

INTERVIEW with ROLAND DYENS by TOLGAHAN ÇOĞULU

Published in “Andante” Music Magazine, February-March 2009, Issue 38

T.Ç: As a guitarist I feel so lucky that I am living in an age that has wonderful guitarist-composer generation including you, Leo Brouwer, Dusan Bogdanovic, Nikita Koshkin, Sergio Assad, Paulo Bellinati, Carlo Domeniconi and the others. In my opinion, the works of this generation are creating the history for the classical guitar world for late 20th century and early 21st century. What are the reasons behind the fact that this revolutionary generation consists of composers who are also guitarists?

R.D: This “phenomenon” have always existed in the past, through the generations. There is a great and old tradition of composers-guitarists (XIXth century was its Golden age with artists like Sor, Aguado, Giuliani etc ...). Therefore, I think there is obviously a strong link and tradition between them and the contemporary composers you rightly mention. One of the explanations for that comes from the fact that the guitar is an incredibly complex instrument which requires the highest knowledge about its “geography” to write properly for it. And since the composers you mention know more and more about its secrets and possibilities, this is the reason why they produce so much inspiration and, therefore, generate this New Wave of composers. It’s an exponential process actually.

T.Ç: You often use the term “the geography of the guitar.” Could you tell us what you mean with the geography of the guitar and the ways to improve it?

R.D: Geography of the guitar to me means – let’s make it short, ok? – all what the popular and jazz musicians know on the left side of the guitar (left handed knowledge = positions, harmony, places where could be found the right harmonic notes when needed, succession of chords etc.... In one word: spontaneity and ability at the same time, all together. To make it clearer, it’s the same as when you have to accompany a song you never heard before after a dinner with friends in a restaurant by instance. Do you understand me? This is what I call the geography of the guitar actually. And this geography is missing too often to too many classical players (yet let say!). In addition to that, that geography would be of a great help to the classical players EVEN to play classical music in a better way. The way to improve it? Very simple: try to accompany

simple songs on and on first of all; then make it a bit more sophisticated and so on. Even if you feel ignorant at the beginning of that process that “spontaneo-ability” should become natural soon or later anyway.

T.Ç: Each of your arrangements have a special flavor when you play with the classical guitar. What are the key formulas for that? Which steps you follow to get a good fusion in these arrangements?

R.D: I have no “magic trick” for that, but just love and respect for the music and the arranger I’m working on through and for this instrument I know a bit: the guitar. Finding the right spirit and the relevant mood in arranging a piece for solo guitar (process that I always did consider as a full Art actually – nothing to do with a transcription of course – everything’s possible with 2 guitars, even New World Symphony by Anton Dvorak!) is the Major Key to me. Arranging is the contrary of doing something about you know, very soon, it will not sound great on the guitar. Arranging is renouncing sometimes. Arranging is the “Art of sacrifice” in a way. You should know what has to be sacrificed (basses, middle notes or whatever) in order to make a real guitaristic and great stuff. And more than this: a great arrangement should bring a new light on the piece you are arranging, especially if it originally was written for another instrument (the piano most of the time). The difficult challenge in that is to avoid, by all means, to make a terrible and ugly fusion, a kind these “musical salads” I hate (Flamen-Classijazz-Contempo-Brazil stuff). That’s why I mentioned this concept of respect and right mood first of all. And above all: the concept of taste. And this is definitely the most impossible thing to explain objectively. Taste! What is taste? To my opinion, there is taste and/or no taste, nothing else. Bad taste is a mere pleonasm actually. And unfortunately, no one, ever, will be able (nor allowed) to give “Taste Master Classes.”

T.Ç: We know that the first pages of your many scores are like “How to Play Contemporary Guitar?” methods, explaining all the techniques you use in detail. In addition to this, the preface of your book “20 Letters” is like a guitar method explaining three important approaches for classical guitar that can not be found in conventional guitar methods. You are giving many masterclasses in many festivals and you are a Professor of Guitar in Conservatoire National Supérieur de Paris in the last 9 years. How should be the guitar education in the world in 2000s? What is your method to teach the standard and contemporary techniques together to your students?

