

Letter from HOLLAND

Baltazar Benítez, born in 1944, Durazno, Uruguay, began his guitar studies at the age of 12 with Pedro Machin; later with Abel Carlevaro in Montevideo. In 1970 he went to Spain to study with Segovia in Santiago de Compostela. He continued his studies in Alicante for two years with José Tomás. In 1971 he won the First Prize at the international annual guitar competition in Compostela. In '73 he won the First Prize at the international Tarrega contest at Benicásim. Since '72 Baltazar has lived in

Holland and has been on the teaching staff at the Brabant Conservatory in Tilburg. Elektra Classics recently recorded his second album "Bach suite in E minor BWV 996, Scarlatti 5 sonatas". The, not very artistic cover is in complete contrast to this magnificent record. The results of Baltazar's own transcriptions of Bach and Scarlatti are on a high level. The particular characteristics of the baroque music shows profound knowledge of current conventions in the baroque era. His playing is very clear and rich in musical effects. This record is a brilliant combination of expressive intensity and sensitivity. In Holland the record came out as one of the 10 best classical records. I asked Baltazar Benítez why he chose Bach and Scarlatti.

Bach is my favourite composer. Scarlatti is a composer of the baroque era which is also very suitable for arrangement on the guitar. For years I have studied a lot about renaissance and baroque music, their special

styles and embellishments. I also attended several courses including courses with the famous lute player Toyohiko Satoh and the well-known harpsichord player Jos van Immerseel.

To me it sounds as if you play Bach and Scarlatti on two different guitars. Am I right?

No, both Bach and Scarlatti are played on my 1976 Fleta. The difference in sound is due to the fact that Bach had been recorded in a church which seemed to emphasize the bass notes a little more, while Scarlatti had been recorded in

a church where the treble sounded very clear. So the little difference in acoustics gave the subtle effect in difference in character of Bach's and Scarlatti's music.

The continuous movement does not sound monotone or dull. On the contrary, it is a pleasure to listen to all those different nuances you have interwoven in the music. Did you try to imitate the lute and harpsichord as much as possible?

Not really, but association with lute and harpsichord goes without saying. Scarlatti, for instance, composed for harpsichord, the technique he used can be played on the guitar "harpsichord-like". I executed trills with the right hand on two strings to achieve this effect. Not only for the sake of the effect, but I do not think there is another way. If you have a trill in the middle of a phrase, played only with your left hand you immediately get a gap and it is impossible to build up the whole phrase. It is different at the end of the phrase or where the trill is not so important, for example where it says 'piano', there I play with my left hand only. If the trill has to be played at a certain place of tension and excitement, say a chord with trill, then the trill has to be played differently: this can be the two-string trill or a trill with the right hand on one string. So it all depends.

How important is technique to music?

My opinion of music is that one's musical side is the most important thing, but you can achieve this only by means of a good technique. You cannot dissociate the technique from

Baltazar Benítez



the music. So I think, to master musicianship there is no end in studying technique. Technique is sometimes used as if it is a dirty word, but if you do not want to compromise in playing beautiful music, you would be independent on the degree of difficulty. For instance in a fugue, you really need complete independence of all fingers to get the clarity of the different voices. Of course, this is not only a problem of fingers, also your hearing has to be trained to play the different voices with the right power. Also analyzing the music is very important. I think, the more musical information you get, the more technique you need. To me, to make music is trying to get the feeling of original ideas of the composer via the music sheet and give it new life again; that is interpretation.

Being from Uruguay, do you ever think of going back to your country?

Well, I'd like to, but at the moment this is not possible. The situation, as in most Latin-American countries is quite critical, also for musicians. Therefore I'd rather not live there now. If you want to succeed as a musician, you have to compromise with the government. For instance, when I was there 5 years ago, I was asked to play some official concerts. Before performing them I was asked whether I had a certificate of good behaviour. A certificate of good behaviour means, in to-days Uruguay, that you never have participated with the activities of politics of the left parties. This certificate has to be applied for by every person who wants to perform at official occasions. So I did not play one single concert.

Do you still feel inspired by Uruguay in your music?

Yes, I surely do, if I play South-American music, after all, I lived in Uruguay until I was 26. So I am influenced a lot by the Uruguayan folk-music which is a combination of Spanish, African, Indian and European music. It is very mixed. On the other hand, when I studied at the Conservatory in Montivideo, I also got quite a lot of

information as to authentic European music. The advantage of living in Holland is that there is so much more information to be had about the renaissance and baroque music than I could get in Uruguay. For Bach, for instance, I used, apart from other books, the magnificent book: Neue Ausgabe Sämtlicher Werke. Institut Göttingen und vom Bach-Archiv Leipzig. Bärenreiter Kassel-Basel-Tours-London 1976.

Why is it that you do not play many concerts in Holland?

Well, I don't know. I have been very busy of course. But, on the other hand, I am asked quite a lot in Spain, Italy, France and Germany. Maybe they will ask me more in Holland in the future. I can frankly say 'yes' to this ideal!