

## Feature Interview for Classical Guitar Magazine

Stephen Marchionda on Nicholas Maw and Domenico Scarlatti.

By Oliver McGhie

'I'VE QUIT smoking.' That's Stephen Marchionda's news. 'I was probably smoking the last time you saw me. In fact, was I? No, I wasn't. I had quit then but I'd started up again because my mother had gotten a serious illness and I spent some stressful time with her in hospital while she recovered. Thank God. But I've quit now. It's been four months and I'm back to being normal again.' Marchionda digs into a sandwich eyeing his drink carefully, before murmuring something about '...especially with that beer...'

This is my second meeting with Stephen. The first time it was in a coffee house near Wigmore Hall, this time in a small pub in Belgravia near to Victoria station down one of those small alleys into cobbled court yard, where it looks like you've stepped a hundred years back into Dickensian/Edwardian London.

Marchionda lives in Barcelona, Spain, with his Japanese wife. He has been there since last August. He first met Yumi in 1997 while visiting Granada. In the Alhambra and armed with a tourist book Marchionda had bumped into the South American guitarist Fabio Zanon, in the Palacio Carlos V, nose stuck in a guide book. Zanon was in Granada with his girlfriend Mariana, (to whom he is now married). That evening they went to *il Diavolo* together, a bodega for luthiers to console their lost and weary souls. It was there he first met Yumi. She was studying Spanish Philology at the University of Granada. A year later Marchionda proposed to her.

'Oh, poor Scarlatti. Poor, poor Scarlatti,' Marchionda bemoans. Yes, Scarlatti is the topic of the day. This morning Marchionda flew in to Gatwick and I meet him at Victoria station. He's there with guitar and luggage in hand. The reason for Marchionda's moment of despair is for no other reason than the fact that Scarlatti shares the same birth year as J.S. Bach and Handel (1685). Because of this people generally only celebrate Scarlatti's death (1757), his birth year disappearing into the woodwork all too easily. 'Obviously the celebration of the death of composers is silly, you should celebrate them any time you like with good reason,' he adds.

Recently, Marchionda filled the Jacqueline Du Pré concert hall in Oxford with a programme inspired by Domenico Scarlatti, which set the scene with a Spanish atmosphere, followed with music by Joaquin Rodrigo, Manuel de Falla and finishing with the *Sonata* by Antonio José. This *Sonata* had an unbelievably different atmosphere, much more French in style and against the Spanish grain of music, but also with moments of pure inspiration. Before each performed piece Stephen does a left hand stretch which spans about six or seven frets. Later I ask him what this is about. 'That's an exercise left over from the days when I was taught by Ricardo Iznaola - it loosens up my hand a bit. It's especially useful for the Scarlatti works because they are keyboard pieces and there's no natural warm-up written into the music - you're straight in there from the start.'

The most clear and defined piece of the concert was Falla's *Homenaje*. Perhaps this was

because Marchionda used to live in Granada with his home overlooking Falla's house. Overall, Marchionda provided an assertive concert performance showing how he has become a star on the international classical guitar stage.

There are many reasons why Marchionda decided to settle on a programme centring on the works of Scarlatti and these composers of the Spanish Generation of 1927 (which also included such artists as Salvador Dali, Pablo Picasso, Juan Gris and Juan Miro). Firstly, and coincidentally, Marchionda and Scarlatti both share the honour of being Italians living in Spain. (Although Marchionda holds a joint American and Italian passport. His grandfather immigrated to America from the small town of Pacentro in the Abruzzo region, Italy. It was from this generation that Marchionda perhaps inherits his musical genes. His grandmother was an Italian opera singer, and his siblings studied piano).

But Marchionda had also been inspired by John Williams' performance of Scarlatti, in particular the transcription of the K.175 and had heard András Schiff performing the piano Scarlatti sonatas. 'I went over the moon when I heard those,' he says. 'In fact my whole Scarlatti programme, including the encore, is on the Schiff CD. But that wasn't intentional; it just ended up that way.'

