

Johannes Möller at The Point, Eastleigh Saturday 26th April 2014

Tonight we as a society welcomed Johannes back into our company at the Point in Eastleigh after what seemed to me a shorter time than the actual 3 & a half years it has been! Seeing our performer coming on to entertain us, 16th October 2010 might have been yesterday as the years have not touched him at all. The years since then, however, have definitely seen a significant maturing in his playing and particularly his compositional style.

To begin his concert tonight Johannes chose one of the most iconic pieces to be associated with the Classical Guitar since the first days of the renaissance of the modern instrument, which were led by the likes of Andres Segovia (1893-1987) & Francisco Tarrega (1852-1909);

Asturias – Leyenda by Isaac ALBENIZ (b. May 29, 1860, Camprodon, Spain - d. May 18, 1909, Cambo les Bains, France) whilst being much better known as a guitar piece was, of course, originally composed for piano. This, whilst being the result of Albeniz being exclusively a pianist, did not prevent the composer from obviously having the extremely characteristic idiom of the guitar in mind when he wrote it. This fact was naturally a blessing when it came to be transcribed for the very instrument that had inspired the music in the first place.

Over time many guitarists have used this piece to demonstrate their musicality and technical skill but on this occasion Johannes gave it an interpretation that only he could render. From my previous experience of his playing (yes, the impression has lasted over 3 years!) the principal characteristics to be anticipated from his playing are a degree of mysticism tinged with ethereality. The combination of this approach combined with a classically Spanish composition and technical mastery, created a performance which ebbed and flowed with an extraordinarily rich expansiveness. An inspiring start to proceedings!

Having already set a very high standard Johannes' second offering was the first of a number of his own compositions. A piece Johannes opened his last concert for us with, called "Song to the Mother". This piece, following his liking (in most of his early guitar pieces at least) for particularly descriptive titles uses particularly rapid ornamentation, subtle pulling of strings with consequent bending of notes into quarter tones & even beyond, and chordal patterns. This

gave the impression to this particular auditor of listening to a piece by the great Paraguayan guitarist composer Agustin Barrios-Mangore (1885-1944) who, just for that moment, was looking at his world through Japanese eyes! A remarkable vision to conjure up!

The next piece in Johannes' programme was, in fact, one by the same Paraguayan so suggested of in the previous item, namely Agustin Barrios-Mangore. "Un Sueno en la Floresta" (A Dream in the Forest)- also featured in his last concert for us- has a magic of its own even in less practiced hands. When Johannes revealed in his introduction that Barrios was in fact his Musical Idol (something previously suggestive in his own music) the stage was set for something special and we were not to be disappointed. We were given a very refined performance containing incredible pianissimos and a particularly clear accentuation of the beautiful counter melody to the tremolo passage, often lost by other performers. Indeed, Johannes certainly has a particular sensitivity to balance.

The last two pieces Johannes presented for us in the first half of this concert were both more examples of his imaginatively named pieces; "Drops of Silk" (World Premiere) and "From Her Source to the Sea", which has an epic inspiration behind it, namely the journey of the River Ganges from the Himalayas to the Indian Ocean. Johannes explained to us that he wished to combine the western classical music tradition with the northern Indian tradition of the Raga. To achieve this he based his ideas on modality and the Raga idea of a scale descending differently to its ascent.

"Drops of Silk" could well have been imagined as the first droplets of water from which the Ganges rises from its eternal spring of life, imperceptibly combining with the multitude of other rivulets and thus "From Her Source to the Sea". Maybe on the level of a dream these two pieces seem to combine into a larger work of imagination. Such is the ethereal world Johannes' pieces conjure up, certainly in my mind which is also that of a composer!

As would be expected with a subject that grows from so menial to so grandiose proportions, even being the focus of the Hindu faith, Johannes' piece grows in volume and speed to end in a brilliant finale. Johannes creates a Raga of his own through complex rhythms (4/4 combined with 5/4), bending of notes, and harmonic passages combined with simple chords.

The first half finishes with a feeling of breathlessness but at the same time an inward calm. Very much a spiritual experience.

After an interval Johannes continued with a second half almost in complete contrast to the first, although the piece with which he began it seems to be a favourite of his having featured in both his 2008 concert for the Winchester Guitar Festival and his last concert for us in 2010. It is the Reverie “Nocturne” (Op.19) by Giulio Regondi (b.c.1822 in Geneva Switzerland, or Lyon France – d.1872 London). As Johannes pointed out, while his nationality was uncertain, he lived most of his life in England, being a child prodigy guitarist, and wrote all of his music here, so he was effectively a British composer (at least as much as G. F. Handel!). In any event, this piece dates from the early Romantic period and during its quite extensive length reflects very much the styles of Chopin and Schumann. It also heralds the Barrios style in having a most beautiful tremolo melody. Johannes loves this piece because it is challenging even for one as talented as him to play, whilst still retaining beauty of sound as per the ideals of Debussy. As with all such pieces, Johannes says he feels he has approached it from a different perspective every time he performs it! Whichever way he chooses I am sure every time will be an outstanding success.

The next eight pieces on the agenda were also the work of Johannes but of a nature in total contrast to all of his previous work for guitar (that I know of). I have not researched his earlier work for other instruments but there must be several as his “Preludes 3-10” Opus 12 from a projected set of 24 suggests there must be at least eleven others!

Johannes, realising this departure, explained that this is a new project for him, taking as he has a recognisably classical form which will be readily comparable to Chopin but more particularly to the work of Manuel Ponce. The plan and, indeed, the brevity of some of these works reflects exactly Ponce’s ethos whilst the style still rings with the voice of Barrios. The fact that Ponce also wrote 24 preludes is not so widely known due to the fact that Andres Segovia, for whom they were written, chose only his favourite 12 (also re-numbering them) to publish & perform. Johannes, restricting himself purposefully has achieved a quite different style of working. Each prelude is to be in a different key, an ambition quite staggeringly difficult to achieve and maintain playability within the idiom of the guitar. Whilst the Ponce pieces must be known to him Johannes has already produced a fascinatingly modern take on this traditional form. We can only await in eager anticipation Johannes’ completion of this challenging project which I am sure will turn out to be a work that will undoubtedly enable him to demonstrate his technical and interpretational mastery in a compositional field into which he has not ventured before.

Approaching the end of his published programme, Johannes presented two of his more characteristically named pieces, plunging us rather suddenly back into his more ethereal pseudo-reality.

“A Star in the Sky, A universe within...” could not be more cosmic in concept. In this regard, I can only look forward to Johannes considering a symphonic work; something on the scale of Alexander Scriabin’s “Poem of Ecstasy” comes to mind! Coming out of that particular orbit, the piece itself uses all of Johannes’ colouristic talents as he tries to transmit the whole universe into the concert hall! Cosmic inspiration indeed from a composer with so much more left to say.

The final programmed piece was “Night Flame” which is much more about the spirit “within” than “without”. Johannes explained that this is based on a Night Raga which traditionally expresses devotion, love and passion, which effectively left us all in a complete swoon!

An extraordinary experience, but this was not quite the end as, in happy recognition of our thunderous ovation, Johannes treated us to a sweet encore; another of his pieces titled “Ananda” , the self-same encore he gave us way back in 2010!

We can but wish Johannes all health, happiness, many more inspirational compositions & a return visit when he’s finished his Preludes!

Martin Slater