

Offstage: Graham Devine

Graham Devine kindly gave this slightly edited interview with Angela MacTavish after the festival concert on the first day of the adult classes in the West Sussex Guitar Festival on the 22 November 2008.

Hello Graham! It's really nice of you to stay on after the Festival to give this interview.... I wonder if you could say something particularly for our younger participants about the transition between you listening to your mother playing Bob Dylan and Joan Baez; and then later applying for the Chetham School of Music for musically gifted children?

- My mother really enjoys playing the guitar – well, she did; she really doesn't play that much now. She used to play a lot of Bob Dylan songs, Beatles and that sort of thing. That was my first memory of the guitar and I had the opportunity of taking some lessons at a local primary school I attended. I took the guitar along and had a wonderful music teacher there, who still is in contact with my mother and myself today after all these years. She was, as I say, very enthusiastic and was offering classical guitar lessons; everything really stemmed from there. My mother didn't really play classical guitar but she enjoyed accompanying my progress. So I started the lessons and also began playing pop tunes and rock tunes and chords; I was part of the school band playing in assemblies.

So you always had quite a broad range of exposure to different kinds of music

—Yes, I think so, and it was a very musical school so there was a lot of music going on, and a little orchestra made up of different kinds of instruments so I used to play regularly in all kinds of things.

....and did you always play guitar?

—Yes. .

...so after your period at Chetham's it must have been a really momentous decision to move to South America in your late teens. What spurred you on?

— Well, I always had a fascination with South American music from an early age when I discovered composers like Villa-Lobos. All young students get around to playing Villa Lobos at some point and of course then you have Pernambuco and Baden Powell – many composers and guitar players. It really did fascinate me – the music, the rhythm; and I learnt a little bit about Brazil from an early age and it just seemed appealing. At a very, very young age I used to tell my mother, "One day I'm going to go to Brazil," and she thought I was just nuts, crazy --- "Come on, you're not going to go that far!" And really from an early age – I was 18 - I got the opportunity to go on an exchange programme. That was it : I didn't look back. I came back for a short time and at 19 I went to live there and ended up staying. I think I was young enough to not really think too much about the future...it was all about now and what I wanted out of life at that point.

Yes, a very interesting scene at that time... Baden Powell for example – was there any interfusion between his music and Villa-Lobos's?

— I think they must have met. You have the scene certainly in the late 50s and throughout the 60s with the Bossa Nova movement - with Antonio Carlos Jobim of course, famous for writing 'The Girl from Ipanema'. There was a crowd of them – Vinicius de Moraes who wrote the words to many of the Ton Jobim songs and Baden Powell was also part of that group... a crowd of very talented musicians and song-writers in that period and I think a lot of those musicians would say the grand-daddy would be Villa-Lobos and in fact I think Ton Jobim was related to Villa-Lobos.

Really?

A lot of Ton Jobim's harmony and Brazilian music harmony you can hear in Villa- Lobos's music and you can hear Villa-Lobos's music in the popular Brazilian music composers. He still looms over everyone today!

I was going on to ask you about the fusion of different cultures in Brazil and in different South American countries ...did you find the African influence quite strong?

– Well yes, in Brazil very much so. It's much more present I would say from Rio upwards – in the religions which they mix with African spiritualism and also in some forms of white/black magic although it's 99% a Catholic country... and in music, especially the rhythm.

I find that quite interesting because besides appreciating the rhythm of Brazilian music, you're actually very conscious of the subtlety of the guitar aren't you? - So you don't want a strong beat all the timeyou're very sensitive to people appreciating the quietness of the guitar and the range.

— I think you can have that range in the popular music and in rhythm too. It doesn't have to be forte all the time and very strong. The rhythm can be in the background. It's controlled and it's tight but my idea of the guitar is that you can have a greater dynamic range by using extremes. You know, you have a direct touch on the strings so it's possible if you train and you work at it to control a softer soundbut you also have a wider range if you can have a stronger forte as well.

Yes, I see ... then what I was thinking was that your unique experience in the UK and South America must have given you an edge over other competitors who had less diverse backgrounds in the Alhambra and the Emilio Pujol International competitions, which you won. Could you outline what you felt your particular strengths were?

- Well..... I wouldn't agree with that I wouldn't say I had an edge..... Probably that I worked very hard and that I prepared very well; and I think with any competition there's an element of luck although you have to be thoroughly prepared. Hav-

ing been on juries now I can see just how close some decisions can be. Today it was good because I was the only one but it isn't always like that – you could have six or seven people and your opinion could be so drastically different from the next person's opinion that it's almost unbelievable. When you're a competitor you don't realise that, so going back to those competitions all I can think is that I prepared very well. ..I try to prepare for every competition, but for those I'd already made a decision they were going to be my last ones so I prepared I guess more than for any other and I'm sure I had an element - a bit of luck.

