

A photograph of a young man with blonde hair, wearing a red shirt, playing a classical guitar. He is looking down at the instrument. The background is dark and out of focus.

# CLASSICAL GUITAR

**Giordano  
Passini**

**August 2012**

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**Brett Charles  
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**Progressive  
Progressions**

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# CLASSICAL GUITAR

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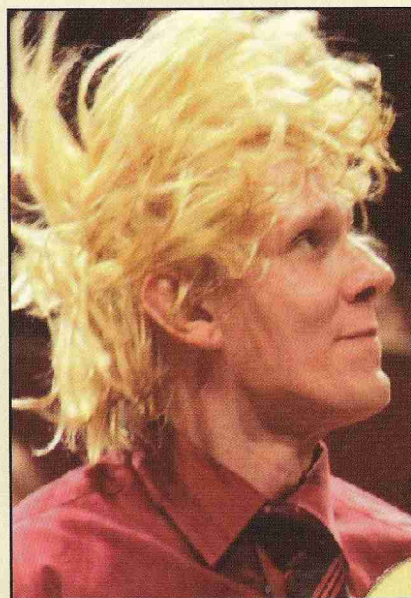
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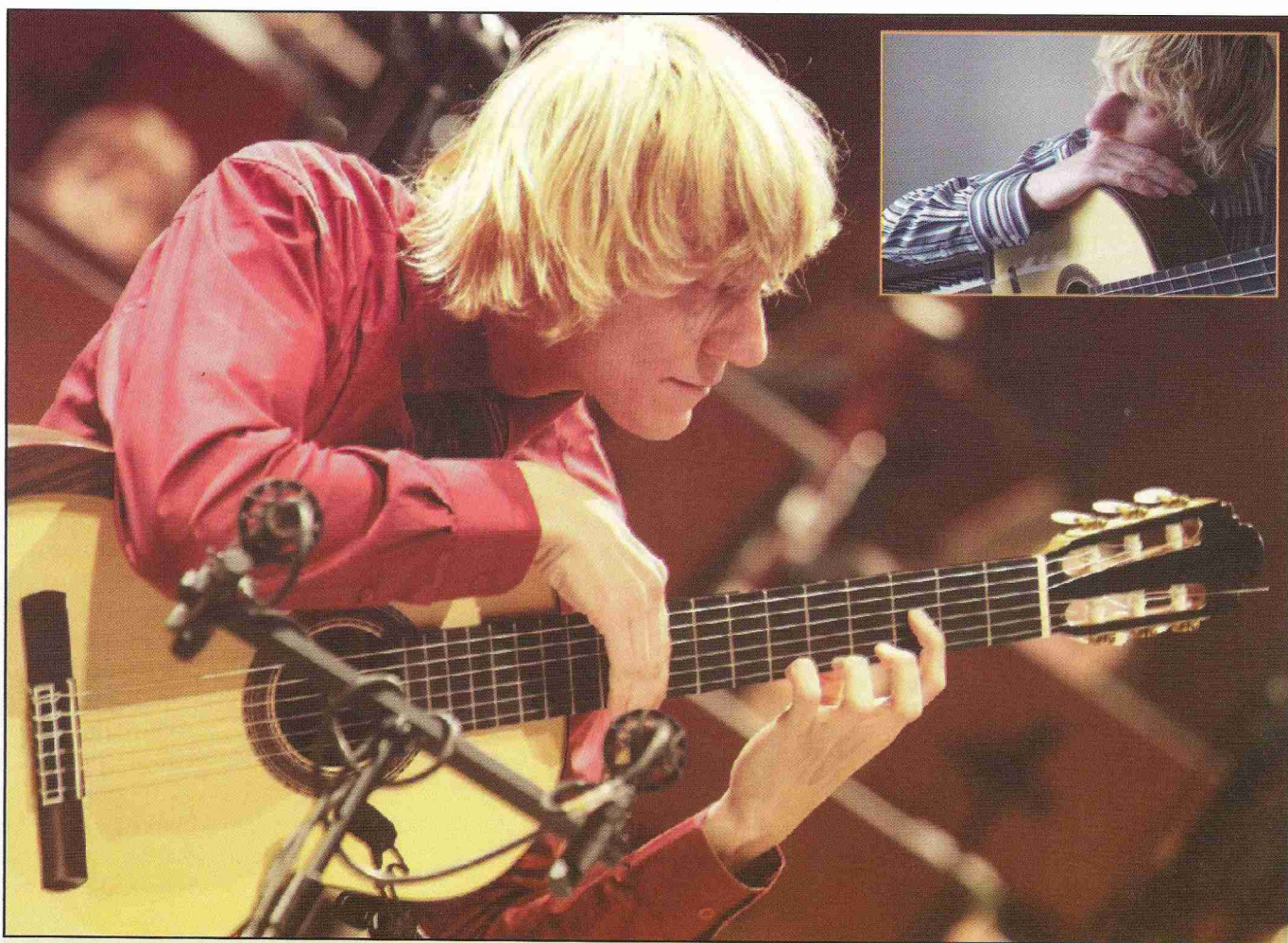
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# MAREK PASIECZNY

