

ANDRÉS SEGOVIA

Although I had heard Segovia in concert on two or three occasions, it was not until 1982 that I was able to interview him on behalf of the newly launched Classical Guitar magazine. He was in London to give a recital at the Barbican Centre, which possessed a somewhat more satisfactory concert hall for a guitarist than the cavernous Royal Festival Hall where, if you sat more than halfway back, you missed a significantly large proportion of the guitar's color. This simple observation, I could not help noticing, was often flatly denied by guitar grandees who themselves never sat in the poorer seats.

Segovia himself was a determined advocate of playing in large halls, for the simple reason that it brought the guitar to more people. It was, however, only the well-off people at the front who, like the first-class passengers in a large liner, enjoyed the experience to the full. The Barbican Hall's acoustically preferable shape enabled very many people to hear Segovia properly for the first time. It was their bad luck that, by that time, his great age — he was 89 in 1982 — was beginning to be all too noticeable. His left hand, never the stronger, quickly became tired, to the detriment of clarity and articulation. In contrast, the right hand, as it tired, seemed to produce tone of an ever-increasing quality, so that by the end of the concert one would have been satisfied if he had played a series of open-string arpeggios in that inimitable style of his. But of course there was always more than that. Segovia remained a great artist to the very end, even if he was no longer the great guitarist that he had been; and ultimately it is artistry that the human sensibility demands.

I telephoned him at the Westbury Hotel in Mayfair, where he habitually stayed when in London. 'Come tomorrow at half past six,' he directed, and hung up without waiting for confirmation. I looked in my diary and found that tomorrow he was to play his recital at the Barbican Hall, one hour later at 7.30. Surely he did not mean to restrict the interview to a mere few minutes? Would he want to speak to journalists at all so soon before a concert? A simple mistake seemed the cause; his wife was not there to look after such arrangements, and he had been known to ring friends in London to inquire 'Where am I playing tonight?'

Accordingly, I rang back immediately. He sounded irritated at being disturbed a second time, and I reminded him that, since he was giving a concert at 7.30, he would scarcely have time to speak to me an hour beforehand. There was a long silence. Then, accompanied by a rich chuckle, came the words: 'I am very sorry. Come the day after.'

David Russell came with me. He had visited Segovia the year before and had played for him. He had been complimented. This time he left his guitar behind, not wanting to hinder me in my work. I was sorry; it would have made my photography more relaxed if David had been playing while I was taking pictures of the older maestro.

Segovia, we were told, had gone for a walk. We sat down to wait. Then, through the door came the burly figure of the great man, wearing his black beret and holding his silver-topped cane. He walked, surprisingly briskly, to the reception desk for his key, and we introduced ourselves.

He asked us to wait for ten minutes, and walked towards the lift. It was his platform walk, slow and stately, far removed from the brisk and energetic stride he had used as he came through the door. Segovia had dropped, simply and innocently, into his performing mode.

In his room I gave him a copy of our first issue, with Julian Bream on the cover. It prompted a mischievous story of how, the year before, he had seen a picture of 'an old, bald-headed guitarist' on the TV screen and had not recognized him. His young son had confirmed that it was Julian Bream, and Segovia exclaimed: 'But he is so old! And I am so young!'

It was the first of many anecdotes, signalled in advance by gesturing to me to switch off the tape recorder. While the machine was running, I was given the standard interview that had appeared in numerous publications. Another off-the-record remark concerned his disappointment with John Williams and his association with the pop group Sky. He did not see it as an essential part of the younger guitarist's search for a new identity, but felt that John Williams should have been content with carrying on the good work that he, Segovia, had initiated. Then there was a furious denunciation of the publishers of his autobiography; they had, he claimed, deprived him of the Spanish rights, which he had particularly requested should remain his. 'To cheat me, an old man, like this!', he stormed, and Andalusian fire raged in his eyes. 'Terrible! Terrible!'

