

This edition opens with an interview that is a little different from usual: in fact it's a meeting with Michael Lorimer, the imaginative, versatile and intelligent American guitarist who was one of Segovia's favorite students – some perhaps have seen him when he was very young in the black-and-white movies of the historic courses in Santiago de Compostela in the 60s. Unlike most other guitarists of that time who were crushed and almost swallowed up by the extraordinary personality of the Maestro, Lorimer didn't become fossilized in that particular aesthetic and his interests have ranged from the baroque guitar to contemporary music (nurtured in his friendships with the likes of Karlheinz Stockhausen and other important musicians). A typical example is the story of the journey from Stockhausen's house to that of Segovia (where Tansman was also a guest), a trip that Lorimer experienced almost like a leap back in time. But other ideas are also worthy of note in the long interview edited by Eduardo Fernandez which we don't want to anticipate for our readers.

Interview with Michael Lorimer

by Eduardo Fernández

I met with Michael Lorimer, emblematic figure of the American guitar world, at the 9th New York Guitar Seminar at Mannes.

New York, July 13, 2009

EF – Michael, what have you been doing lately?

ML – I've been playing for the Mannes Seminar (NY), where I gave a presentation on the music of Ernesto García de León, a Mexican composer whom I've known for 25 years. I have published six volumes of his music. And since I've played Baroque guitar for nearly 40 years, and it's almost always included in my concerts, I played it at Mannes too. It was obvious to do so; the Baroque guitar is alive in the culture of Veracruz, which is where Ernesto grew up, and his music has many harp-like (or Baroque guitar-like) textures. At my presentation, I also played a CD of Ernesto's brother, Antonio, who is a famous *sonero* (singer of the *son*) in Veracruz. He sang *El Fandanguito*. [*Fronimo* readers can hear this online at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cXy0lMtmlw>]. And I played a CD of a typical Veracruz ensemble which features living fossils of the Baroque harp, the Baroque guitar, and a type of Baroque dancing still danced in Veracruz. It was a lot of fun!

EF – I bet. It is nice to have this sort of continuity in Mexican music, from old times until now...

ML – Yes. I think in South America, in the Americas in general, European culture arrived and then – even in language – it froze; whereas in Europe it moved on. So we have in all the countries of the Americas *charangos*, *jaranas*, *cavaquinhos*, *violónes*... various guitars which actually derive from 17th-century guitars. The ukulele is one more example.

EF – Tell us about the *Saldívar Codex* story, which is related to this...

ML – In the 1980's, the Center for Inter-American Relations, a foundation that used to sponsor guitar concerts, asked me to play a concert at the Y [the 92nd street Y, a well-known hall for chamber music in NY] – you know, you did those concerts too. And because I always played Baroque guitar I wanted to include it – but what Baroque guitar music was there from the Americas? I started investigating. A bibliography mentioned a manuscript in Mexico City by an "anonymous" author, in "beautiful handwriting" that had certain "Spanish dances" in it. I was intrigued for two reasons: one, I just wanted to see the music, and two, I always thought there was something odd about the *Pasacalles y Obras* of Santiago de Murcia: Murcia was probably the greatest Spanish guitarist of his time; he was born and raised in the Spanish culture; and he played

in the Spanish theatre where the Spanish dances we see in Sanz – *Jácaras*, *Villanos*, *Gallardas*, and so forth – were central. And yet, in Murcia’s huge manuscript there’s no Spanish music except for the *passacalle*. Murcia was the guitar teacher to the Queen of Spain, who was French as was the Spanish king, so maybe Murcia was enormously taken by French culture, but it seemed impossible to me that Murcia could have so completely abandoned his Spanish heritage. When I read the description of the manuscript in Mexico City, I thought, “Those are exactly the dances that would have been in a Part 2 of Murcia’s manuscript!” What is more, Mexico is where *Pasacalles y Obras* was discovered in the 19th century by a tennis player who liked to buy old books – he bought it in Mexico and brought it back to London where it’s now in the British Library. And *Pasacalles y Obras* is a very important book – three doctoral dissertations had been written on it, more than on any other guitar book at that time.