By GUY TRAVISS



*Marek Pasieczny.*

AWARD WINNING guitarist and composer Marek Pasieczny is one of the most popular contemporary Polish composers and guitarists of the younger generation. Since completing a masters degree in both guitar performance and composition at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, and after having won several guitar and composition competitions, Pasieczny has established a successful career as a performer, composer and teacher. Today his work has received critical attention from major musical figures including Krzysztof Penderecki, Roland Dyens, Carlo Domeniconi and Nigel Westlake among others.

Pasieczny's works have been performed and commissioned by a variety of performers and have received premiere performances in venues such as Carnegie Hall, Lutoslawski's Hall, Royal Albert Hall, Wigmore Hall, Canterbury Cathedral, He Luting Hall and He Lv Ting Hall Shanghai. He has collaborated with a number of musicians including Pat Metheny, Krzysztof Penderecki, Roland Dyens, Carlo Domeniconi, Kazuhito Yamashita, Pepe Romero, Manuel Barrueco, Pavel Steidl, Roberto Aussel, Aniello Desiderio, Zoran Dukic, Eduardo Catemario, Badi Assad, Marcin Dylla, Duo Melis, Duo Katona, LAGQ and many others.

*What is your approach to guitar composition?*

Ideas do not come to me when I sit in front of a piece of paper and say 'ok, now I'm going to compose'. It doesn't work like that for me. Ideas usually pop into my head at the least expected moment. From then I start to work on and around the idea(s) thinking firstly about structure and form before the notes come, building it up harmonically and melodically. By the time I sit down to actually write the piece, it is already fully formed inside my head. I always work at the piano, no matter which instrument, or combination of instruments, I am writing for, including the guitar. Once the piece has been written down the 'recreation stage' begins. This is where I play it through to check that all the ideas come through the way I had imagined, adding the dynamics, expressive markings and making any changes accordingly.

*How do you expect performers to approach your music?*

In general it is very pleasing when someone is able to correctly decode my intentions when playing or listening to my music. It does happen sometimes. But what also happens from time to time is that someone receives my music in a totally different way



from what I had intended. It could be something that I would not have even thought about, but I will still get aesthetic satisfaction from it.

I believe that in such cases art has played its role, although communication may have failed. But then I do not find full communication or understanding to be absolutely necessary.

*Are composer-performers the best advocates of their music? What issues does this raise for you?*

I know a number of top guitarists who strongly believe that no good or artistically valuable compositions can be written for the guitar by any guitarist, regardless of whether they had any compositional training or not. However, if this should hold true for all instruments, it would be like saying that Chopin or Liszt's piano compositions are of no artistic value, or that Paganini wrote the worst compositions for the violin. For these composers, it was their in-depth knowledge of their instrument that made it possible for them to push it to its limits the way they did. Their compositions greatly expanded the possibilities of their instrument.

