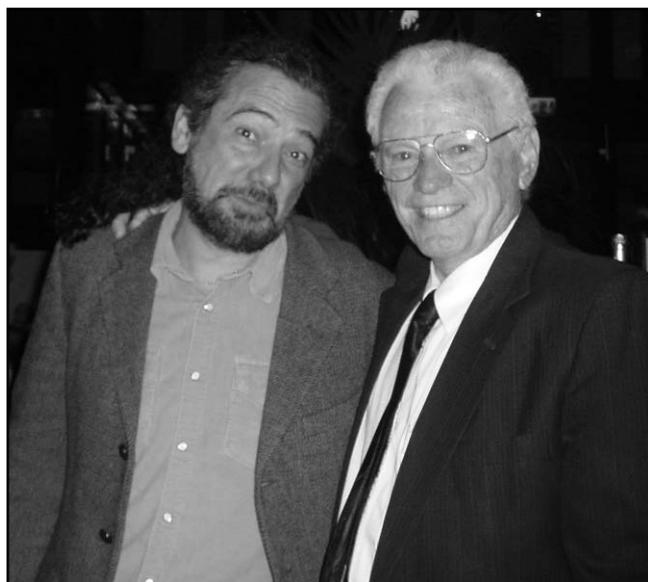
FEW European festival venues can match Koblenz, where the rivers Mosel (Moselle in France) and the great Rhine meet a kilometre or so from the Mercure Hotel. The occasion was the 14th International Koblenz Guitar Festival, held from 29 May to 5 June 2006. Director Georg Schmitz had assembled a strong line-up of performers, teachers and lecturers, among whom were (in alphabetical order) Sérgio and Odair Assad, Elias Barreiro, Manuel Barrueco, Costas Cotsiolis, Aniello Desiderio, Paul Galbraith, Jörg Gauchel, Stephen Goss, Klaus Heinen, Volker Höh, Hubert Käppel, Wolf Moser, Gerardo Nuñez and his group, Alexander S. Ramirez, David Russell, Günter Schillings, Pavel Steidl, Piraí Vaca and Jason Vieaux, with CG magazine represented by Thérèse Wassily Saba (who was appointed Head of the Jury) and myself.

The first thing I noticed was that, with the exception of my valued colleague, it was an all-male affair. Even the flamenco troupe did not contain the customary female dancer, for whom I suspect there is no place in the kind of loud and fast flamenco-jazz favoured by the likes of Rafael Cortes, Macareno and Gerardo Nuñez, the guitarist on this occasion. They are highly brilliant performers, and that is why they have built up so enthusiastic a following. I can



PHOTOS: EMILY SABA

Hubert Käppel, Costas Cotsiolis, Pavel Steidl and Sergio Assad.



Odair Assad and Elias Barreiro.

admire their technique while at the same time regretting the loss of the dancers.

Many old friends were encountered, many good concerts were given. Paul Galbraith began the proceedings, using his familiar set-up of 8-string guitar and resonating box. He has just about perfected his upright cello-like stance, and the result was a concert of extraordinary clarity and precision. I revelled in its delicate handling of complex textures, particularly in Ravel's *Mother Goose Suite*, but it is fair to say that there were one or two dissenting voices who missed the familiar expressiveness of the 6-string guitar. But Ravel and Debussy are not Albéniz and Granados, and for me there was more than enough compensation in the revealing of a new and intriguing range of colour and an expressiveness all its own. Galbraith's recent issue of a CD containing both *Mother Goose* and a substantial Debussy programme confirms my opinion that these are some of the most delectable sounds I have heard on a guitar. Will the 8-string ever supplant the 6-string guitar? I doubt it. But when it is played with the mastery of a Paul Galbraith, it is going to attract new composition, and that alone will give it an excellent chance of survival and even popularity.

