

Interview mit Classical Guitar

ALEXANDER-SERGEI RAMIREZ

By THERESE WASSILY SABA

ALEXANDER-SERGEI RAMIREZ was born in Peru but was brought up in Germany. He studied with Maritta Kersting, Jose Luis González. and Pepe Romero. He is a recording artist for Denon with whom he has made four recordings. His awards and prizes include the Mozarteum Prize of the City of Salzburg, Austria, and he recently took up a teaching post at the Robert Schumann Musik Hochschule in Düsseldorf where he himself studied.

How did you get your recording contract with Denon?

ASR: Actually, I don't know, it was quite strange really.

When did you do your first recording?

In 1991. To be honest, I'm not so involved in pushing my career. I'm not the type to write letters to people to get concerts and whatever. It's just that I'm one of those fortunate guys who stay home and get phone calls. I was giving a concert, and a producer from Denon came backstage and asked if I would be interested in recording. Of course I said yes, and that's the way it all started. Then suddenly I got a phone call to do a test recording in two weeks time, so I had to prepare for it quickly. I had to cover everything from Renaissance to modern pieces. I only had three hours to do the recording for one hour of music, so luckily I was well-prepared. It went well and then suddenly I got the contract for CDs.

What sort of contract did they offer you?

Just one for each CD. We made the test recording in a church, but the actual recordings were made in a big hall in Germany. You would notice the difference immediately had they mixed them. It's really impossible to match the sound, even if you record in the same hall with the same microphones and everything;; it will always sound different.

What about the other recordings?

They were all recorded in the same hall but you will notice that the sound is always completely different. For the second recording we wanted to match the sound of the first recording, but it was impossible, even though we positioned the microphones in the same Spot. Then we realised that, in contrast to the first recording, there were chairs in the hall, and a new carpet! All these changes influenced the sound. In the end we decided to aim for a completely different sound for each recording; for example, the sound on the Villa-Lobos recording is much bigger, and quite the opposite to the Sor recording which is more intimate, and is better suited to that kind of music.

The recordings with Denon are always made in a big hurry: you have only three days for the recording. That's not much time - two or three days to record all the Villa-Lobos and the Ginastera - and it's a lot of work. I don't want to describe it as a live recording, but of course, it would not be as perfect as it could have been had we spread it out over one year; and there are a lot of people doing that.

If you record it in a Studio with the microphone in the same

position then it is not difficult to match the sound, so then if you are comfortable with one piece, you can go to the recording studio for a couple of hours, and do a nice recording of it. If you're still not convinced by that recording, you can do it again a few weeks later.

In the end these people have a really perfect recording but when the time comes for them to give concerts, they are just not at the same level because in concert you can't play one piece several times or wait till you find the perfect situation ready to play a certain piece.

That is really the difference and I probably prefer not to have it perfect, but just to have one which reflects your playing at a certain moment, more like giving a concert. Recordings are not a perfect thing, they are just a record of how you played for these three days in your life, because every week you should be developing. If I were to record all this again, it would be different. I'm sure everyone who has made recordings thinks more or less the same as me.

Another thing with the Denon recordings is that it was the first time that this producer had worked with a guitarist. He didn't know about the squeaking of the strings and whatever, so they were a little bit desperate and it took a long time to convince them that it is quite normal, that it didn't bother me and that for me it is part of the sound of the guitar. In the end it was a great experience, and it was fantastic to work with this producer, Holger Urbach. In fact, I learned a lot more about the pieces through doing a recording, than I had in several guitar lessons.

How many microphones did they use? Did they position them really close to the Instrument?

They had one just in front of me and then one in the hall so they could get the ambient sound. There's nothing added, no echo machine and no filters. Just pure sound.

The good thing about doing recordings is that you actually have something concrete at the end of your work, it's like a painting for an artist; it's something that exists after the performance.

But a recording is not a performance, because there's no audience; there's only a microphone standing there, and also you're so concerned about whether you will squeak here, or move your chair or you will make noises, and all these things that you wouldn't care about in live performances. So I prefer live performances much more than recordings. It's nice to have a recording of course, but it never represents a person.

In the first recording, which was of Albeniz, Falla, Rodrigo, Turina, were the pieces chosen by you?

