

Speaking about Roland Dyens...

Speaking about Roland Dyens evokes a certain presence, a look, a smile, a beautiful voice. From the first notes, improvised there and then, there is a feeling that something special is happening, a rare moment that will change everything, transform perceptions profoundly and forever, transform the way each listener hears, no matter what their country, language, age or musical knowledge. This does happen, and happened regularly during each concert, masterclass, lesson, encounter and course – affecting thousands worldwide if you could count them.

I would like to tell you about this incredible quality of communication. You, the readers and guitarists, no matter what style you play, know this great artist musician, composer, arranger, improviser, teacher and the importance of Roland Dyens for the history of both the guitar and music. His exceptional gifts, nurtured through ceaseless effort were somehow worthless in his eyes unless they served as a link, to communicate, to touch and move. This, for example, is what explains the scrupulously detailed indications found in his manuscripts: fingering, nuances, sostenuto, timbres, overtones, are all described, thought through and marked in a way that offers keys to facilitate access. Naturally all this requires effort, but it would be an enormous misinterpretation to think that this makes his music more complex. Of course it can be so, but for anyone who takes the trouble to read carefully the foreword and the educational preface to 'Twenty Letters for Guitar Solo' (Lemoine) for example, or to the 'Hundred' (Oz), they offer an excellent introduction to this musical universe. Indeed, his compositions may be dedicated to one individual, but through this person a whole world can be discovered within this shared intimacy.

On stage too, there was the art of conversation – in several languages of course – Roland spoke fluent English, Italian, Portuguese, German – was passionate about these languages and their sounds, committed to speaking them correctly and above all, with the correct accent (he was an imitator of note). The improbable pronouncements and vapidness of many French journalists' articles drove him to distraction ('Migouelle' in particular was particularly irritating). In his view it was a serious professional fault.

His musical conversation evolved in many different styles and worlds, but was never hierarchical. As Tarrega's grandson, Llobet, Alberto Ponce's son he cherished Fernando Sor, but just as much Django Reinhardt, Baden-Powell, Chopin, Barrios, Brassens, Monk, Jobim..... Indeed, in what could be termed his 'unclassifiable' recitals, the music ranged from the classical repertoire to arrangements for solo guitar or piano or jazz masterpieces and they all found their place in the musical coherence of his unique style.

As for the challenge of performing in a new country, he would very carefully arrange a well-known song from that country, often finishing it on the plane, learning it at the hotel and in his dressing room, then playing it (by heart of course) for a public, surprised, amazed, then thrilled and quite overcome at this homage to their country. Whether in Colombia, Peru, Japan, Korea, China, India, Lithuania or Greece, this created an immediate bond. In this way, and because he was profoundly touched by Alfonsina Storni's melody and story, his arrangement of 'Alfonsina and the Sea' became a veritable hymn in Argentina and one of his most frequently played arrangements was for a guitar quartet and even guitar mandoline.

Another of his notable challenges, which cannot be ignored, is his respect for the original, initial tonality, which makes his task that much harder ('scordatura', unusual tuning rarely found in the classical guitar repertoire), but which extends the range of possibilities for his instrument. In this way, Roland Dyens explored, innovated and literally stretched the limits of the guitar in unheard-of ways. The reason, besides the challenge, which certainly wouldn't displease Dyens as the 'arranger', is to take into account the unconscious collective hearing (the 'French Songs' typify this approach). The public is aware from the outset of subjective emotions that come from listening to the instrumental version of a familiar song played in its 'true' tonality. At Vaison la Romaine, April 2016, Roland was the sole 'classical' guest at the Brassens Festival. I was present when a public, largely unaware of a classical instrumental recital, made this discovery. Everyone 'woke up' and was deeply moved, often to tears. As they told me afterwards, they will always remember this concert and the magnificent 'Saturne' as an encore.

He held courses in Paris at the CNSM with his 'etudiens' ('studyens') at the highest level or in a masterclass for guitarists of all ages, including novices or sometimes amateurs. As he said, 'The word amateur includes 'aimer' (to love). They started with a level of exchange and of emotion which was seen as a fundamental human encounter before tackling formal matters; technical challenges always created by and for music: resonance, rhythmic accuracy, sonority, melodic accuracy.... It was essential to find the best solution, the best fingering possible and the most appropriate tone colour for each phrase, each melodic line, each harmonic resolution and then continue searching, over and over. In the next course or later things could change, nothing was set in stone, ever. Technical skill went in tandem with musical understanding, active listening and imagination. He gave himself completely to his art and demanded the same of his students. 'When it comes to music I'm not handing out gifts.' And that indeed was the gift.

Always fully aware that as a teacher and virtuoso, the stature of his public persona could impress and intimidate, however the man that he knew how to communicate with everyone, in all circumstances – from the greatest to the least guitarist on the planet, to complete strangers, taxi drivers, delivery men, cashiers, salespeople - as if, during this exchange, this lesson, this conversation, he or she was the most important person in the world. And they were most certainly and profoundly. (To go shopping in a supermarket could be quite an adventure: asking a person's first name, and the best game of all, once his acute ear detected a slight accent, to work out the country, the province, the home town.) With humour, self-mocking, word play, neologisms, idioms, he knew how to lessen apprehension and handle any shyness among his students. Not to mention his famous, lurid and amusing glasses, which went everywhere with him, including competitions and master classes, and which didn't improve his looks. 'My glasses are more famous than I am.' Such pride!

I leave it to Roland to have the last word with an extract from an email sent on 18 January 2016 in which he spoke of his intense dislike of going backwards, of focussing on his earlier works: 'Each time that someone produces one of the lesser of my compositions from 'my body of work' it's like a punch to my heart, it's quite bizarre..... while all, all would however imagine that that would overwhelm me (....) In fact, it's as if I had a sort of 'mission' that I had to accomplish on earth. One that I hadn't yet completed ('*tant que vivray...*' while alive). And, above all, I don't know whether it could be bettered.'

Tristeza nao tem fim (sorrow has no end).... Roland Dyens' music lives on, forever there to be discovered, and futures scores are being printed by his dear editor and friend Sylvain Lemay (Oz), *Ten Pieces* by Astor Piazzolla sublimely arranged for guitar solo.

Valerie Folco (XII 2016)

Anthea Johnston, english translation