

BRNO

INTERNATIONAL GUITAR FESTIVAL

9th – 15th August 2009

By PAUL FOWLES



Scott Tennant, Juan Francisco Ortiz, Andrew York and Juan Falu.

UNLESS the proceedings took place in one of those Orwellian communities that sprung up across England in the wake of the New Towns Act (1946), you're generally on safe ground in referring to a location as 'historic'. But the Czech city of Brno can truly justify the label. With records dating back to 1091, this medieval administrative centre of Moravia boasts a wealth of noble architecture, each structure with its own story to tell. It is without irony that the refurbished 18th century civic building where most of this year's concerts were held is referred to as the New City Hall.

But the dominant feature on the Brno skyline is unquestionably the Spilberk Castle, which has occupied its elevated site since the 13th century. Now it doesn't take a world-ranking military strategist to figure out why castles tend to be built on top of hills, and whoever chose the location for this one was taking no chances. But it was worth the arduous climb through endless cobbled

streets to be present for the opening concert by a flamenco team fronted by guitarist José Antonio Rodríguez. It seems I wasn't alone in feeling this way, the estimated audience figure being in the region of 1200. With a fully-equipped outdoor stage erected at the lower end of a sloping courtyard, sound and lighting were of the highest order. The large video screen, despite prompting the inevitable references to 'stadium rock', proved to be a desirable piece of kit, the camera catching details that couldn't be seen with the naked eye.

And there was much to see and hear, Rodríguez soon establishing himself as an outstanding practitioner of the modern school. The evening also served as a timely reminder that audiences and reviewers don't always perceive a performance from the same standpoint. A brief introductory sequence from dancer Rosario Toledo was greeted with hoots of approval, whereas an extended and at times quite brilliant solo from Rodríguez prompted



Jose Antonio Rodriguez.



Anna Slezakova-Zuniga Marcos.



Maria Linnemann and Student.



Milan Tesar.



Ramiro Martinez Pina and Vladislav Blaha.

little more than the customary round of applause. But let it also be emphasised that Toledo went on to emerge as a class act in her own right, the intricate footwork being complemented by that all-important capacity to walk across the stage in a meaningful way.

Although Andrew York will perhaps always be best known for his long and illustrious stint with the *Los Angeles Guitar Quartet (LAGQ)*, let it never be forgotten that he was active as a solo guitarist and composer both

before and during that celebrated innings. A sell-out concert at the New City Hall provided a timely opportunity to catch up on York's recent offerings, the Celtic soundscape of *Skerries* and the nocturnal imagery of *By Candlelight* (from the seven-movement *Kinderlight*) leaving the most lasting impressions. And it was surely fitting that York should end the programme with a triumphant restatement of the evergreen *Sunburst*, in much the same way as Dave Brubeck still signs off with *Take Five*.



Ondrej Pavlicek.

To describe Franco-Hispanic guitarist Juan Francisco Ortiz as one of the old school is no insult but it's certainly a fact. Fielding a programme subtitled *La Guitarra de Garcia Lorca*, Ortiz transported us back to those days when the Spanish guitar was perceived as an instrument of quiet contemplation that enjoyed regular cameo roles in the nation's literary heritage. The performer's penchant for reciting breathy Spanish texts over the music may have been a little too theatrical for some tastes, but retro recitals like this are nonetheless a resource to be treasured, the finest moments of all coming in the cycle of *Preludios Lorquianos*.

By this time, the programme of lectures and masterclasses was underway in an elderly but well-equipped school building. In addition to those who had given concerts, this year's teaching staff included guitarist and composer Maria Linnemann, whose book of lyrical miniatures accompanied me to many a restaurant gig during the 70s and 80s. A tour of the rooms revealed a noticeably large quota of students from Costa Rica, whose presence was to prove significant over the next few days.



Daniel Espinoza.



Anna Slezakova.

Back at the New City Hall, all seats were taken in anticipation of the solo recital by Scott Tennant. As a founder member of the LAGQ who still remains part of the crew, Tennant's appearance in the same series as York marked something of a reunion. Eduardo Sainz de la Maza's ethereal and under-rated *Campañas de las Alba* found Tennant on impressive form, as did the ensuing Weiss sonata and a wonderfully evocative setting of *Wild Mountain Thyme* presented as an encore. Elsewhere, it gradually emerged that not every scheduled item was going to appear. Programme changes can be an irritant for the audience and a minefield for reviewers, but I have to say that Tennant's decision to put Rodrigo's incurably lame *Pequeña Sevillana* out of its misery and replace it with Torroba's infinitely more robust *Suite Castellana* won my unquestioning support.

