

RENE WILHELMY TALKS TO JEFFREY MCFADDEN



Jeffrey McFadden
Photograph by Michael Schulz (Image Force)

RW- Jeff, in what way has your competition experience been most helpful.

JM- Well, the competitions can be helpful in many ways. Of course, when you perform at one of these events, there are people from all over the world attending and they might remember you if you play well. They'll be more inclined to invite you to play a concert in their own communities if they know you can function under the "rigorous" conditions of a guitar contest. Success at competitions also seems to yield opportunities to record and to get some press attention, but in a broader sense, it can put the stamp of legitimacy on your act in the eye of the general public, almost like, fairly or not, a certificate of authenticity. The real bonus of participating in competitions though, is that you get a chance to meet so many other players, and guitarists as a breed are noted as an entertaining bunch to consort with... I may be a little

biased in saying so.

RW- With all your competition experience you've surely developed a manner of preparing your program which suits that particular situation, but is there any significant difference between competition preparation and standard concert preparation?

JM- For me, there is no real difference. Whether you are performing for a jury of international experts or your local sewing circle, you have to somehow "reach" the audience for them to like you. I do think there is a broad assumption that technical perfection is paramount in competitions but I don't think any jury would award a prize based solely on who plays fastest or loudest. I assume that "communication" makes the artist/audience relationship work, whoever the audience happens to be and so I try to prepare well enough to communicate, wherever I'm playing. The nice thing about competitions is that you usually have a week with no other commitments, once you've arrived, except to practice. No phones, no faxes... almost like a holiday, in a perverted sort of way!

RW- A holiday?! Hmm.. what an odd concept! Now, about your choice of repertoire... How do you initially decide what would be the most effective program and does the character of the test piece effect your decision?

JM- Well, rather than trying to build a program around the test piece or making sure that I've covered all the style periods, or using some other thoughtful parameter, I've always simply chosen to play the repertoire that I'm most enamoured with at the time. I try to fit the test piece in at a suitable spot in the program. I know I'm not alone in this philosophy; I once saw a fellow competitor play a program made up entirely of what we normally consider to be encore pieces- all short, flashy tunes - and he had the jury giggling with delight.

RW- So, if I understand correctly you would play your own favourites, whatever they might

be, and possibly reduce your chance of winning, rather than playing a flashier program which you think might impress the jury?

JM- Well, I admit that if you happen to be enamoured of say, sluggish, repetitive studies or you like only sarabandes and nothing else then you probably are sunk using my philosophy. I was thinking, more precisely, that you sound your best, and therefore have the best chance to succeed, if you play pieces in which you've discovered some special qualities, pieces that you really like. Otherwise, it's somewhat like giving a speech about how much you love the Bruins when you're really a Habs fan, or about how you enjoy fetching sticks and eating dog food when you're really a cat - not very convincing.

RW- OK, but competitions being what they are, surely it's a good idea to have a few "hit" pieces you can pull out of the bag?

JM- Yes. I've played, for example, Rodrigo's Fandango, parts of El Decameron Negro and the Barrios "Catedral" in competitions. I suppose these qualify as hits; almost everyone has played them and they do contain a few hot licks!

RW- Before we move to a different subject, do you have any "horror" stories to tell about your competition life - a story that you could laugh about in ten years' time (eg., your plane running out of fuel and having to land in a different city an hour before you have to play)?

JM- Thankfully, nothing so impossible as that, but I remember drawing lots (to decide the order of players) at one competition and picking 9:00am. For me, that's horrific. I have difficulty just getting the guitar out of the case at that hour. On the morning of the competition, there were no restaurants open (it was too early!) and so I had a nutritious breakfast of twinkies and orange pop from a vending machine. When I went to the hall, found what I thought was the "warm-up" room and no sooner had I played one note than a yoga class came in and the instructor demanded that I hit the road (for spiritual reasons, I suppose). The stars weren't aligned for me that day!

