

VLADISLAV BLÁHA

By GUY TRAVISS



Vladislav Bláha, Leo Brouwer and Isabelle Hernández.

AT THE beginning of this year *Classical Guitar* featured a report on the Brno Guitar Festival. The Czech guitarist Vladislav Bláha was the founder of that event and remains its Artistic Director. This month CG looks at his career developments since he last featured on the cover of this magazine.

Vladislav Bláha studied at the Conservatoire of Brno in his Czech homeland where he is now Professor of Guitar. He is also president of the Czech Classical Guitar Society and has performed and given masterclasses at prestigious concert halls around the world, including the Royal Festival Hall in London and Radio France in Paris.

At the time when he was graduating from music college, the Czech Republic didn't have a guitar scene to speak of, and Slovakia was in a similar situation. So Bláha decided to move to Germany and continue his studies in Weimar. Later he received funding from the British Council to study in England where he worked with Gordon Crosskey and Jack Duarte.

Attached to Bláha's name in some way is a number of leading exponents of the guitar world. The iconic *Usher Waltz* by Russian composer Nikita Koshkin was composed for the Czech guitarist, and he was the first player to premiere works such as Brouwer's *Elogio de la Danza* and, more recently, the Cuban guitarist/composer's *Paisaje Cubano con Fiesta*.

Bláha embodies the portfolio-style career typical of working musicians today. In addition to his teaching duties at the Janacek Academy of Music and running a guitar festival in Brno, Bláha is active as both a performer and scholar. In the case of the latter, the Czech guitarist has focused on the music of Karl Kohaut. In 2004 he received his Doctor of Arts degree from the Academy of Music in Bratislava, Slovakia, with a thesis centred on Kohaut's music. This musical figure was of interest to Bláha partly through his national connection, but also due to some curiosities about the musician's output. 'Kohaut was a lute player of Czech origin who lived in Vienna,' says

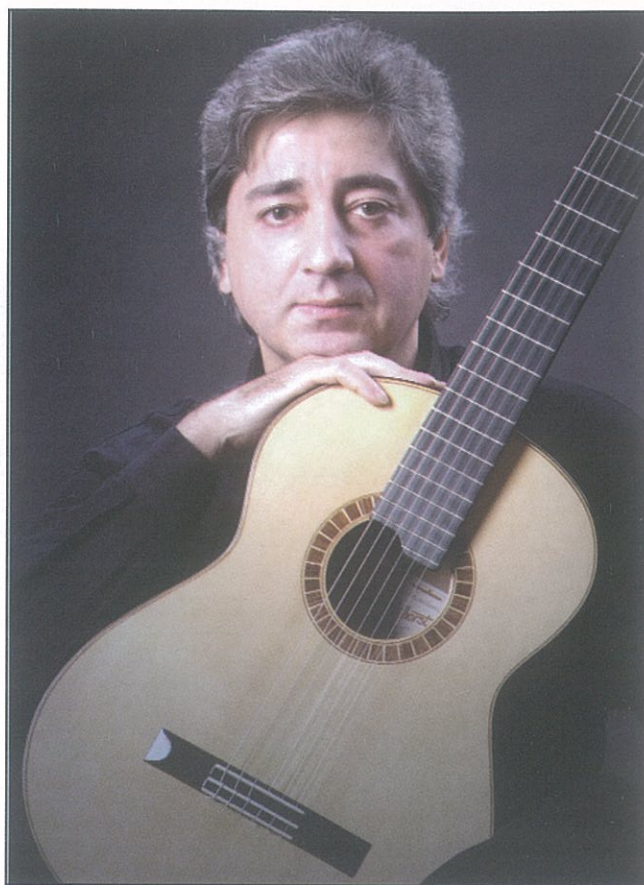
Bláha, 'and I wrote about his eight lute concertos. It's unusual that a lute player composed eight concertos for lute and strings. Some years ago I did a recording of his E Major concerto, and it's the only recording that I know of. Most people know his F Major concerto played by Julian Bream.' At this time Bláha has no plans to publish his transcriptions of Kohaut's music, but does hope to record all eight concertos if he can find a sponsor. Like many tasks that occupy people's time, Bláha hopes to do this simply because 'no one else has done it'.