So I was really curious. Immediately I wrote to the bibliographer and to the owner of the manuscript. Neither answered. So, I started to ask everybody – for example, if you were going to Mexico, I would have asked *you* – “Eduardo, would you please go to such-and-such a street and ask people if they know of this person?” Long story short, the Mexican guitarist Gerardo Támez and an Argentinean protest singer, a refugee, were coming to California to sing in some *peñas*. Since both lived in Mexico City, I asked Gerardo, “Have you ever heard of Dr. Saldívar?” He said, “I don’t know him but I have a friend who knows him. I’ll bring you something”. Gerardo arrived with a few photocopied pages. One look at the unmistakable handwriting and I knew I had found the other part of Murcia’s manuscript. Again, I wrote letters and this time I got replies from the bibliographer Dr. Robert Stevenson as well as from Elisa Saldívar, widow of Dr. Gabriel Saldívar the manuscript’s owner. Sra. Saldívar wanted to sell copies of the manuscript to scholars and I began assisting her in that. In due time, I went to Mexico, met her, and saw the manuscript.

The *Saldívar Codex No. 4* is a curious compilation: it is as if a collection from our time had side-by-side a Scott Joplin rag, a piece by Ligeti, a punk-rock piece, etc – a wide and disparate variety. Some things were 200 years old at the time Murcia wrote them down; others were the first time ever such a piece was written down. I thought readers might miss those distinctions – people might see only “it’s Baroque guitar music”. In the preface of the facsimile, I wanted to talk about the music’s significance. I started with obvious questions such as how do you play trills? Murcia adored Visée and Champion – so did he play trills like the French players? How *was* the music performed? And then I asked, What was the character of the dances? I immersed myself. I went to see Dr. Stevenson who wrote most of the Grove articles on 17th century Spanish-American music. He is absolutely among the most knowledgeable scholars. I told him I was researching Spanish dances by taking the approach of Richard Hudson – a student of Stevenson’s – who would examine a dance’s earliest appearance and then analyze how it evolved over time. Stevenson told me “You are on unploughed ground. Nobody has done this with Spanish dances”. After working intensely several months, I had to go on tour, and I had to distribute facsimiles of the manuscript. So I pulled everything together and published the book. The detailed section on the dances I never published, but I did publish an analysis of the manuscript.

Apropos the dances, I was reading 17th and 18th century plays in which the dances are actually personified. For example, one character might say “There go the *Folías*”. That’s interesting – what did the *Folías* look like? How did they behave? In the 18th century, the *Folías* were depicted by three old women, all dressed in black, hunched over with glasses falling off the ends of their noses, and walking with canes. But someone in the play comments “You see how they look now – but you should have seen them 30 years ago as they sallied forth from the barber’s house. How gay they were then!” Which is exactly what happened to the *Folías*, a dance that was forbidden by the Inquisition as being lascivious, but by the time of this play had become very slow and proper.

Interesting coincidences occurred. Some plays included woodcuts of the period. Designing the cover of the facsimile, I thought it would be nicer with an image, not just a page of black-and-white type. I chose a picture of eagle and showed it to my wife, who had been out of town for weeks of my research and had just returned. She said, “No, take that woodcut over there; it’s got musicians”.

I agreed, quickly pasted up the cover, and immediately took the book to the printer. Months after the book was printed and distributed, I looked at the cover and thought “What play was that image from?” It was from a play called “Who’s chewing over there?” Depicted are several musicians standing and one guy sitting at a table, eating something like a sandwich. In those times, no separation existed between, say, music and acting – all players sang, played, danced and acted. As you can see, the actors are also playing instruments – a drum, a flute and an anvil. So, *who* is chewing? It’s the guitarist! And *who* was he? Almost certainly Murcia – the most famous guitarist of the day, a performer in the theatre, and a friend since childhood of the playwright. So, months after my book was published, I realized it had on its cover – and just by coincidence, not by design – probably the only depiction of Murcia that exists!