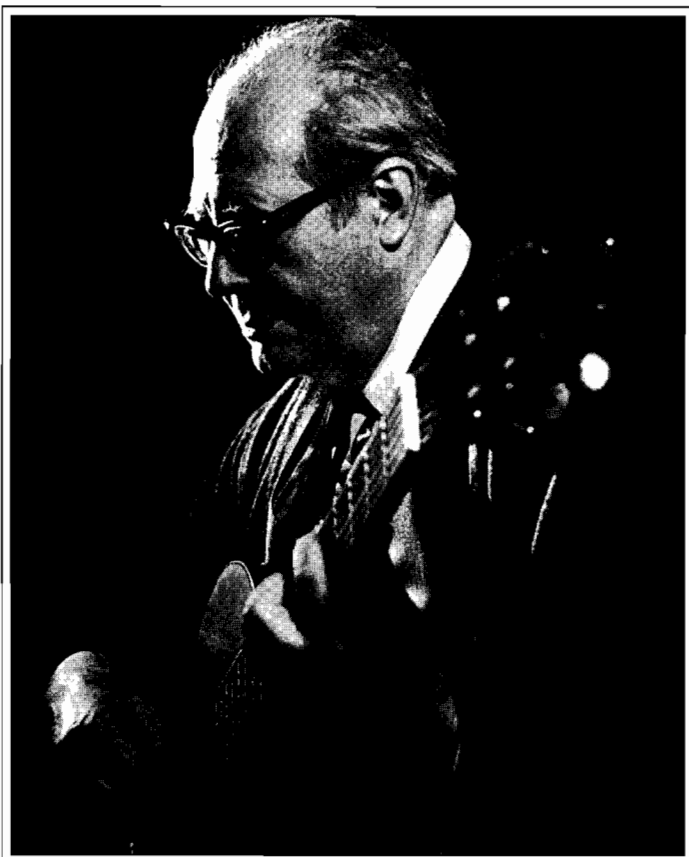
He leafed through our first issue. 'Duarte,' he muttered. 'Again Duarte. And more Duarte.' His meaning was not clear. Was it a criticism? An expression of approval for the industry of his old friend? John Duarte did

put in a tremendous amount of work in the first two issues before departing to help revitalize another guitar magazine (*Guitar International*, now defunct), after which his contributions to *Classical Guitar* became less frequent.

I was left with the impression of a man of formidable musical power but possessed, notwithstanding, of a lively sense of fun and a love of company. Segovia liked to talk. He was also surprisingly docile when it came to photography, obeying every instruction to turn his head this way or that way or to 'Look into the lens, Maestro'. I have photographed a great many guitarists, and the only other to have behaved with such impeccable understanding turned out to have done some professional modelling before his guitar career took off.

There were to be later meetings with Andrés Segovia, but the first one remains the most vivid.

CC



Courtesy Classical Guitar Magazine

The Barbican audience had been highly appreciative, giving him a standing ovation at the end. But there had been some trouble with the footstool, which had collapsed. It was terrible to be distracted by that kind of thing, said the maestro, because the fingers were accustomed to the discipline, and as soon as the discipline was relaxed the fingers could not perform their task. But he had enjoyed playing at the Barbican.

'The acoustic may be a little better than the Festival Hall's, where people come once but not any more if they don't hear the guitar very well. There, I was always looking to see if people were applauding. If they weren't, it was because they couldn't hear. It was a phenomenon in all the concerts there.

'Last night there were two or three coughs, on my left.

You know, I was once playing the Suite by Bach — the Sarabande, a long movement, expressive, then...' (a realistic cough to illustrate his point) '...then I stop. I look at the place where I hear the cough, and...' (here followed a handkerchief-to-mouth mime, designed to effect an instant cure for bronchitis). 'Everybody laughed — but no more coughs. A handkerchief to the mouth disturbs neither the neighbor nor the artist.'

At the beginning of his career Andrés Segovia had set himself four aims: 'To redeem the guitar from flamenco and other folkloric amusements, to persuade composers to create new works, to show the real beauty of the classical guitar and to influence schools of music and conservatories to teach guitar at the same dignified level as the piano, violin and cello'. Did he feel that he had achieved those four aims?

'I think I have succeeded in my purpose. Because first I redeemed the guitar from the captivity of the flamenco — apart from Tárrega, because Tárrega did not give concerts frequently, not in concert halls or theatres. He was, rather, surrounded by several friends, and he played for them. He received a very modest remuneration. It was a difficult life.

'I did not know Tárrega. I was a little boy when he died. He intended to come to Granada, where I was living, because a friend of my family wrote to him. He answered and said he would come. But in the meantime he died.

'The second goal was to create a repertoire which was not a repertoire by guitarist composers — with the exception of Sor and Giuliani. Tárrega was not a big composer; and the other composers were not very musical. I began to ask the real composers — symphonic composers — to help in creating the repertoire for the guitar. The first to answer was Torroba, who died recently. He was then a young composer of great

talent. The first composition he did for the guitar was the dance, in the Suite *Castellana*.’