At that time were you receiving any instruction?

— No, I guess I've basically been self-taught since I was maybe 17. I had lessons with Gordon Crosskey at Chetham's for a few years when I was there; then I had a very short – I would say some months – at the Guildhall; but I left to go to Brazil so from that time - around '79 - I've never had a teacher... which is not something I would recommend to anybody, but I think I was lucky enough to come across good musicians and have good advice.

You've said you feel an audience should be challenged and not just fed lollipops all the time. In which part of the programme did you particularly want to challenge us?

I think this could work two ways because first of all lollipops are great and I've said in another interview that those are really what draw people into the guitar inspire and – maybe – encourage people to try out the guitar. They will hopefully be with the guitar for ever. There are lots of wonderful lollipops and I like to play lollipops.. But I also think there is music that is a little bit more challenging. It might be simply because of the duration of a piece or the language of a piece. In the guitar repertoire we don't have too many pieces which are, let's say, over 15 minutes long ...not that many ...and we also have a lot of music that was written in the last part of last century so you have the 60s and 70s where there was a very experimental language and it's not all sugar – it can be almost squeaky door music and bangs and crashes; and some of that I still enjoy today although some I feel is a little bit dated. But you have also a modern language which I think can be captivating in the right setting and performance. I also feel this shouldn't be neglected but should find its right place in a programme if you are going to present this particular music - and it should be maybe discussed a little bit or talked about beforehand to give an audience a bit of insight in to what they are going to hear. Then they feel they are not alienated - nor that it's just highbrow or intellectual music, so they can find some connection with it - but they also have to work – it's not just "Oh how lovely." Something else is happening – it's just a different language. Some of the music could be successful. It's not up everybody's street but some people might come away from the concert and think " That was really different – did I like it or not like it?" and maybe they discover that they actually did like it. You asked me how I thought I challenged people yesterday. I would say with two works. First of all there was the Fernando Sor work which is actually one of the longest works he wrote for the guitar, going on for about 17 or 18 minutes – a huge largo and a set of variations; and I think it's not only a challenge for the audience but also for the performer to hold the interest of the audience throughout that music; but it's not always the most instantly appealing. I think you have to dig a bit deeper with that. And so I felt that it's not only a challenge for me because there are many moments that are very tricky technically but musically it's even more difficult so it's a challenge for me in that respect - and also to try to hold the audience or to give something to the audience through such a long work. But I guess I've got melodic writing on my side there! The other work would be the Brouwer, in which again I like to paint a picture or an image of that work beforehand – it's not like some of Brouwer's works where I would say there's a very clear narrative, and instantly appealing; it requires a bit more work from the listener but not so people are all running for their hats and coats.

You obviously have great empathy with Brouwer – your CD and so forth. Which aspects of his work do you identify most closely with?

— He was the first contemporary composer that I remember hearing. In a Radio 3 programme of guitar music called Encores and they were just phenomenal – very popular pieces in fact - and at the very end of the set he played the Etude No. 6, the arpeggio study, which I was learning at the time. I was just completely knocked out by his playing of things like Scott Joplin– he played The Entertainer, some popular pieces that he'd arranged and also this study which I was just struggling with – I just could not play it and here it was like butter, melting, and I really became very interested in Brouwer. I told my tutor – she was a young student at the time and she said "You must hear this piece I'm playing," and she played a piece by Leo Brouwer called Canticum and it was the most crazy racket I'd ever heard in my life. At that point I think I was only 10 years old or 8 or 9, and I was awed by this sound – a wall of sound – and it was really like nothing I'd heard Brouwer play, completely different; and I was just excited by the noisy element and the unexpected. It just fascinated me and I think really from a very young age I became captivated by Brouwer's music but it also provided an energy and a motivation to discover contemporary music; but it's just one aspect of me and my playing: because I love melody but I also like this – I would say –organised chaos too!

So, last question – you said every instrument needs personalities to attract people to its music; introspectively which aspects of your own character do you feel are the most striking?

— It's a difficult question to answer because I would like to convey that I have belief in what I am doing....Hopefully I can convey that and a real connection, a passion, for what I am doing. That's not only with playing, it's also with teaching I would say which is a large part of my life, and which I enjoy very much – it's a very important part - so I think it's the belief and the motivation and the passion hopefully. It's a difficult question to answer but I would say those are some traits I look for in myself and I'd like to think that they are evident at some point.