EF – You have worked a lot with composers, and have edited many pieces, especially American composers. Tell us something about this.

ML – Let’s see... One of the very first composers I worked with was Karlheinz Stockhausen...

EF – My God!

ML - ...to tell the truth, contemporary music was a closed book to me in the 60s. I grew up in Los Angeles where I heard pieces by Schoenberg, Krenek and others, and I appreciated the structure and thought, but the music didn’t hit me in the heart. But then I was at a party in Berkeley, California and somebody was playing an LP of Stockhausen – in the 60s in Berkeley, California people would choose Stockhausen as background music for a party! I started listening, I really was moved, and I wanted to find out more about Stockhausen.

EF – Do you remember which piece it was?

ML – It was *Song of the Youth (Gesang der Jünglinge)*. When I heard it I felt... I didn’t know what it was about – it’s electronic music with voices – but I felt a profound religious feeling, a parallel with Bach. This was the first time I felt this with contemporary music. I had always wondered, “What would it be like sit a hall in Beethoven’s time and hear a Beethoven symphony for its very first time? What would it have been like to have been in Leipzig and have heard a Cantata on a Sunday with maestro Bach conducting?” Stockhausen’s piece moved me and it opened the doors for me to new music. (end cassette I side 1). As luck would have it, Stockhausen presented a concert at Mills College shortly thereafter, and a class for composers at the University of California, Davis. Great! I took Stockhausen’s class and, of course, now I was hearing it directly from the horse’s mouth (laughs). At the end of the semester, I asked Stockhausen if he had ever written for guitar. He said, “No, I don’t really know anything about guitar”. It was the end of a school day, we were standing in the hallway, and students were walking around us. I had brought my guitar and I said, “Let me just show you a few things”. I kneeled down and played a little. Right away, Stockhausen sat down on the hallway floor with all the students milling about and said, “I want to hear more. Do this. Do that”. I started playing and he said, “I have to hear this all the time. I really want to write something for you. You have to come to Darmstadt.” So a year later I went to Darmstadt. Karlheinz and I had quite a good friendship. That summer, I was studying with Segovia too. I had lunch one day with Karlheinz in Darmstadt, got on a plane, flew to Spain, went to Compostela... and stepped back (laughs)... a hundred years.

EF – What year was this?

ML – Stockhausen’s class was 66-67, Darmstadt was 68. Just as an aside: the summer of 67 Segovia invited me to study with him at his home “Los Olivos” in the south of Spain. Alexandre Tansman was there. At breakfast time every morning, Tansman would give the Maestro a little fugue or some little piece – it was really great. One morning, they got talking about contemporary music. This was interesting because in the 30s Tansman championed Stravinsky and the avant-garde. And then Tansman must have had a crisis – something emotional, spiritual – he turned

against it. We think of Tansman as a very traditional composer, but actually he was radical when he was young. But, going back to that morning, Segovia observed, “Composers today... they’ve really taken the wrong road. But they will repent.” Tansman was convinced too that composers would repent. I am a kid, I am sitting there listening to them, and I am thinking “These guys have *no* idea. (laughs) They have no *clue* what’s going on”. That’s what I thought. Guess what: they were exactly right. They were ahead of the curve. The crowd doing all the wild stuff in the 60s was behind the curve. For example, in the 70s, I did premieres in Europe and in America of *Folios* by Takemitsu. I asked Takemitsu, “What inspired you to write *Folios*?” He said, “You know, contemporary music has been going a certain way, but I couldn’t take it any more. I felt compelled to return to tonality – I couldn’t resist – and this piece is about that”. As you know, starting around 1970, many composers worked their ways little by little out of serialism. And to me, now, because of my experience of being with Stockhausen – or rather not so much being with him but *hearing* his music, I mean *really* hearing it – the doors to any kind of music opened for me. I thank him for that. But it was curious with Stockhausen – he invited me to come and stay with him after Darmstadt, to be with him in Connecticut where he was staying with his mistress Mary Bauermeister (she is a really fine artist). He was working on the ending of a big piece that involved orchestra and voice; it was written for Martina Arroyo...