Yes. Luckily, Denon wanted to have a Spanish Programme; I had just returned from living in Spain, and I was very involved in Spanish music anyway.

The second recording came out as a deal between Denon and me. They wanted a popular programme that sells, so I suggested a very popular one including the Mozart Variations and Recuerdos de la Alhambra, and so on, but only as an exchange for a recording of my own choice. So they agreed, and one year after the Alhambra CD I recorded the Villa-Lobos Studies and Preludes and the Ginastera Sonata, all my most favourite pieces written for the guitar.

When the Alhambra recording was released, there were of course a lot of people asking me: 'How can you do a recording with all these overplayed pieces?' To be honest. I never really

cared about these people. I still like these pieces very much, I think they are just great. Also for a Company it is very important that their product sells; the Alhambra recording does sell quite well, and a lot of non-guitarists buy it. They might, as a consequence, buy more guitar recordings, or show up at guitar concerts, which they may not have done. If the first recording they bought was of the Royal Winter Music by Henze. So I don't think there is a reason for guitarists to be angry about it. I do not force them to listen to this recording or to buy it!.

You know, it is very strange, but a lot of guitarists care more about what other guitarists play, instead of being concerned about how they play. This would never happen with other Instruments. To blame a pianist who is recording or playing the Moonlight Sonata for the 500th time would never happen. In fact it would be just the opposite: they think it is harder to perform a piece that everybody knows than to perform one that is completely unknown. Unfortunately, that's not the way guitarists think.

There are still a lot of guitarists who really don't know what's written in the music. Everybody has heard the Mozart Variations very often in concert, but how often was the theme really played *cantando* without playing the upbeat too loud? How often was the melody really separated from the accompaniment? How often was the rhythm played correctly, and so on. If you really listen to all of these things and just try to count the performances which were acceptable, only a few would come to mind.

I think one of the greatest mistakes with guitarists is the lack of a tradition of Interpretation. I have worked with a lot of musicians, Singers, violinists and, for example, my fiancée Sheila Arnold, who is a Professional pianist. The first thing

these musicians do is to analyse the music without touching their Instrument; they just look at the music and discuss what was happening: where the phrases and lines are, and where they are going to. Even with fundamental things like rhythm, in a lot of guitar recordings you still hear that they are often just playing whatever they want, changing the rhythm and changing the meaning of the phrase. It's so strange, but a lot of guitarists don't care about this.

Do you think pianists stick closer to the score?

Oh yes. For example, there are a lot of books about the meaning of the little articulation markings. It's incredible how much they focus on the manuscript and worry whether the crescendo Starts on the E or the F - that makes a lot of difference to them. Also with the rhythm; for example, a Violinist would never play the fourth beat louder than the first, nor ignore a crescendo or a decrescendo sign. From the very beginning they are taught to obey the signs on the page, and no one would ever dare to think of changing It. It's very Important to grow up with this training of playing what is written there on the music. Most guitarists start making their own Interpretation of the music from their very first pieces, but it should take two or three years before you really start with the Interpretation. You don't start the Interpretation first. Of course, I don't say that I've made perfect recordings, no. But you must play what's in the music - not only memorising the music, but also the performance directions. It's also helpful If you have the manuscript, or the editions with the markings. There is a growing number of guitarists who do follow the music; for example, Barrueco is just great in playing exactly what's there in the music.

That's another point: you should always be able to write down what you can hear in the music, and it should be more or less what is on the score. It sounds like a dry and intellectual thing to do but it's not. If you listen to Horowitz or Glenn Gould, you can write down the music perfectly. They both exaggerate the music a lot, but you can always hear the pulse and the rhythm performed accurately. Of course, sometimes they are doing the Crescendos differently, but mostly they play what is written; and when they do it differently, it is done on purpose and not simply because they don't care or don't know.

You think guitarists are just not aware of how different their playing is from the score?

Yes. For example, with the Villa-Lobos Preludes Nos.3 and 4, every bar is marked clearly; poor Villa-Lobos has carefully written in his beats, but nobody seems to notice it. Nowadays things are improving; as I say, David Russell, Manuel Barrueco, or John Williams would never play it another way.

What pieces are you playing with the pianist?

Carulli.

Can you hear the guitar?