The non-guitarist composer's approach to guitar composition is very different from that of the guitarist composer. The most obvious reason for this is the familiarity with the instrument. Construction wise, certain characteristic tendencies can be detected that clearly distinguishes one group from the other. For the guitarist, there is generally an element of improvisation (composition as written-down improvisation). For the composer, a well thought-out, deeply structured and non-coincidental process of composing is prominent.

These two opposing methods of creation bring about different interpretational problems for the performer. In the case of the non-guitarist composer, problems such as uncomfortable, difficult or impossible chord structures, hand positions, or fingering possibilities; lack of colouristic, tonal, and percussive explorations are common. On the other hand, guitarist-composers tend to go for guitaristic conventional repetitive patterns conforming mainly to well-known techniques and tricks and lacking in innovative harmonic possibilities.

Without knowledge of the technical possibilities of the guitar, it is very hard to compose for it (discovering unique timbres and a huge array of tone-colours can give unlimited scope to an imaginative mind). On the other hand, the guitarist-composer's lack of knowledge is not about the technical aspects of the instrument, but of form and other compositional techniques. This is why the majority of their works are in the form of small 'written improvisations'.

The question now is: to what extent does knowledge of a particular instrument or compositional

technique make the process of creation richer? I think the issue lies with balancing your imagination with respect for what it is you might not have knowledge of, or enough knowledge of, then seeking that knowledge before attempting to bring your ideas to life. Whether one is a composer, guitarist or composer-performer, we all wish to put our ideas out there. Once they are there, their acceptance is no longer within our power to control. Only time will tell.

*How do you feel when others adopt your repertoire?*

I try to be as open as I can. I have worked with many different instrumentalists before, and from experience I find that quite often it is guitarists that tend to want to change things. Perhaps it's because guitarists have limited good repertoire to choose from and tend to play the same pieces as other guitarists. They repeat the same repertoire over and over again, year after year, festival after festival, and so they start drastically changing compositional elements such as tempo and dynamics. This is done not for the sake of improving the music but simply to be different

e.g. play faster than anyone has ever played before. This kind of habit carries over even to compositions written by living composers, where they not only want to change certain elements such as tempo, articulation, dynamic markings but even the notes as well. I can agree with someone who feels strongly about making certain changes which make artistic sense, and who can convince me that it works better than the original, but if changes are made with no regard for the music itself then I cannot appreciate it at all.

***"I have worked with many different instrumentalists before, and from experience I find that quite often it is guitarists that tend to want to change things."***