EF – *Momente*.

ML – Exactly! And he was very begrudgingly notating trombone parts... He said “This is finished. This is old-fashioned. I’m never going to do this again.” (laughs) That’s what he said. One morning, Mary was playing the radio – Chopin. Karlheinz got up and walked straight out of the house to the ocean – and refused to come in until the music was turned off (laughs). I asked him, “If you hear somebody like Arthur Rubinstein play Chopin, how can you resist that?” He said, “No, no, that’s finished, that’s dead, that’s old”.

That year, 1968, just a few months before, Karlheinz had written an amazing piece in Darmstadt called *Music for a House* – which I was fortunate to hear. Basically it was epigrammatic texts like “Play a tone as if you had all the time in the universe”. The musicians were the best contemporary music players in Europe and they always expected a challenge in Darmstadt. But this year Karlheinz said, “Okay gentlemen, here’s what we are going to do. We have these texts; we’ll perform in this house with four big rooms; there will be composers who can bring music from one room to another via loudspeakers; and the ensembles in each room will change periodically according to the following schedule – Mr. Globokar, you are going to be in this room from 7-7:30, Mr. Kontarsky you’re going to be in that room... The piece goes from 6 to 10 PM. Any questions?” The musicians were stunned. They had always expected something rough when they came to Darmstadt, but not this. It was as if Karlheinz had said “Well gentleman, this is where we are – we’re on this side of the lake. At 6 o’clock we’ll start walking on the water and *then*, at 10 o’clock, we will reach the other side. Any questions?” (laughs) The musicians were freaked. There was tremendous tension in the room. I picked up a percussive instrument – like a toy hammer that goes “*chzzz*” when you hit something – and for some reason I struck it on the knee of the guy next to me. He jumped straight up out of his chair and Karlheinz said “Michael, Michael, what have you done?” (laughs) Everybody was really nervous. But then – this piece – it came out really well. There were things that happened that you never could have had if the music had been written down – it would have been impossible. Really amazing things. So Karlheinz was convinced that this was music’s future and when he was finishing *Momente* his feeling was “I really do not want to do this”.

But people evolve. Maybe two, three years later, Karlheinz had a new idea. Why not write down a piece like an improvisation, but where the composer actually writes *all* the notes? How’s that for an idea? (laughs) And so he wrote *Mantra* – a through-composed piece for two pianos and electronics, one hour long. To Karlheinz, having cut from the past, it was now a completely new idea. And as he went along, he got less and less allergic to tonality, and started to include that more in his music. So, Karlheinz was the first...

EF– But, did he finally write a piece for you?

ML - Actually, Karlheinz did write a piece for me, but – apropos the distaste he had at that moment for composing music for any particular instrument and his enthusiasm about writing "Process Music" – the piece he composed was not *only* for guitar. It was *Spiral* for instrumental soloist and shortwave radio [composed 1968, N.Ed.]. Karlheinz wanted me to play *Spiral* in the German House at the World's Fair in Osaka, Japan. But I never found a good way to play *Spiral* on guitar and I never performed it. Karlheinz then gave *Spiral* to the Swiss oboist Heinz Holliger who I understand played *Spiral* many times.

EF – Why do you think composers are so terrified of writing for the guitar?