They are using a fortepiano. If you play with a Steinway, you have to push a lot and I think the sound just doesn't fit. I don't like the sound combination between the guitar and the modern piano, but it fits wonderfully and perfectly with the fortepiano.

Do you tune at modern concert pitch when you play with the

fortepiano?

Yes. It's difficult, because when they go down to 430, the guitar doesn't sound at all well, and the feel of the strings is horrible too. In one of the first concerts I decided to tune down to 430, and I told the pianist that it would be fine with me because it's just a little bit lower, but there is a huge difference, even at 435. Then even if you tune the fortepiano up to 440 to match the guitar, there are Problems: the tuning goes down again because it is accustomed to being lower.

Do you compromise and tune at 435?

435 is already low for me, and 430 is impossible, so we try to get 440. The fortepiano tuner has to sit next to us, but it works because we retune during the concert.

It's a shame, isn't it, because the guitar does sound beautiful with the fortepiano. Do you play Diabelli as well?

Diabelli, of course. We also did some Ponce, which sounds great. Carulli produced an incredible amount of really beautiful music for piano and guitar. Melodically and even harmonically, sometimes it is really astonishing what Carulli does. I think he is a great chamber music composer.

Do you think he hasn't been appreciated because we've mainly looked at his studies and solo pieces?

Yes, absolutely. Everyone knows his little studies but, with chamber music he is absolutely on the same level as Giuliani.

And Sor? You made a recording....

Oh, I love Sor. I think he was possibly the greatest guitar composer in the classical era. Giuliani was great too, but he was completely different; he was totally guitaristic, and Sor is probably completely unguitaristic in a way. Sor doesn't write a lot of arpeggios to make it sound grand and more difficult, as Giuliani does. Sor is probably more honest.

So Giuliani is a bit more idiosyncratic? In the way that Villa-Lobos was?

Yes, or like Franz Liszt was with the piano. Giuliani really knew the guitar very well and took advantage of the guitar's nature. Sor had a more Symphonic approach to composing, so every line of music is complete, except with his Opus 14, which is really a kind of homage to Giuliani. Apart from that, you could easily make orchestral works out of all his other pieces.

Are you considering orchestrating Sor's work?

Oh yes, if I am studying Sor's work I am always thinking about what could be written there, or which Instrument could play that line.

Is that something you naturally do?

Most instrumentalists try to orchestrate their pieces, but for no other Instrument is it as easy as with the guitar, so I think it's important to take advantage of that. Other instrumentalists even get jealous of the huge range of colours and timbres that

we are able to produce with our Instrument. It's very strange that a lot of guitarists just try to imitate the piano, while pianists themselves are trying to imitate an orchestra.

Did someone teach you to orchestrate pieces in your head?

My teacher in Germany, Professor Maritta Kersting. With the Sor studies she was always asking me: 'Can you imagine which Instrument would be best here?'. It helps a lot with playing the lines, because it is very hard to play legato on the guitar, probably one of the most difficult things. But if you think in lines and in orchestral terms and imagine the violin playing or the cello playing, you immediately imagine it as a legato, and it changes the phrasing.

It was an invaluable thing to learn from my teacher. You know, she wasn't a Professional guitarist; she never played concerts. She was a Singer and then started later with the guitar, more or less as a second Instrument. She discussed technical matters with me, including legato, but she never played a whole piece. She taught me everything from the point of view of a Singer, and so if somebody played the smallest line non-legato, she would freak out. I am still learning from this, and still thinking in lines, and then playing it with vibrato, or playing with the phrasing like a Singer.

Professor Kersting was a Professional. She studied with Karl Scheit and so she was qualified, but she was never a concert performer. She also studied lute with Walter Gerwig.

Do you come from a musical family?

My grandmother was an expression dancer, modern and improvisational. My grandfather was a musicologist

(Quellmalz). My mother studied piano seriously. My father also studied piano, but then changed to become a painter. He went to Germany to study medicine but at the same time studied painting and was always practising the piano. When he returned to Peru to practise as a doctor, he decided that he really wanted to be a painter and returned to Germany. He is not a practising doctor, and has devoted his life to art, but still plays the piano every day for two or three hours. So that was the way I was brought up. All my brothers played an Instrument and I played the cello for a long time from the age of seven. It was much later that I discovered the guitar, when I was 17. After hearing a recording of Segovia; that was it. I fell in love with the guitar and with the possibilities of the Instrument.