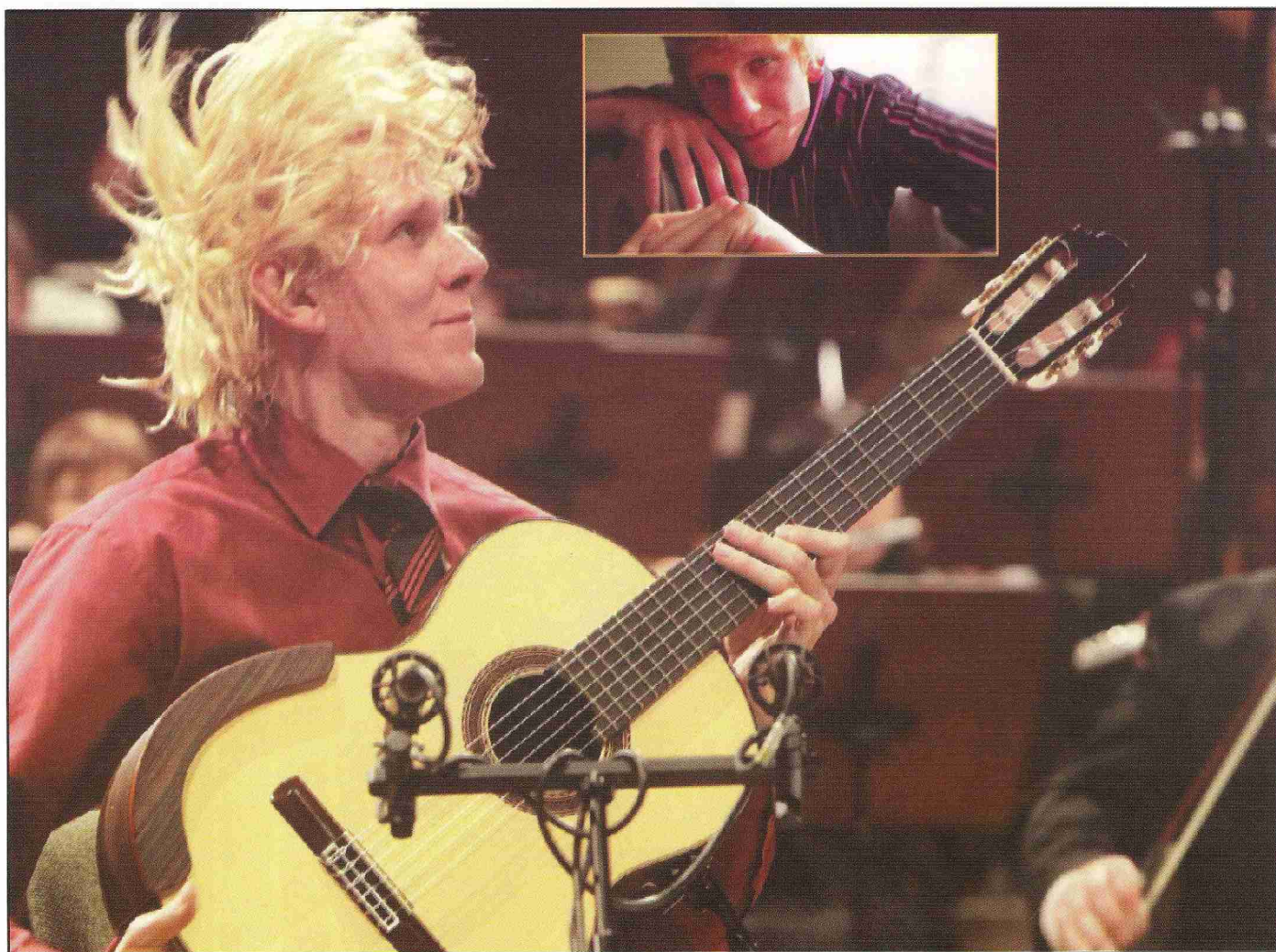
*In recent years we have seen the rise of guitarists who are also*

*trained composers (Brouwer, Dyens, Bogdanovic for example), those who have done their studies in harmony and counterpoint etc. Who do these composers represent to you? Do they follow some pre-existing model?*

Before the twentieth century composition and improvisation were a natural part of every musician's development. It was only from the twentieth century onwards that the expert was created, isolating composers from instrumentalists. In my opinion, this has had a damaging effect on the guitar and its repertoire. When I spoke with Roland Dyens about this issue he shared this opinion. Entrusting the art of composing only to the composers 'killed' the creativity of the instrumentalist. However, it is very unnatural to take away a musician's ability to improvise and compose, because every human being is born with the desire and capability to create.

What we find now in the twenty-first century is that not all composers compose well, and not all





instrumentalists compose badly, so the wall that separated composers from instrumentalists is beginning to fall away. The twentieth century was a very tough period in our history, and the need to draw clear lines, structures and distinctions within the chaos was high. However, at the turn of the century those confinements are no longer necessary, and the desire to break free and express oneself has once again become prominent. It is therefore not surprising that we should find ourselves compared to nineteenth century musicians, as the Romantics had also felt the need to break away from the restraints of the Classical era. This is not to say that twenty-first century composers compose or should compose in nineteenth century style. While we may seek guidance and borrow from the idioms of the past, the style and language in which the music of our era should be composed needs to be different from what came before it.