ML – Well, say, the violin is easy to understand, it is basically a single line and a few stopped chords – and composers learn that; they learn that tuning. The guitar does not have that. It is a stringed instrument but it has this weird tuning in fourths – and it's kind of contrapuntal but you cannot really do so much with counterpoint. It doesn't sustain. Its dynamics are limited. It's hard to get a handle on. But Curtis [American composer Curtis Curtis-Smith] at one point was commissioned by the pianist Leon Fleisher who was playing only with his left hand. And Curtis wrote a fantastic concerto. Really good. I looked at the piece and I said "Curtis, if you are wondering how to write for guitar, there it is! One hand!" I know that when Paco de Lucía heard Chick Corea he said "He's got a guitar in each hand". And actually, that's a good way of thinking about the guitar – like a one-handed piano. To help composers who want an easy method for writing playable guitar chords, I make a model of the guitar fretboard and tell them, "Anywhere you can place up to four fingers, guitarists can play. You can use either your right hand or your left, whichever you want". I explain the barré and the importance of open strings for sonority – those ideas are not difficult to understand. And basically, with just a few simple concepts, people can write successful guitar music. One person I helped was Thea Musgrave, for instance...

EF – And how did your collaboration with composers go on after Stockhausen?

ML – Another composer I worked with who was a big inspiration to me was William Bolcom, an American composer. The violinist Sergiu Luca who introduced me to Bill via a cassette recording said, "You gotta hear this guy. Listen to him play Schubert. It's like the composer's alive." Bill was a student of Milhaud, so he was never averse to tonality, but he grew up in a time of strong bias against tonality. One way Bill dealt with it – after he discovered the music of Scott Joplin in the late 60's – was to write new piano rags. Bill's a fabulous player of ragtime music. And he and his wife [mezzo soprano Joan Morris] started performing the American songbook – that is to say, American songs from the 1800's all the way to contemporary times. Bill was a serious composer, a ragtime player, and a performer of the American songbook. I thought it would be terrific if Bill would write something for guitar. Like so many composers, he was terrified of the guitar so I gave him a primer I wrote for Stockhausen who had asked, "Write me a pamphlet that will tell me how to write for the guitar". And in 1974 Bill wrote a piece that was really amazing. It has textures Fernando Sor could have written, but didn't. It's unique – I've never seen anything like it in guitar music – but it completely fits our instrument. It's like when Britten wrote the variation in the *Nocturnal* with octaves on the outside strings and open strings in the middle. You know, the texture is so obvious, so guitaristic – but nobody did it before; that was the first time! Actually, Legnani has that texture, so you know, but I don't think Britten knew that. Bolcom came up with stuff like that...

EF – Which piece was this?

ML –A piece called *Seasons* which depicts the seasonal cycle in the state of Michigan, so there are five movements instead of four (laughs). It starts with *Winter*, and then there's *Thaw*, and then there is one called *Spring and Summer Dances* – because spring and summer come together in Michigan. The next movement evokes the time after summer – Indian summer. And finally, the last movement is about fall and the return of winter – it's called *Harvest Time and Winter's Onset*. Bill's piece

evokes the seasons as they actually occur, rather than the four traditional ones. And it covers a wide gamut. It starts, for example, with scratching-on-the-strings and vocalizing *shhhuuuuu* sounds – like the sound of wind blowing. When I first saw the score, I thought “Oh, boy, here’s...” (end side 2, cassette 1). I’m sure you have had this experience too, Eduardo, especially with a new piece – nobody’s ever played it before, and there’s a feeling like, “It’s nice that you can write something like this, but I have to actually *play* it for people”. But the more I studied *Seasons*, the more I liked it – and I found it was really successful. I saw that the noisy parts, as much or even more than the “guitaristic” parts, really made sense. It was a challenge at first, but I got comfortable with it. Eventually, I played a program here in New York – in Tully Hall – where I played the first half on Baroque guitar – all 17th-century music; then I played maybe a few Villa-Lobos pieces – *Etudes* and *Preludes*; and I finished with Bolcom’s *Seasons*. The next day the Hurok office called me, “You need to reconsider your repertoire!” (laughs) But, as you know, early music eventually became very big, and Bolcom is now considered not-cutting-edge-at-all – if anything he’s considered conservative. Perceptions change!

