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CLASSICAL
GUITAR

July 2008

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LACCS - 25th ANNIVERSARY

An interview with Juan R. Monroy

By THÈRESE WASSILY SABA

LONDON guitarists know the debt they owe to Juan R. Monroy, who with his wife, Juanita Sylvester, founded the Latin American and Caribbean Cultural Society (LACCS) 25 years ago. Over the years the society has brought many legendary guitarists to London to perform including Laurindo Almeida, Alirio Diaz, Carlos Barbosa-Lima, Charlie Byrd, Eduardo Falú, Eduardo Fernández, Sharon Isbin, Marlos Nobre, Gaudêncio Thiago de Mello, Roberto Aussen and Eliot Fisk, to name just some. However, it is not only London guitarists who have been enjoying their hard work because LACCS has built up an enthusiastic audience of its own.

Over the years the scope of its work has stretched to include Latin-American films and its other non-guitar events have included a harp ensemble from Italy, a folk song and dance group from Vietnam, dancers from Kazakhstan and, not surprisingly, some very fine tango performers. I spoke to Juan R. Monroy during the current anniversary concert season.

For how many more years do you imagine you will continue with LACCS?

I want to keep doing it for another 25 years - well, if I am still alive, why not?

Is it more difficult now than when you started 25 years ago?

It gets more and more difficult each year, but it has always been difficult to be involved as the organiser of these concerts, particularly if you organise a concert at a high-profile public venue; it is difficult not only because it involves more expenses, you need to book well in advance because you are competing with many other musical events in London. In the case of the guitar, one of the reasons LACCS started promoting the classical guitar 25 years ago was because this instrument was practically forgotten by the media and by the musical British establishment. Of course if we compare the guitar with piano promotion for example, then it is obvious that the piano and the pianist occupy a more privileged artistic position than the guitar and the guitarist in the main concert halls of London. For this competitive reason we need to be more careful with the guitar repertoire in order to attract larger audiences to the concerts. LACCS always aims to present first class guitarists and to promote new classical repertoire for the guitar.



European premiere of Cantata Oratorio Colombo by Antonio Carlos Gomes at the Royal Lancaster Hotel, London.

Are the concerts profitable?

Generally speaking I don't think the classical music business is profitable at present, not even for the international venues. The reason could be that the music market has changed tremendously in recent decades, with new technological inventions and the explosion of the pop music business - all of which have affected the market of the classical music, especially as the younger audiences are less educated in the appreciation of a quality classical programme.

With regards to how we finance our projects, almost all of them have received support from the private sector and in a few cases, a minimum of support from the governments. The reality is that culture and music is not an important subject to governments and the politicians, so in our work it is very difficult to maintain both a professional profile and the prestige as cultural promoters for the guitar and Latin American classical music. All of these big venues, such as the Royal Festival Hall in London, need sponsorship to survive. They need public money because they cannot finance themselves just through ticket sales. A concert ticket may cost something like £20, but these venues spend thousands of pounds on electricity, the front of house staff and so on. They always need public funding and public funding is always linked with politics and the politicians, who at the end of the day, control the budgets. But the way we have been working with LACCS is through private support - people who like music and who agree to sponsor an event - that is the only way. We 'can't' finance the concerts ourselves and we 'don't' receive any grants from anywhere.

Doesn't it get easier because you have built up a reputation over the years?

In some respects, yes, because after many years people do get to know you, and know that you have been an honest person. So over the years we have worked regularly with some people. Our work in the UK has been as pioneers bringing Latin American music to British audiences since the 1980s, when there was limited knowledge of Latin American culture; even in the television of that period, our culture did not exist at all for the British establishment and general public. So, in working hard to maintain a permanent programme of concerts at the main London public venues for more than two decades we have been able to build a prestigious reputation as a serious and honest organisation, which is only motivated by the idea of building a better cultural and musical image for Latin America and the Caribbean region.

You have mostly focused on organising guitar concerts, haven't you?

Yes, the guitar has always been important in our minds, although when we started the whole idea 25 years ago, our main instruments were the piano, opera singers, and orchestras. Over the years we decided to focus more on the guitar as the main instrument which we would promote through our concerts. We decided this for obvious reasons really: the guitar is the national instrument in almost all of the Latin American countries - everybody has a guitar at home. Music for guitar is of interest to people writing for the guitar. It is a relatively easy instrument to travel with and for the organisers, we are spared some extra expense because we don't have to bring an instrument in, such as a piano, and then pay for the cost of tuning it. These are the positive things about the guitar, and as a result of working for all of these years we have created an audience who are more attracted to the guitar. When we organise our programmes we try to show something different from one to the next, and so we have moved away from the traditional guitar repertoire. We think that the future of the guitar is through expanding its repertoire.

Your programmes do feature a lot of premieres.

Yes, exactly, we like to present premieres of Latin American music, which was almost unknown here in London before we started organising concerts. I think that this was an area of interest for us which we needed to explore in order to show the British public that Latin America has its own music - and its own guitar music as well.

It is not just the impressive variety and quality of artists that LACCS have brought to London for which it is to be congratulated on but also the programming of works by composers which might otherwise not have been appreciated... that is, Carlos Barbosa-Lima playing guitar concertos by Francisco Mignone and Radamés Gnattali with the English Chamber Orchestra; works by the Brazilian composer Marlos



Juan Monroy presents a LACCS Award to Carlos Barbosa-Lima.

Nobre; works by Carlos Chávez and Silvestre Revueltas played by the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra; Maria Isabel Siewers with the Delos Quartet playing music by Carlos Guastavino; the Cantata Oratorio Colombo by Antonio Carlos Gomes (1836-1896); Oscar Ohlson playing The First Sonata by Pablo Delano and Creole et Fontaine by Edmundo Vasquez.