Although he hasn't yet drawn a line under his work with the music of Kohaut, Bláha doesn't hesitate to move straight on to discuss other projects, both past and present, that have consumed his interests for a period. In fact, it is difficult to keep pace with the number of realised and yet to happen ideas that came to him on this occasion. In particular, he drew attention to his book on the history of the guitar, published in 2012. Although there are several titles dedicated to this subject, many promising a comprehensive look at the guitar, its history and evolution, Bláha explains that there is still great scope for this type of book. This is understandable. The guitar has a large following and strong amateur base. But it is not sales that concern Bláha, rather, it is the sheer availability of interesting things to discuss that makes him believe in such a project. Bláha goes on to cite some underrepresented aspects of guitar history to demonstrate his point: 'I wrote quite a lot about Stradivari guitars. I don't think that guitarist know much about them, so I have pictures of all five of his instruments and some parts of the sixth guitar. They were hugely important for guitar building leading from the baroque guitar to the classical instrument'.

After a while discussing the various subject areas of the book, you quickly gets the impression that this is a project that is likely to continue well into the future. 'In the end it [the book] took about six years to compile,' explains Bláha, 'and in the last three years I changed a lot. For the last two years I did corrections only, but in its current edition the book is around 100 pages longer than before.' The recently extended version of the book is the result of new discoveries being made in the guitar world, and Bláha expects that subsequent editions will be extended as new discoveries are made.

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PHOTO: JEF-KRATOCHVIL

subject. Particularly of note here is John Taylor's *Tone Production on the Classical Guitar*. At this stage Bláha's work, which he likens to following on from Emilio Pujol's attempt at the subject, is intended to be published in Czech only. However, Bláha hopes that the book's popularity will attract an English translation of the text. At this

time it sounds as if Bláha is taking a very pragmatic approach to the subject, as he explains: 'Tone colour, nail shape, how to move the fingers on both the left and right hands to influence tone etc., this is the kind of thing the book will look at, and practically from the view of current guitarists. My edition will include pictures, making it possible to compare the shape of the nails and such things. I think it will be very interesting for guitarists.'

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the guitar department at the Janacek Academy of Music, which was founded by Vladislav Bláha. Today guitar in the Czech Republic is a very different thing from what it was when Bláha graduated from that same music college, and that is largely thanks to his efforts. The Brno Guitar Festival and the guitar department at the academy are very much connected, each helping the

other develop. 'Students have more opportunity to do guitar studies in the Czech Republic,' says Bláha, 'before it was quite complicated because each year only one or two students went to the academy in Prague to study, and the other students had to go to other countries like Austria or Germany. But this is expensive, and not everyone wants to do it, so it's good to have this opportunity for them here.' Many of the students graduating from the Janacek Academy have gone on to form successful careers, and this teaching position is very much part of what defines Bláha's work in recent years.

It is easy to get the impression that Bláha is caught up entirely in any one of the things so far mentioned, whether that's his teaching duties, his academic pursuits, organising a festival or playing. A glance around his music room at his home in Brno tells you something about his dedication to the instrument: what strikes you immediately is his collection of over 30 historic instruments, the oldest dating back to 1810. But in addition to these items, there is a whole world of guitar



paraphernalia that temporarily overloads the senses when you first enter the room. In a way, standing in this space gives you the best insight into Bláha's musical mind.

Central to all these things, of course, are Bláha's activities as a player. He tours regularly, and at the time I spoke with him it was difficult for even he to recall exactly where he would be going and where he would be playing in weeks ahead. This summer has seen him visit the United States in addition to European engagements, and all the while he is preparing repertoire for both the concert hall and recordings. In fact it is the subject of recording that brings us up to date with where Bláha is now. Despite previously explaining to me that he had a strong empathy for 'purpose composed' (i.e. music written for the guitar) guitar music, his latest recording project sees him compiling pieces for a CD of great transcriptions for the guitar. His interest and experience of transcribing music makes this an exciting proposition. Among works by Vivaldi and Paganini, Bláha will record some more iconic guitar translations such as the Bach *Chaconne*.

With such a busy and active life, Bláha hasn't really given much thought to what the future will hold other than what immediately needs doing. But that is the kind of musician the Czech guitarist is, and a testament to his success in his industry. To keep up with what he's doing, you can follow his news on his website: vlblaha.sky.cz (available for viewing in the English language).