After that, many composers who heard Torroba’s work played on Segovia’s guitar were stimulated to produce their own guitar pieces. Torroba himself went on to produce 200 or so. Castelnuovo-Tedesco wrote more than 120 pieces, Turina only about a dozen but of good quality, Villa-Lobos many — including a concerto — and of course Ponce and Tansman.

‘This was achieved. Between, I had the transcriptions that I made from vihuela and from harpsichord and from piano, and the pieces that had been composed by real composers foreign to the guitar. The repertoire had 300 or more pieces. This broke the vicious circle the guitar was in. Because there were no composers, there were no artists. And there were no artists because there were no composers.’

Segovia was also concerned about projecting the sound of his guitar, since both Tárrega and his brilliant pupil Llobet both thought that the guitar could not be heard beyond a very short distance. He played his first concert in Granada at the age of 16, then went to Seville, where he performed many times despite the limitations of his repertoire at that time. From Seville he went to Madrid, and thence to Barcelona. It was here, at his second concert, that he decided to make the experiment in sound that opened up the way for concert guitarists ever since.

The first Barcelona recital had been given at the *Sala Granados*, where incidentally he first met the young woman who was to become his first wife. It was, he says in his autobiography, of a great significance to guitarists throughout the world. The *Palau de la Musica Catalana* held over a thousand people — an unheard-of audience for a guitarist — and when Segovia announced that his farewell Barcelona concert would be held there, he was greeted with howls of derision from what he calls the ‘simple minds’ of those who had taken Tárrega’s opinion at its face value.

‘Llobet thought that I had lost my mind. But I made the experiment in this way. I told the manager of the hall, “Go throughout the hall and tell me if you hear this —” Segovia clicked his fingers several times, not very loudly. ‘He said yes. I said, “All right, now go over there while I do the same thing”. And I noticed that the quality of the sound was exactly the same throughout the hall. The *Palau* was almost full for the concert. The public was happy. And I was more happy.’

The story of how, in Madrid, he had gone into the workshop of Manuel Ramírez has been told often. Ramírez, after hearing him play, put a good guitar into

his hands with the words ‘Pay me without money’. The debt must have been repaid many times. In every concert Andrés Segovia gave, he played the Ramírez guitar, and people knew it was by Ramírez.

Later came Hauser and Fleta. In recent years Segovia seems to have alternated between Ramírez and Fleta to some extent. Was there some particular reason for that?

Fleta, explained Segovia, built his guitars in one of the most humid cities in Spain — Barcelona. The wood absorbed moisture, so that when you took the guitar to places that were drier — he mentioned Scandinavia, North Germany, Canada and the United States, possibly having in mind the intensity of the central heating in some of those places — severe damage could be caused to the guitar as the wood dried out. Ramírez, aided by the drier climate of Madrid, had to a considerable extent contrived to extract the moisture from the wood before manufacture. Segovia loves the Fleta sound — especially for intimacy, he says — but an experience in the United States two years previously, when his Fleta had become unglued, made him turn again to Ramírez.

‘The Ramírez guitar was stronger, more resistant to the heat, to the change of temperature. Two years ago I took a Fleta to the States. Before the concert, in Washington, I had to telephone my wife in Spain and ask her to send me a Ramírez guitar by our airline, Iberia. I received it only a few hours before I was to give the concert.

‘Now there is another inconvenience — the strings. Dupont made the first nylon strings for me in 1947. They were superb. I had them for eight months before changing them. But about three years ago I telephoned Dupont to say that their strings were very bad. They told me that when I came back to New York they were going to send me the head of the plastics section.’

Had he said the head of the head of the plastics section, we would not have been surprised. However, Segovia received him in New York: ‘Then I called Augustine, because Augustine had made the strings. And the head of the plastics department told me that the quality of the nylon they had sent to Augustine was not so good on account of the crisis in petroleum. He told me that as soon as they got out of this crisis they would send me a better quality of nylon. The petroleum crisis — can you imagine!

‘I practice two hours with the same strings, and already they do not sound very good. It is a case of “Very well, I am going to change the second and the first”.’

In spite of that he still used Augustine strings.

‘Many others have taken up the possibilities of making nylon strings. But it is the same situation. I have no obligation with Augustine. I never accept any obligation, either with strings or with the guitar. No, no, never. But I have to admit the truth: that the best strings are Augustine.’