In the Oxford concert Marchionda played three Scarlatti sonatas (using his 1998 spruce Antonio Marin Montero guitar from Granada) transcribed by himself: the K.513, K474 and K.475, the final of which showed Marchionda completely absorbed in the music soaking up each and every arpeggiatic passage with a newfound relish. 'For me Scarlatti is hands down the greatest of the early Spanish composers, although obviously there are others like Louis Milano; Soler, who was a very famous harpsichordist at the same time; Navarez; and other Italian composers like Boccherini who were living in Madrid at the same time.'

I ask Marchionda how it was he came to decide on these particular pieces. 'I was in Granada when I first began this project. The music shops there are quite pathetic, but I picked up a book which happened to be the last of Scarlatti's sonata collections. There are actually 550 sonatas in all. I started playing those, got hooked and eventually ordered them all. The first collection to arrive in the post was the penultimate collection, the one before the edition I had bought in the shop. As a result, I was really only studying the k.400 to k.550 range of sonatas. I'm not saying that these ones haven't been done by guitarists, because they have, but generally speaking from what I've seen they are the less performed of Scarlatti's works. Although I have seen Eliot Fisk programme the K.513 into his concerts, but it is usually the earlier ones he and others play.'

It was Ralph Kirkpatrick, the Yale scholar, who organised all Scarlatti's pieces into this known chronological order. Scarlatti was also in the last 30 years of his life when he wrote his sonatas. 'According to Ralph Kirkpatrick the sonatas are more or less consistent in style, but if you look at the earlier ones they are quite a bit different from the later ones, which are fully formed, perfect almost: they have a wonderful combination of humour and atonality (thrown in there for effect from when he was imitating flamenco music). In a way that makes it much more challenging for the guitar. In all I've arranged

15 sonatas and I'm going to be recording them. I've had such joy working through the sonatas that I can only imagine what it must be like for keyboardists. But when keyboardists have so much repertoire to choose from it's not quite the same as making the choice between Sor and Scarlatti when it could be Brahms or Scarlatti!

'I do a lot of contemporary music, but I like to balance that with older music too. I'd done the transcription of Henry Purcell's incidental music to Thomas d'Urfey's play *A Fool's Preferment* a while back and I felt the need to do something similar again. Combine this with the fact that someone had also mentioned it had been 250 years since his death, and a nudge from my agent, I decided to work on pulling together a programme which celebrated Scarlatti and the inspiration he became for the 1927 Spanish Generation.'

When listening carefully to the music of the other composers in that Oxford concert it was possible to hear this influence. Marchionda explains how in the Scarlatti K.475 there's a pattern in E major which echoes exactly a passage in Falla's *Homenaje Le Tombeau de Claude Debussy*. Falla probably didn't do this consciously, although he did conduct thorough research on Scarlatti's sonatas, even composing a harpsichord concerto based on Scarlatti. Rodrigo's music was the same in the way that you can hear similar voices coming through in the Fandango of the *Tres Piezas Españolas*. Even in the *Invocation y Danza* he quotes the accompaniment to the melody of the opening passage of Falla's *Homenaje*, which in itself is a very Scarlatti-based accompaniment. 'It is the treatment of the counter-point and voicings that are so similar,' Marchionda explains.

'I chose the Antonio José piece because it was another piece like so many others inspired by Scarlatti. That, and also that it really was a masterpiece, unlike and beyond what any other Spanish composer was writing at the time. Maurice Ravel, who tutored José in Paris, was quoted saying that, "He will become *the* Spanish composer of our century". I wonder how Rodrigo felt about that, since he was studying there in Paris as well!'

However, José's life was cut tragically short when on a summer day in the August of 1936, aged just 35, he was seized and arrested by a group of militia and a few months later executed by firing squad in a small village outside of Burgos in Spain, without accusation, reason or trial. These actions were the result of political unease in the beginning of the Spanish Civil War where José's social eccentricities in a sheltering conservative community made him an easy target.

'This Scarlatti project is one of the most incredible personal things I've done. It's so nice to play another person other than Bach from the Baroque era. It's wonderful music, utterly different from Rameau, Bach, Handel... it's like Spanish music with an elegance which otherwise that era sometimes misses.