*Does your writing, for whatever medium, adhere to a certain set of principles or musical aesthetic?*

My way of composing can be defined as creating a new context from the elements of the language of tradition. The sound material is often rooted in the past, yet it is always re-defined.

I think the contemporary composer finds him/herself pulled between two extremes: if one chooses to renounce tradition altogether there is the possibility of falling into the trap of incomprehension; if one follows the tradition

too closely, one may prove banal. This is the paradox of practising art in modern times. So for me it is always a question of finding a way out. Since we cannot fully free ourselves from the past, we need to play a game with it.

Materials should be treated in such a way that allows you to stick to certain elements of the convention, while keeping it at bay through the use of quotations, metaphors and paradoxes. Such treatment may however sometimes lead to eclecticism. Censored and rejected in avant-garde times, and, to a large extent, rightly so, eclecticism is now coming back under the guise of postmodernism. However, there are many methods to stay out of eclecticism despite playing games with tradition. For me an important method is to violate the rules of the traditional language and to create a new context using the elements of that language.

*How do you select commissions?*

I'm interested in commissions that present a challenge to me. For example, I recently finished a commission for a large one-movement work for 13-course baroque lute and string quartet. This was challenging in terms of balancing the instruments (in volume and importance), finding an appropriate lengthy one-movement baroque form (I ended up with a chaconne with 22 variations) and writing a piece for an unusual ensemble that would maintain interest for over ten minutes. I also like to maintain a balance between compositions for



guitar (or projects involving guitar) and compositions for different instruments. Recently I have been working, almost simultaneously, on a few solo pieces for guitar as well as a piece for piano and violin for Hilary Hahn.

This year I have commissions for two guitar concertos, a couple of chamber pieces (string quintets, piano ensembles) and some solo guitar works. The most challenging commission will be composing a new guitar concerto for the 'Silesian Guitar Autumn' International guitar festival in Tychy, Poland (which I will also be premiering). At the same festival, legendary guitarist Kazuhito Yamashita will perform (for the first time in Poland) his wife Keiko Fuji's double concerto for guitar and double bass (European premiere). This, in addition to the presence of other guitarists such as Tomatito, the Assad brothers and Ana Vidovi at the same festival, puts tremendous pressure on me not only as a composer but also as a performer. However, at the same time, I am excited and very much looking forward to writing such a challenging piece and performing it at the festival.

*Do you work in a collaborative way?*

No. During the process of composing from the very beginning till the end I am alone. In the case of a specific commission, I listen to what the other side expects from me (in terms of orchestration, sometimes specific form, length etc.) but most of the time they give me 'free reign' and I can make all those decisions by myself.

If I know beforehand who will be performing the piece, I will take into account their technical and musical abilities and try to write something that will suit their unique style. For very good players, I try to push to the limits and let them sort out how they are going to play the difficult passages on their own, while I focus on the 'big picture' – the piece as a whole. This is especially important for concertos, where not only the soloist or soloists are involved but an entire orchestra as well e.g. with Gabriel Bianco in 2010 premiering *Fantaisie en hommage à Frédéric Chopin* for guitar and orchestra, and Duo Melis (Susana Prieto and Alexis Muzurakis) in 2009 with *Concerto Polacco*.

The only time a collaboration occurs is when I have an idea for something particularly new sounding and may require the help of an instrumentalist to test it out. Or simply during the rehearsals of a given composition, I will explain or demonstrate what it is that I want and the instrumentalist can figure it out (I usually write out an explanation in the score for something that does not yet have notation). The premiere of the *Suite Polonaise* for two pianos and eight hands, for example, commissioned by Aaron Shorr (Head of Keyboard at RCS) for the 2009 Piano Festival, I had great fun rehearsing with four piano lecturers from the RCS while we experimented with toothbrushes, pens, pencils, rulers, towels, papers and polystyrene until we found the perfect combination of objects to produce the desired effect.

**For more information visit PASIECZNY.COM**

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