Were you in the Hochschule at that stage?

I was still in the Gymnasium, and then I started playing guitar on my own, without any teacher at first. Then I played for Professor Kersting and she took me to the Düsseldorf Hochschule, and everything went on from then. I was 19. I studied there for 5 years and then I took an exam and then a further two or three years, and in the middle I went to Spain to study with Jose Luis Gonzalez. It was great there in the little town of Alcoy. There were a lot of Japanese students, some from Iceland, USA, Australia, from all over the world. We all learned a lot from Jose Luis's playing. He had an old-fashioned way of playing, a little bit like Segovia, probably more personal; he had an incredible dynamic range with unbelievable pianissimos, and the most beautiful tone that I have ever heard. I can still hear Jose Luis guiding me as I play certain lines. He was a great guitarist - not everybody's taste,

of course, but he had exactly what I think is missing in most classical guitarists nowadays.

Then I studied with Pepe Romero who, besides being one of the greatest guitarists of all time, is a great, great teacher. In his teaching he mostly focuses on technique, the importance of relaxation as you play, and the way to practise so that you do not falter during performance. I'm still working on that. And there is also his deep knowledge of Spanish music, its roots in flamenco music, and the direct contact he has had with most of the Spanish composers.

Since I have been teaching, I have really become even more aware of all the important and completely different influences from my teachers.

What was your trip to China like?

Absolutely fantastic! I was invited there by the Peruvian Embassy to take part in the Peruvian-Chinese cultural week, which they were celebrating in Peking in November. I gave some concerts there and was also giving a little masterclass at the Conservatory. The concerts were well-received; I think that the Instrument suits the character of the Chinese people: it is quiet and modest, but at the same time, has a lot of temperament, and a warm soul or spirit.

To be honest I didn't expect to hear a very high level of playing at the masterclass; up to that time I had never heard anything about the Chinese guitar scene - that was a big mistake. I've never seen so many great guitarists studying at the same conservatory. Their teacher, Professor Chen Zhi, must be one of the greatest guitar teachers ever. I shall never forget the 11-year-old Sun Sxing playing the Handel Variations by Giuliani, or the 16-year-old Li Jen playing

Aguado's Rondo; all absolutely wonderful players, with a beautiful tone and vibrato. Their finger movements were completely relaxed; you could just lean back and listen to the music. And of course there was also the 20-year-old Yang Xue Fei who just didn't want to stop playing: Regondi's Nocturne, Hungarian Fantasy by Mertz, some Barrios, and of course, even in China, you can not escape from Domeniconi's Koyunbaba!

You've just started a new teaching Job in Germany, haven't you?

Since October last year I've been teaching at the Robert Schumann Hochschule in Düsseldorf. At the moment I have eight students between the ages of 20 and 30, who are training to become professional guitarists or teachers. Besides getting individual lessons each week, we have a lesson devoted to performing skills, which means that every Student has to perform once a week in front of his colleagues; it might be some new pieces, or some that they may have performed several times at these occasions, this doesn't matter. It's just important that the Student gets used to the performing Situation. Sometimes I even record their performances. It is hard in the beginning but it works. There is nothing harder than performing in front of your colleagues; if you are able to do it well in front of them, then you can perform anywhere. Teaching is really fun, and it helps your own playing. You are much more aware of what you're playing, technically and musically. I'm very grateful that the Hochschule is very generous with my concert schedule. Nevertheless there is still enough time to practise, as there are five month holiday from the Hochschule each year!

What are your plans for the future?

I have just returned from a concert tour of Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, which included the Tonhalle in Zürich, one of the most beautiful halls that I've ever seen. In April I shall be in Spain, judging the Alhambra Competition in Alcoy. As well as my solo recitals, I will be giving some duo concerts with Sheila Arnold on piano, and others with the fortepiano player Gabor Antalffy. I was teaching in Koblenz at the end of May, and giving other courses in Meinerzhagen and Borkum in Germany. In November I will combine a concert tour with teaching in India, Thailand, and Indonesia.