We talked then about his autobiography, the first volume of which appeared in 1976. When were we going to see volume two? It appeared that he had been having trouble with his New York publishers. He now had a new publisher (William Morrow) and everything seemed set for the second volume — and more.

‘Now I am going to begin the publication of my second, third and fourth volumes.’ Originally his publishers had wanted to confine his autobiography to a simple index of concerts and musical success. But, as he said with a chuckle, ‘My life has been not only long but broad’.

‘I enjoy writing very much. But I erase more than I write. My writing is in Spanish. I always look for the word that is just the right one, you know, the one that carries the meaning that I want. I know my language very well, and I like to write well in it. Perhaps I ought to have been a writer.’

We wanted to know why so many of his old records were so hard to get, and whether any arrangements were being made to reissue them — perhaps in

tribute to his 90th birthday in February 1983. He did not know the answer to that. He agreed that his older records sound ‘very nice’ — adding that he never played them himself — but was far more interested in the possibilities of making new recordings. It was not easy to find the time.

‘Last July I was in Japan. I had to give three different programs in Tokyo. That represents about 50 pieces that had to be memorized, practised and performed. I did not have the time to prepare one record, apart from the one that has the little pieces by Schumann, which are very nice on the guitar.’

‘Soon I am going to do the *Fantasia* for piano and guitar by Castelnuovo-Tedesco, written for my former wife, who died. I am going to do it with a friend of mine who is a very good pianist. That will be one side. On the other side — solos.’

He talked about his old friends Falla and Ponce. ‘The sonata by Ponce — the first sonata — is very beautiful. The theme of the *Sonata Clásica* was deliciously put by Ponce. And then the *Sonata Romántica*: I remember the great French composer Paul Dukas, who played the piano. He deciphered the Sonata for piano and told Ponce: “This is good Schubert — but without the divine length”. The Andante is deep poetry. And also the Moment Musical, the Intermezzo. Very nice. Sometimes I play it with the other intermezzo. Because the *Sonata*



Mexicana was the first thing he wrote for me, in Mexico. The first thing Ponce wrote for the guitar was the little serenade, in the *Sonata Mexicana*. But this is, how shall I say, a little shy, a little timid, you know, because it is the first thing he did. When he wrote the sonata with three movements I told him, please put that intermezzo in. But later on he wrote the other one. When Falla and I were together, he wanted to hear this little intermezzo. It is beautiful.

‘Ponce has been magnificent for the guitar. He was a real composer. Everything he did — the preludes he did for me, for instance — was first class. He did not have the least intention of appealing to the public. His aim was to use the poetry of the guitar. He composed one sonata that I have lost, because I lost my entire house in Barcelona at the beginning of the Civil War. I lost many things by Ponce because, you know, he used to send me the original without making a copy. I told him about this many times.

‘I lost seven or eight pieces in this way. A sonatina I asked him to write in homage to Tárrega disappeared — and the worst of it is that the first movement was a very big emotional thing. Great emotion. But still I think that the greatest thing he composed for the guitar was the *Theme, Variations and Fugue on La Folia*.

Segovia played a little joke on Ponce in the matter of the variations. Ponce had sent him the variations, telling him to reject the ones he didn’t like. Segovia wrote to the composer to say that he couldn’t do much with the variations, apart from four or five at the most. Ponce concealed the disappointment he must have felt, but was delighted when Segovia turned up with the printed music, which Schotts had meanwhile published, of all 20 variations together with the fugue.

Segovia had spoken to Falla about Ponce, arousing his curiosity. Falla was to conduct at the Venice Festival, where Segovia was also due to perform. From Geneva Segovia telephoned Falla, who was in Barcelona at the time, offering to pick him up at the frontier and drive him to Venice, departing 15 or 20 days beforehand so that they could enjoy themselves in every place they liked between Barcelona and Venice. On the journey they talked about Ponce.

‘I was speaking about him in a very tender way, because I knew Ponce very well. He was a spirit, you know, who never took a single step for himself. And Falla, after hearing my description, had a great sympathy with Ponce, but still didn’t know anything by him.

‘In Venice I was practising the *Theme, Variations and Fugue* — not all the variations, because the work was too long for the concert I was to give.

While I was practicing, Falla said “What is that?” Further on he said again, “What is that? It’s very good, that”. Finally, when I played the fugue, he said, “What is this? This is very good”. And I said, “Do you know, it is by Ponce”. And he said, “I am very glad to unite the estimation of the music to the sympathy of the person”.’

CC