An established part of the Brno mix is the *Guitar Talent* competition for young players, thus providing a showcase for the more ambitious among the hundred or

so resident students, most of whom were of school or college age. A natural offshoot of this is the series of free daytime concerts by past winners from Brno and elsewhere. The 2009 roster saw highly promising appearances by Ondrej Pavlicek, Vit Dvoracek and Anna Slezakova, the latter augmenting her programme with the surprise arrival on stage of Zuniga Marcos, a charismatic young tenor currently based in Switzerland.

By the latter stages of this year's competition, it was clear that we were heading for a photo finish between Daniel Espinoza and Matteo Guayazán, both from Costa Rica. Despite a cool and funky slice of Gentil Montaña from Guayazán, a jury chaired by composer Milan Tesar decided that Espinoza had given a stronger all-round performance. He was duly awarded first prize by a narrow but decisive margin. The dark horse was Aleksandra Sapok from Poland who, despite suffering some anxiety in the first round, came back to take third prize with a barnstorming *Elogio de la Danza*.

But perhaps the name to remember most is that of Hedvika Svendova, whose tidy and rhythmic *Candombe en mi* from the *Cinco Preludios* by Maximo Diego Pujol earned her victory in the junior section. Having shown no fear of performing before the adjudicators, this disarmingly mature 13-year-old was every bit as composed when invited to take a lap of honour in front of some 200 people at the New City Hall. It's early days, of course, but the future for Hedvika Svendova could prove very interesting.

Now I have to confess that I often spend the first five minutes of a concert listening rather than watching. So Mexican guitarist Ramiro Martinez Piña was well into his second piece before I realised he was performing on a ten-string guitar. A backstage conversation revealed that Piña's teacher was an admirer of Narciso Yepes and encouraged his students to uphold the ten-string tradition. The fact that I was genuinely unaware of the additional strings certainly established that Piña's sound, unlike that of Yepes, matches the balance and clarity of a conventional instrument. But it also shows how little



Matteo Guayazan.



Hedvika Svendova.



Vit Dvoracek.

impact those extra basses actually achieve. Only in the setting of the popular song *Cielito Lindo* was the range even close to being fully utilised, the rest of the programme, including a fluid *El Decameron Negro*, being essentially the work of an engaging and smiley guitarist whose choice of instrument makes little difference either way.

Sharing the bill with Piña was an earnest battalion of players operating under the collective title of the *Silesian Guitar Octet*. Tempting though it is to dismiss such a configuration as 'four too many', it has to be conceded that the tightly-drilled presentation of Gershwin's *An American in Paris*, arranged by Franciszek Wiczorek, was a major undertaking that proved considerably more convincing than might have been feared.

A flyer handed to me in the street revealed the intriguing coincidence that this year's guitar festival overlapped by two days with the annual *Motor Fest Brno*. More alarmingly, the final evening's concert was going to clash with, wait for it, the *Miss Grid GP* beauty pageant. Could this really be the reason why Juan Falú was the only performer of the week who didn't quite attract a full house?

A legendary figure on the folk scene in his native Argentina, Falú is a musician whose work illustrates the lack of boundaries between the classical and folk

guitars in his part of the world. Presenting his own pieces alongside works by Ariel Ramirez, Carlos Guastavino and Atahualpa Yupanqui (no, it's not an anagram), Falú performed on a nylon-strung instrument using a technique that was classical in all but name. Nostalgic in melody and harmony, never too hectic in rhythm or tempo, Falú's occasional moments of drama rarely ventured beyond brief bursts of neatly-chopped chord strums. Exhilarating he may not be, but subtly compelling he most certainly is, the free and lyrical setting of *Alfonsina y el Mar* served up as the second encore emerging as a premier-league reworking of a truly great tune.

No festival would be complete without the student concert, and this one distinguished itself by fielding not a single player who was attempting repertoire beyond their technical means. Finest of all was Lubomir Kopkas, who was unable to give a full daytime concert due to an arm injury but was back in harness on the final afternoon to present the cutting edge soundscape of *Melate Binario* by Enrico Chapela. A senior student of festival director Vladislav Blaha, it was fitting that the talented and motivated Kopkas should be chosen to close proceedings.

My sincere thanks to Vladislav and his team for the invitation, and special thanks to 'Martina the Highlander' for her time and toil as my translator.



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