Marchionda has played in many venues around the world since graduating from The Cleveland Institute of Music and Yale University School of Music: Wigmore and Carnegie Halls, Lincoln and Kennedy Centers, Liceu and the Royal Opera House, Oxford, Columbia, Yale, MIT and George Washington Universities and in 2001, the first

concert at the David Josefowitz Recital Hall, (Royal Academy of Music – London; where he was affiliated in 1991). He has performed at Aspen, Cheltenham and Les Soirees Des Junies Music Festivals and on BBC Radio 3, National Radio of Spain, US National Public Radio. As well as performing solo, Marchionda also does small ensemble and orchestral works.

When I met Stephen last it was that time of year again. The time when you lock up your pets and get out the thermal underwear. The time when you trudge out into the early wintry air, stomp around in your wellies, glue your eyes to the sky and end up with neck-ache and/or hypothermia. It was Guy Fawke's night, to be more precise. Except this time I was offered the opportunity to escape the bubble of effigy burning rocket blasting nonsense, and attend musical celebrations for Nicholas Maw's 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday at the Wigmore Hall. What a relief. Speaking to Stephen that night in the coffee house, post-concert, I asked him about chamber music and how the guitar relates and works with that sort of repertoire.

'Let's face it, the guitar Renaissance of the 60s and 70s is over. There was so much of it at one point – but now it seems that the classical guitar might be squeezed out of the contemporary music scene altogether. The guitar has to start looking to move into the world of chamber music. In solo playing you can be the one directing the music. But even I have sat through recitals when I thought it would have been good to mix things up a bit by adding other instruments or voice – Bream liked to do that a lot.'

His reaction then is as firm as it is now. 'Lots of guitarists are trying for all sorts of combinations with percussion, cello, voice... But the problem is many of the venues and chamber music societies get inundated with string quartets, trios and pianists. They may programme one guitarist out of curiosity's sake, maybe once every five years. If they do more than that they're guitar fans. But generally they don't do it. In both America and Europe that is the way of things.'

'The quality of learning with other musicians and what you can teach each other is amazing. When you can get up on stage with musicians of whatever calibre and share, that is amazing. History always plays a role in music though music itself is a very unhistorical event. The actual art of performing is in the moment when you are sharing with the audience – it's a wonderful experience, and the same feeling comes with playing with other musicians - the rest of the time you are just playing.'

'Recently I've been working with the Quartetto del Solisti della Scala - The Scala Soloists Quartet (based in Milan), the tenors Philip Langridge and Kurt Streit, and I've just started rehearsals with the Moscow String Quartet working on Ricardo Iznaola's *Musique de Salon for String Quartet and Guitar*. Chamber music with guitar in the mix is so interesting, from Stravinsky to Harrison Birtwhistle, and Benjamin Britten to Nicholas Maw. Young composers today should find it similarly fascinating working with guitar.'

Not forgetting the reason why Marchionda and I met in the first place at that coffee house – to discuss the celebration of Nicholas Maw's 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday concert – it was in that

concert that Marchionda collaborated with the tenor Phillip Langridge performing *Six Interiors* and the 1989 solo guitar work, *Music of Memory*.

Heralded as the one reviving neo-romantic music in the period after the Second World War, the one replacing the melody in today's classical music (as opposed to John Cage's experimental tendencies), and the one guitarists have their hopes pinned on for further enlightenment, after the success of *Music of Memory*, Maw is deluged with enough praise and reverence by Marchionda to drown-out a chapel full of gospel-goers. His selflessness preceded him; Marchionda simply refused to talk about himself, 'People say that Maw has a "Brahmsian" style, but his musical language is very different from that. He has a fantastic way of holding the audience spellbound. The piece that characterises his voice the most is probably his solo violin sonata. But *Music of Memory* is, without a doubt, one of the most incredible pieces written for guitar.'