Stephen Goss's lecture *The Guitar in Mozart and Mozart on the Guitar* was timely, for obvious



Paul Galbraith and Georg Schmitz.

reasons; it would have been interesting even without the anniversary. Dr Goss is Head of Composition at the University of Surrey; a skilled musician and a prolific and imaginative composer, he is thus in a better position than most to speak on this topic. It was a talk of unusual quality and distinction.

In his concert, Paul Galbraith offered some Mozart of his own arranging, ingeniously forming K153, K574 and movements from K399 into a baroque suite. Otherwise, tributes to this iconic composer were thin on the ground. I wished Roland Dyens could have been there to play Sor's *Six Airs Choisis* from *The Magic Flute* in that enchanting way of his. Come to think of it, Manuel Barrueco, who was there, once recorded those pieces, very neatly and gracefully, but they are not in his repertoire now, and that was that. Bach, Piazzolla, Turina and Albéniz are, however, and provided a rich feast of music. The latter's *Suite Española* brought a ripple of excitement to the Wigmore Hall when Barrueco made his debut there many years ago. It very nearly did again, but it is very difficult to capture those defining moments that etch themselves into the memory. What we had instead was experience, polish and a formidable power.

Four Fantasies by Francesco da Milano formed a prominent part of David Russell's recital. There was a group of Dowland too, giving the 16th and 17th centuries a substantial share of the proceedings. Granados's *Valses Poéticos* yielded some rubato of the highest musicality, as we have come to expect. It was a pleasure to hear Sojo's Venezuelan pieces once more. Hans Haug, Mertz and Giuliani made up the rest of the programme, with Grieg, Malats and Barrios as encores.

Pavel Steidl's recital was a delight too, though of a slightly different order. Paganini brings out all his capacity for mime and illusion; his guitar tone has so much *vox humana* in it that when he opens his mouth you are



Colin and Maureen Cooper with David Russell.

half convinced that the sound is coming from there. Later, Bach's Chaconne demonstrated his more serious side, though that too was intensely human and lyrical. It did not conceal the architecture, and it is this ability to range so widely across the gamut of the human emotions that makes Steidl the player he is. Mertz (*Bardenklänge*), Giuliani (*Rossiniana No.1*) and Legnani (some of the *Caprices*) completed a satisfying programme.

The Staatsorchester Rheinische Philharmonie, directed by Rasmus Baumann, partnered, alternately, Aniello Desiderio and Costas Cotsiolis in a 'Spanish Night' of music by Albéniz, Falla and Rodrigo, in which both Rodrigo's *Aranjuez* and *Fantasia* were played, with unaccompanied solos by Albéniz, Falla and (as an encore) Pujol. Electrical amplification has to be near-perfect (that is, unnoticeable) to please me; this was not.

The Assad Duo played Albéniz, Rodrigo, Piazzolla, Bittencourt (the zestful *Noites cariocas*), Gismonti, Dyens (Hillerød, from *Côte Nord*), Gnatalli, with family contributions from Sérgio (*Farewell* and *Homenagem a nossas raizes*) and Clarice Assad (*Valsas do Rio*). Superlatives sound like clichés when you write about these musicians, and I will merely say that they fulfilled expectations and more.

The International Koblenz Guitar Competition 'Hubert Käppel', to give it its full title, had an unusually high entry of 80. No 1st prize was awarded, and the 2nd was shared between Kyi-Hee Park, from Korea, and Artyom Dervoed, from Russia. Kyi-Hee Park got the new guitar by Michael Wichmann. In the jury were Thérèse Wassily Saba (Head of Jury), Elias Barreiro, Colin Cooper, Jörg Gauchel, Stephen Goss, Klaus Heinen, Volker Hoh, Wolf Moser, Alexander S. Ramirez, Günter Schillings, Piraí Vaca, Jason Vieaux. Competition secretary: Tatjana Schwab.

Make a note of Koblenz: it is worth visiting, for its Rhineland scenery, the food and the wine, and not only for the music and good company of this well-organised festival.