Bill introduced me to a number of composers, I met others – and eventually I became “midwife” to a significant body of new music. Another wonderful piece was written by William Albright – *Shadows* – which to me is the American *Nocturnal*. I always admired Britten’s *Nocturnal* – it’s absolutely a masterpiece – but I always played *Shadows* in the place where one would play the *Nocturnal*. I thought, “Why not? Lots of people play the *Nocturnal* but right now only I am playing *Shadows*.” Since then, more people have played *Shadows*.

In the early 80’s, I had a friend, an ambitious young guy from Mexico who was playing things like Giuliani’s *Grand Overture*, Bach’s *Chaconne*... things like that. I asked him, “What about Mexican music?” He said, “Well, Ponce...” And I said, “Antonio, you can go to Europe and play Giuliani and repertoire like that, but if you were to play Mexican music that people haven’t heard... Is anyone in Mexico writing? What’s happening?”

EF – This was Antonio...?

ML – Antonio López. He said “Sure, I have some friends.” and he showed me a box of music. I started reading and came upon a piece by Ernesto García de León. I said, “This guy is really good; this is a beautiful piece. I’m going to play it. *You* should too”. Long story short as far as Antonio is concerned? He went back to Mexico and within two, three years he was playing only Mexican music, nothing else. (laughs) Antonio went on to make excellent recordings of some of Ernesto García de León’s *Sonatas* and, of course, lots of recordings of Ponce. He became a champion of Mexican music. But, Ernesto, he really touched me with his piece. It was his *Sonata, Op. 13, “Las Campanas”*, the middle movement, the last phrase, the cadence – it *got* me. It wasn’t what I expected and it is really touching. Eventually, I met Ernesto – and for decades we’ve corresponded.

Another composer I’ve worked with – an American who I feel is one of the greats of *any* period – is Curtis Curtis-Smith. I published one guitar piece of his – it’s a fine piece, but it’s not really indicative of how great a composer Curtis is. He’s a superb pianist and the guitar really freaks him out. It’s like pulling teeth; it’s painful for him to write a guitar piece. When he wrote the one piece I published, he said “OK, if I’m a composer worth his salt, I should be able to write a guitar piece.” With protest, he wrote his piece – which is nevertheless very good.

EF – What’s the name of the piece?

ML – It’s called *Great American Guitar Solo* – which is a salesman’s title, isn’t it? (laughs) But here’s how it happened. Around 1980, Curtis wrote a symphony in which he used an American vernacular idiom for the first time in his life. Looking for a title, he asked William Albright, “How about *Simple Symphony*?” Bill said, “Nope. Britten’s already done that.” Curtis suggested other titles which Bill also shot down. And then Bill asked Curtis about studying in Leonard Bernstein’s class at Tanglewood. Curtis recounted how someone once asked Bernstein, “So – what is the great

American symphony?” Bernstein replied, “There *is* no great American symphony!” Then the class asked, “Well... why don't *you* write it?” Bernstein replied, “No, no, impossible. It can't be done.” Right there in Curtis's story, Bill raised his finger and remarked, “Well, *there's* your title!” So, Curtis called his piece *Great American Symphony*. His next composition was the guitar solo. It's in the same idiom and that's why it's called *Great American Guitar Solo* – the acronym of which is *G-A-G-S!* (laughs) like “jokes”. Curtis is someone I encourage people to listen to. He wrote an unbelievably imaginative and beautiful piano solo in 1972 called *Rhapsodies*. Remember how last night Arthur Kampela was saying he was crazy about Curtis's piano piece? If Arthur wrote a piano piece he would like it to be like Curtis's? Arthur was referring to *Rhapsodies*.