Of the performers you bring over, there seems to be little other opportunities for them to come over to Britain to perform, for example, we wouldn't have been able to hear Carlos Barbosa-Lima so often, if you hadn't brought him out here?

Absolutely, we have brought Carlos Barbosa-Lima here about 11 times so far and with many of the guitarists, such as Berta Rojas, Eduardo Fernández, even Alirio Díaz, would rarely be heard here, if we hadn't brought them over.

When did you bring Alirio Díaz out to give a concert?

We have brought him here three times: once privately in 1987, then at Wigmore Hall and once at the Purcell Room.

You haven't had so many recitals at Wigmore Hall recently.

We were looking for venues in those days, so we experimented. However, the most important thing is the person playing the instrument. We were at Wigmore Hall for several years. St John's Smith Square has plenty of acoustic but it is a big venue with 700 seats; the Purcell Room has 378 seats. So more recently we have been putting on our concerts at the Purcell Room at the South Bank Centre and sometimes also at the famous Leighton House Museum in Holland Park which is a very special venue. There we are surrounded by the paintings and art collection of Lord Leighton with the beautifully tiled walls in the Arab style. It has a very good atmosphere for guitar concerts.

Yes, it's almost like being in a mini-Alhambra. The ones I remember of your concerts in the past which

were so very special were those with *Laurindo Almeida, Charlie Byrd and Carlos Barbosa Lima.*

Charlie Byrd played a piece which I heard when I was a little boy called *Adios*. Charlie Byrd arranged it for two guitarists. It is a very beautiful piece and now it is part of Carlos's repertoire as well. The other piece he arranged is *Guantanamera*. We have this solo on the website and you can hear the whole piece there. Another piece he arranged which I think is fantastic is the *bolero* by Agustin Lara called *Solamente una Vez*. It is a very delicate arrangement.

On 17 March 2008 we put on a solo recital with Carlos Barbosa Lima who is celebrating the 50th anniversary of his international career. That was a very special concert and we presented Carlos with a LACCS award for his contribution to promoting Latin American music.

In 2008, you have quite an international mix of players in your series.

Yes, we have Ukrainian guitarists, guitarists from Bosnia-Herzegovina and from the Baltic and Scandinavian countries. We started in February with Zarko Ignjatovic from Slovenia, then in March Carlos Barbosa-Lima in Purcell Room. On 7 April the Turkish guitarist Ahmet Kanneci played with the clarinetist Ekrem Oztan: it was a very nice programme and the Anatolian pieces. Then on 28 May we have Julio Almeida from Ecuador, Andriy Ostapenko on Thursday 31 July, and then the Zagreb Trio on 28 August at Leighton House. It is years since they have been here to perform in London.

Last year you organised a Chilean Guitar Festival.

Yes, it was the first one in the history of Chilean music for classical music abroad with six Chilean musicians playing in the series - Carlos Pérez, José Antonio Escobar, Luis Orlandini, Romilio Orellana, and Oscar Ohlsen - all of them played Chilean premières. There were five concerts: two at the Purcell Room and three at Leighton House, from April to September 2007. I started with the idea of this festival in 2005, and almost all of the guitarists I invited had already played for LACCS, with the exception of Eduardo Figueroa who studied baroque music in Italy and who is now a member of an important baroque music ensemble in Italy called Gruppo Seicento. So I knew all of them and it was a good idea to bring them together into a series because they are all performers of an international standard. I wanted them to play the Chilean repertoire to show the British audiences that Chile at the moment has its own repertoire. I gave them one year to organise their new repertoire by asking Chilean composers to write pieces for them. They all fulfilled the task and we received some very nice reviews.

After the successful experience of the First Chilean Guitar Festival in London, I decided to revisit my country, Chile. I visited two important academic

centres for the classical guitar, the Universities of Concepción and the University of Bio Bio, where I had meetings with the Directors of their Music Departments to discuss the possibility of a collaboration between LACCS and the universities to create a programme for young guitarists to perform in London and in others countries in Europe, and a festival for 2010.

So perhaps you will continue with LACCS for another 25 years?

These 25 years had been a rich personal experience for myself and for the colleagues working in LACCS. We have learned so much about the performing arts in Latin America and in Europe, especially with the classical guitar. We created an institution to serve the intellectual interests of the musicians and to benefit the culture of each Latin American and European country represented in our series at the South Bank and others important venues in London.

We think that LACCS must be preserved for future generations. The idea behind this cultural project involves the participation of professional musicians, instrumentalists and composers, people associated with this field of culture in universities and colleges, and the music lovers, all of them have been a part of the successful experience in music - which is LACCS and its series of concerts.

Another contribution of LACCS had been to create a friendly cultural platform for the Diplomats in London, to bring together music and diplomacy, to contribute towards a better understanding among all nations, in which the guitar is part of the musical tradition.

As Colin Cooper said, 'Classical Guitar magazine knows only too well the difficulties of keeping a guitar series going in London, having mounted a long succession of recitals at Wigmore Hall over several years. But LACCS has been doing it for 25 years, extending its scope in the process. LACCS and its founders, Juan R. Monroy and Juanita Sylvester, deserve the highest praise, recognition and (it goes without saying) the continuing support of those various bodies that help to provide a solid financial basis for this successful initiative. Without LACCS, our knowledge of the arts of Latin America and the Caribbean would be inadequate. What began as an effort to bring the arts of Latin America to London has become a global operation. Juan Monroy's efforts have helped to fill more than one cultural gap in Britain's capital city. I hope they can carry on doing what they have been doing with such distinction for a quarter of a century, because London needs them.'

www.laccs.com

N.B. For those interested in more historical background to the Latin American and Caribbean Cultural Society and Juan R. Monroy, see an earlier interview published Classical Guitar magazine in November 2005.