R.D: I'm convinced that the guitar education in the next decades should necessarily tackle issues like "accurate listening" than "fast moving fingers" if you see what I mean. Guitar playing nowadays is becoming an Olympic Sport all over the world more than an Art and an Emotion (of course we have exceptions and beautiful ones here and there). But, let's be careful with the Olympic Games Syndrome at least!! *Listening* to my opinion, means taking care of any single note, avoiding either bad resonances or squeaks on the low strings, things (wrongly) called "details" but which are the essential to me since the guitar playing of Tomorrow will need all that care to be recognized and loved as it should deserve. I have no particular "method" with the students except making them taking advantage of my experience as both a player and a composer. So "listening carefully" to our playing is THE key according to me.

T.Ç: Do you have projects to gather your huge experience in classical guitar teaching in a book or DVD format?

R.D: No, I don't plan to record a DVD to explain all these elements. Just the "live Master Classes" are enough to me in order to spray my "philosophy" and personal approach of guitar playing around. My main goal is that I manage to convince the students that I cross on my path about my vision of guitar playing, even a few of them. I'm not a Guru, though, not at all !! Please, don't think this even half a second J Just an artist that needs the young generation to be more aware and more musicians than just guitar players, even good, right? This should (and hopefully will) make the difference in the future.

T.Ç: You are travelling around the world to give recitals and masterclasses. What are your observations about the new generation guitarists?

R.D: They are more and more captivated by the guitar then more and more curious and demanding. And this is a very good thing. The new generation of guitarists do have an incredible "appetite" in learning actually. And it makes absolutely sense since the amount of knowledge we have at our disposal today is increasing every day. And of course, they are better and better instrumentalists, no question on that. Nevertheless, the musical level could be much improved still for the reasons I tried to make clear through my previous answer.

T.Ç: What are your music projects for the future (short-term and long-term)?

R.D: The very next step will be publishing both a cd and a Book on 11 arrangements I did on Pixinguinha's music (one of the founder of chôro in Brazil – He is a myth there). So I'm currently working on both listening to the 1st edit of the cd and correcting the proofs for the scores. It's a lot of work !! The whole thing should "come to the life" at GSP (San Francisco) by mid-March. Then, the following expected project is a commission for a guitar duo (*Chroma duo*, a great duo from Baltimore), then I don't know, nothing's special planned yet. Maybe something like "20 New letters". But really easy that time !! (I really thought they were very easy at the time I wrote them but they are not that much in fact). Writing both very easy and "sexy" pieces is one of the highest challenges I know in my life. "Yes I can!" (as Obama said)..

T.Ç: You were born in Tunisia and lived there until you are six. But the maqam-based Arabian music has not influenced your pieces much like other musics except some of your works like "Hamsa." Are you interested in maqam music?

R.D: I know what you mean. Yes, this music is quite interesting and beautiful actually. But the fact I was born in Tunisia is not a sufficient factor to explain I would be particularly moved or touched by this kind of music more than another (look at Domeniconi's music by the way – he is my exact contrary! : he is an Italian born then turned a "Turkish" composer somehow..). But maybe you could find some "unconscious" (or less unconscious) elements of this traditional music from North Africa in some part of my music, except Hamsa. Why not in some of my starting concert improvisations, who knows? But you know what about that "influences" issue? I do believe – not in reincarnation but in its "opposite" somehow – I do believe in previous lives. For this, I believe sometimes that I used to be a Brazilian man in one of my previous lives J. I feel so close from Brazilian people, the way they behave and anything that speaks about Brazil and its culture.

T.Ç: This is the second time you are coming to Turkey for a concert. What were your observations about guitarists when you came to Ankara in 2007.

R.D: What a fervor! What an appetite! Oh my God! Did you know how I named the 3rd movement of my Traveling Sonata for flute & guitar? Ankara! So maybe Istanbul will inspire me some new music for the future, you never know..

T.Ç: What do you advice to the guitarists for their musical lives?

R.D: Same as I tell all the guitarists I meet all over the world: 1) being honest in their musical options (choice of pieces, personal interpretation etc.. – if you are strongly convinced by something then you are definitely convincing. No way!) ; 2) Practice the guitar with a much more musical (than technical) approach. Trying to reach a musical goal will obviously improve your technique (the important thing being to possess a clever technique and not a stupid and just “fast” one); 3) To “tell a nice story” any time they are playing (in concert or not), even a very simple one, but a nice story. The listener will always remember that nice story on the morning he wakes up after the concert. On the other hand, he will never ever remember the faster scale in the world. Never ever.