Before you run out of tape, I would like to mention William Neil's *Fantasia for flute, guitar and cello*. In my view, it is one of the best works of guitar chamber music of *any* era. In the USA, there's one professional flute-guitar-cello ensemble that formed *just* to play that piece! But in Europe, the *Fantasia* is not yet known, not yet played. It won Neil the Rome Prize from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. It's about 10' long and it marries a Bartók-like compositional rigor with a Villa-Lobos-like sensitivity to the idiomatic resources of each instrument. It's a real gem.

EF – What do you think of this recent wave of guitarists who start to compose?

ML – I think it's great people are composing, for sure. Especially in the Americas, Leo Brouwer has been a tremendous inspiration for young players, don't you think?

EF – Absolutely.

ML – Because, for example in Mexico, people grew up playing the Segovia repertory and listening to Segovia – or to performers *trying* to play like Segovia. Then Brouwer came to Mexico in the late 70s and it was like an earthquake: “Hey, there's something else we can do!” And also, “I want to *be* like him. I want to compose too.” That's great! But of course not all of the new music is of a really high level. The composers I mentioned – Stockhausen, Bolcom, Albright, Curtis-Smith, Thea Musgrave, William Neil and also Leslie Bassett who I did not discuss but is superb – they not only came up with ideas, but they have chops [technical skill]. And I think many guitarist-composers have good ideas – appealing, wonderful themes – but their ability to develop them is limited. By contrast, most of the non-guitarist composers I've assisted really have technique. That's not because they don't play guitar, it's because they are dyed-in-the-wool composers – they've seriously grappled with the issues of composing. It is absolutely wonderful so many guitarists are carrying on the centuries-old tradition of not only playing the guitar, but composing for it too. And it's even better to the degree they become more composer, less guitarist – to the degree they get real chops. You know what I mean? Like, for example, Ginastera's *Sonata* – that's a *composition*. How many guitarists could write a piece like that? Or the Britten *Nocturnal*? That's what I mean. In this regard, I've noticed a trend among guitarist-composers concerning form. (end side 1 cass.2) As you know, the variation form has a long connection to the guitar – the very first variations ever printed were for vihuela. *Pasacalles* started being played in the 1580's and – right through to the 18th century – *every* Spanish book included *pasacalles*, culminating in the great ones of Guerau and Murcia. And then look at the sets of variations by Giuliani – how many? Many, many...

EF – Which people don't play...

ML – Yes! *Many* sets of variations – like Op.112. What a wonderful piece – and Elena Papandreu is the only person I've heard perform it. Sor, too – so many great sets of variations. People want to play his *sonatas* – but that was a form Sor attempted infrequently whereas over and over he turned to variations. Getting back to our times, I think variations are *still* a natural form in which it's possible to travel far in composition within the relatively limited gamut of the guitar. I'm surprised more guitarist-composers aren't interested in variations...

EF – Maybe they don't know Giuliani...

ML – Maybe so. Well, the Bach *Chaconne* is nothing more than a set of variations, isn't it? Can anyone surpass that? Indeed, you can build enormous structures with variations. Rondos too are variations – great for big pieces. Britten, for example – when he wanted to write a major piece for guitar, he chose variations. So I'm surprised guitarists today don't turn more often to variations.

EF – How do you see the situation these days for the guitar? Has it changed since Segovia's death?