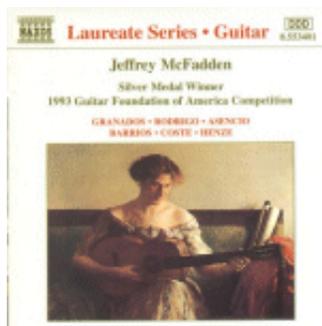
RW- Yes, certainly all guitarists fear being displaced by a yoga class (!) but, since you made the reference, perhaps you could tell me about your "guitar gurus". I refer, of course, to your teachers. What was the one most important thing you learned from each of them?

JM- I learned many critical things from all my teachers, as you might imagine, and it's difficult to distill it down to one thing but, here we go! My first teacher was Ray Sealey, who is a very thoughtful musician. He stressed the importance of playing musically, of having a point of view on your pieces and he encouraged experimentation and creativity in interpreting music. I studied also with Robert Hamilton, a true technical guru, who made the physical process of playing the guitar clear and logical to me and stressed the importance of control and technical facility. My main teacher was Norbert Kraft, a great guitarist and musician, who helped me refine my approach both technically and musically. In studying with him, I really went from being a student player to the next realm.

RW- That's an impressive trio! Now, as a teacher yourself, surely you try to impart this knowledge to your students. Do you have a particular philosophy or method that you follow dogmatically (for example, encouraging a technical grounding before working on musical considerations) or does it all depend on the individual student?

JM- When a student is tackling a new piece I think it's imperative that they undertake an initial phase of simply thinking about the piece before actually putting finger to string. This would include everything from deciphering the rhythms, to deducing the form, to "playing" through a few bars mentally, without actually having the guitar in hand. I really believe that, to paraphrase Yogi Berra, 50 percent of guitar playing is 90 percent mental (or something like

that) and consequently, this is a very important exercise. Some of the musical considerations will obviously take form during even this early stage, but the next phase has to comprise training the fingers to obey. After this it ceases to be a strictly linear process.



RW- And now, concerning your recording career; when did you decided to start your first recording project?

JM- I started to feel that the time was ripe to release a record around the middle of 1993. I had repertoire that I was really enthused about and there had been some recent competition exposure. I was lucky enough to get a grant to produce a master tape in 1994 and started actually recording a few months hence.

RW- And did you have a plan in place for distribution or a specific company in mind to endorse the project?

JM- My initial idea was to simply shop the record around to local distributors, not any one company in particular. Norbert Kraft, who produced the record, then suggested that we try to convince Naxos to distribute it. I was delighted when they agreed to do it; the distribution is truly world-wide which is invaluable for someone in my situation. It was a bit of a surprise as well - Naxos tends to package CD's with pieces by a single composer and this disc is a recital.

RW- Yes, and I've noticed it's part of the so-called "Laureate Series". What was the genesis of this series and how has it evolved?

JM- The unifying factor in Naxos packaging has traditionally been the composer, not the artist and so, as I understand, the series was created - in a bit of a departure - as a vehicle for debut-type recordings. My record was the first in the series and with its success, Naxos decided to extend the series to include other young guitarists. They now award the "Naxos Prize" to guitarists chosen from among the year's GFA finalists, sometimes one finalist, sometimes two (other years, it might not be awarded at all). The prize, of course, consists of the opportunity to make one of these Laureate Series records. Elena Papandreou, Antigoni Goni, and Jason Vieaux have recorded for the series and I suppose it will continue in like manner in the future.



RW- Soon after recording this debut CD, you had to prepare and record 2 CD's in the Naxos "Complete Works of Fernando Sor" series. How did this come about?