As one of the two musical works Marchionda played that night *Music of Memory* is a cross between Tippet's *Blue Guitar* and Britten's *Nocturnal*. Among the Mendelssohn-esque, interludes surrounded by a sea of romantic gestures Marchionda showed his mastery of the guitar with some impressive ragueado playing. 'I first came across the piece, when, for my Carnegie Hall concert, I was looking for new repertoire and Steve Gibb sent me the score for *Music of Memory*. The piece struck me immediately. There are so many layers in it that it took a full six months to learn. Because the piece is dedicated to Eliot Fisk, I noticed that there were many "Eliotisms" in it – particularly in the way that the music is quite impetuous at times!'

The other piece Stephen played was a duet with the tenor Phillip Langridge. They performed *Six Interiors* (written in 1966) and for this number they were both sat down. There was plenty of guts and attack in the opening movement and later on some softer and sweeter sounds. At times it was almost as though Stephen seemed to conduct with his right hand between chords. '*Six Interiors*, interestingly, was written by Maw when he was only 31.' Stephen says. 'The six parts of the songs are individual poems by Thomas Hardy compiled into this one song by Maw. The first part is a dedication to life. The second bit is serious too. The third part has a bittersweet edge. The fourth is a grief stricken, operatic and tragic study of old age. Five is old age again, not treated so seriously, and six is the tolling of a bell...'

Out of respect for Marchionda's enthusiasm for Maw and to give adequate praise of Maw's works it is probably worth detailing what else was played on the programme that night. The Emmanuel Ensemble played *Quartet for Flute Violin, Viola and Cello*, composed by Maw in 1981. In and among the swashbuckling dynamics of the piece the purity of the flute sound blended so well it could be mistaken for a violin – therefore proving that the flute *is* able to 'sustain serious musical argument' – and supporting Maw's plea in the programme notes that the flute *can* 'articulate and sustain a melodic line' and is not always relegated to division two in the league of musical instruments.

And the Zivoni String Quartet played *String Quartet #3*, composed in 1994. This Quartet had a less crisper sound than the Ensemble, but here we were in the presence of a

mightier piece. Folkloric elements helped turn this work of music into an epic with double bowing on violins, repetitive bass lines, long flowing cello and viola lines decorated with a tune that could see a mouse scurrying across the pantry floor: a masterpiece to behold.

As if in response to the boldness and projection of these performances I proffered Marchionda the option of playing new models of guitars which use carbon fibre. His response thus followed ‘We are never going to compete with the likes of the violin and cello, in terms of volume, without amplification. I don’t see the point of sacrificing character of sound and projection for loudness. I’m a very green-friendly guy, and, although there may only be 50 years left of Brazilian Rose wood, do we really want to end up playing plastic guitars? There are other woods we can be experimenting with... and, anyway, just think of the amount of wood that gets used for furniture...’

‘There’s something incredibly beautiful about the solo guitarist performing on the stage,’ he continues. ‘It’s the same with the cellist. I like the lone piano, but some how it’s not quite as intimate. I saw the pianist Alfred Brendel play in the Palacio de Carlos V, in the plaza where it’s rumoured that they used to hold bull-fights, in the Alhambra Palace. They hold concerts there in the summer. In a venue like that a solo pianist can be as intimate, or maybe it was the performer. Because he’s such a great pianist maybe only Brendel could do that – to create that level of intimacy which made you feel that you were right there. It’s wonderful to do that with an instrument which is so big and noisy.’

‘That’s what I would recommend to aspiring guitarists – go to other types of concerts. I don’t know how to say this nicely but I get guitarists in my recitals and they only come for the guitar. The music is not the guitar, the guitar reads the music. There are other composers out there, writing music for other instruments, who produce such wonderful and meaningful music that they can change your life.

Visit [www.stephenmarchionda.com](http://www.stephenmarchionda.com) for more information.

### **Discography**

Songs for Tenor and Guitar (Britten, Maw and Dowland) *Chandos*

The Complete Variations and Preludes by Manuel Maria Ponce; *Sanctuary Classics - Resonance Label, to be re-released 3, September 2007*

Spanish Sonatas, by Rodrigo, Turina and José *TouchMedia*