ML – I think it's changed a lot. On the one hand, the technical level is much higher. When I went to Segovia's class for the first time in 1963, I was 17, and I thought, "Now I'm going to hear *real* guitar playing". I was shocked to find I was among the better players; I had expected to see *many* really fine players. Without a doubt, the technical level has risen a lot. On the other hand, some times I wonder about the direction we're taking. Microphones appear to have influenced us, not always for the better. Segovia had a phobia of the microphone – he never wanted to use it. Perhaps that's a bit overboard – because in some cases a microphone is absolutely called for, isn't it? But, on the other hand, because Segovia didn't use the microphone, he strove to project his sound – and not only in terms of volume but in terms of "Is this easy to follow? Can you understand me?" Because if people couldn't understand Segovia, he was finished. Now, because of microphones, players have the *illusion* they can get away with playing really softly – [speaks quietly] mumbling like I am now (laughs). But on the guitar, you *always* have to speak clearly, because ours is a *very* quiet, hard-to-follow instrument. Parallel to the rise of the microphone are "improvements" in guitar design. Yesterday at our seminar, I was feeling low because I had seen so many bad guitars – one after another. Then the Brazil Guitar Duo played and I felt, "*Finally* – good guitars!" They were playing Sérgio Abreu guitars – traditional design – *real* guitars in my view. They really had a *sound*! I was saying "Thank God! It's great to hear a real guitar. And also real guitarists!" (laughs)

EF – Also, I think there is an issue with the repertory people are playing now...

ML – Yes. For sure! On the one hand, there is an academic repertory, say, a whole program of sonatas – which would be fine, for example, in the context of the Mannes festival. But not for an average audience. On the other hand, there are players who essentially want to play rock-and-roll – programs that are all pop. There's a middle ground. I think one problem for young players is that recitals – not just for guitar, but for piano, violin, anything, at least in America – are really gone. When I started giving recitals, especially in the 70s, I appeared on series featuring, for example, Arthur Rubinstein and up-and-coming artists – including me. Then "spectacles" were added such as Chinese acrobats from Beijing. Now, there's only Itzhak Perlman – his will be the *only* recital in a whole series. Result? Many young players have little experience playing for audiences and they don't understand programming from the practical standpoint of delivering to people.

EF – Do you think that the fact that there are so many competitions has some influence on this?

ML – I don't know. I think it helps young players, because it gives them a goal – "Can I do it?" On the other hand, you can win some competitions by playing five pieces well – and that's different from playing for an audience for an evening, isn't it?

EF- I agree, it's an artificial situation... We were talking, before I turned on the recorder, about teaching methods, and I know you have thought a lot about that subject... how do you see it happening now? How do people learn?

ML – Well... with Segovia, his basic attitude was, "If you have good technique, I don't need to tell you anything. And if you don't have good technique, I don't have time to teach you." So Segovia almost entirely avoided the subject of technique and concentrated instead on "How clearly are you speaking? What story are you telling? How coherent is your musical picture?" That's essential – but, as in all things, there's an extreme. With the guitar, too many people were being "artistic" when

basically they couldn't play! (laughs) So I think the focus on technique and raising the level of execution is definitely good. But it too can be carried to an extreme, for example, when people thrash through monstrously difficult pieces in a way that's interesting only to guitarists and leaves out average listeners or even other musicians, non-guitarists. For example, one composer, a close friend, asked me, "So-and-so (a well-known player) wants to commission a piece. What do you think?" I said, "Hear his recital and draw your own conclusions". The composer came back to me and said, "I don't understand! This guitarist is very famous – but why? What is there to listen to in his playing? In the whole evening there was no line, nothing to follow, just fragments." Too many guitar performances sound this way to me too – no beauty, no story, just impossible-to-follow (difficult-to-even-hear) notes. On the other hand, there are players now who do tell coherent stories, and that's great. It's a fact that in every age the number of great artists is limited – they are rare birds. I disagree when people say, "There's nothing but technical devils now. What a decline! Nobody thinks of music anymore." As I see it, good artists are simply *rare* and the more people who can play the guitar with ease and fluency, the better. It helps us all. It's good!

NB re Murcia image: *This illustration is an engraving from the 1779 edition of "Quien Masca Ahi?" ("Who is Chewing Over There?") by Francisco de Castro (ca.1685-1742), the most popular writer of comedies in Madrid during the time of Santiago de Murcia. As the image reveals, the person "chewing over there" is the guitarist. In the original production, that player probably would have been Murcia, the most famous guitarist of the day, a performer in the theater, and an exact contemporary of Francisco de Castro.*