JM- Norbert Kraft, the producer of the Guitar Collection asked me if I'd like to record one of the volumes in the Sor complete works around the time that we were working on the recital disc. It was a thrill for me in a number of ways; I really enjoyed working with Norbert and Bonnie (co-producer and editor) on the first CD - I really can't imagine a more tasteful circumstance in which to record. They do everything possible to reflect the performance in the best light. Also, I had been, coincidentally, nurturing a small obsession with the 19th century repertoire for about 4 years and so I felt very much in touch with the stylistic "in's and out's" of the music. After recording this disc they asked me to do a second "Sor".

RW- And regarding the programs, did you have the opportunity to record any part of the opus that you wanted or did Naxos assign specific programs to specific artists in the series?

JM- I was initially given a choice among 2 or 3 different programs and I chose opp. 26-30

because I particularly like some of the lesser known variations contained in that grouping. I also thought that the studies (op.29) would be a great challenge. The situation was similar for the next CD (opp.46-51) which, by the way, has just been released and is my personal favourite among the three! (I know - I have no shame.)

RW- In these two Sor recordings were you influenced in your stylistic approach by other guitar recordings or perhaps by orchestral or other non-guitar renderings of music from this period?

JM- It would be difficult to isolate any recordings that had a singular influence on the approach, but I have listened to a good deal of orchestral and operatic repertoire from the period. As far as guitar recordings, I really like David Russell's record of 19th century music, as I'm sure everyone does.

RW- I certainly concur! Now, I understand that, as of October 1997, your recital disc had sold 15,000 copies and the first Sor record had sold 10,000. These are really impressive totals, given the realities of the classic music market, especially, I think, in reference to the Sor. The sales numbers for this one may in fact surprise some people. Do you think this kind of "all-one-composer" packaging is a favourable format to perhaps create a new public awareness of Sor's music.

JM- I hope it does because Sor's music is really underestimated, by guitarists who perhaps think of him as a composer that they encountered from their earliest days of study and whose music consequently has limited novelty and by the general listening public who may have heard, if anything, a few studies or only the well-worn pieces. On one hand, an all-one-composer disc demands more of the listener simply because there is less variety but viewed from another perspective, this format paints a fuller, more detailed and maybe more realistic picture of the music in question. I think Sor's music can stand up to the scrutiny. It's formally well-balanced, often genuinely charming, and is crafted with flawless integrity. It's almost always contrapuntally conceived while remaining firmly "Viennese" in spirit and has textures which one doesn't expect to hear in guitar music. How could you not love it?

RW- It absolutely true. It will also be interesting to see the impact that the Naxos complete works projects have on music lovers over the next couple of years. You're now working on a Coste project; can you tell us a little about this ?

JM- Well, the complete works of Napoleon Coste is the next big undertaking in the Guitar Collection. I've recorded one disc already and it contains some larger fantasias as well as Coste's arrangements of Strauss Waltzes, which were a blast to learn, incidentally. I believe one or two other volumes have also been recorded up to this point and this summer, I'm due to record all of the Coste studies and some works-without-opus-number.

RW- (conclusion) - I'm sure everyone will look forward to discovering some unknown jewels from this Coste Complete Works set. So, Jeff, on behalf of the SGM I'd like to thank you for this interview and the wonderful concert you gave here last month. Congratulations on your most recent review (of Sor opp.26-30 in "Classical Guitar", March 1998) and all the best with your latest release. We hope to hear you again soon in Montreal!

JM- Rene, it's been a pleasure, un grand plaisir, et je vous souhaite bonne chance! I love coming to Montreal and will hopefully see you very soon!

DISCOGRAPHY

GUITAR RECITAL. Silver Medal Winner, 1993

GFA competition.
Granados, Rodrigo, Asencio, Barrios, Coste, Henze
NAXOS
8.553401

GUITAR COLLECTION. FERNANDO SOR.

Complete Guitar Music, Vol.7.
NAXOS
8.553451

GUITAR COLLECTION. FERNANDO SOR.

Complete Guitar Music, "Sor - Souvenirs d'amitié".
NAXOS
8.553585

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