

# BENJAMIN VERDERY

*Benjamin Verdery was in London to play in the South Bank Summer Music Festival. The director that year was John Williams, who had met Ben in Córdoba and invited him to play in London. Ben's presence in Spain was the outcome of a meeting with Paco Peña in New York. Thus Ben Verdery's first appearance in England was in the Queen Elizabeth Hall before an audience of about 1500 enthusiastic fans of John Williams. Not every guitarist makes his London debut in such heady circumstances, but Ben, something of an extrovert and given to intense enthusiasms, took it all in his stride.*

*He was invited some years later to the Classical Guitar Festival of Great Britain at West Dean, a large and sprawling millionaire's mansion in the heart of the West Sussex countryside, and it was there that we had our second interview. His work with the ensemble in that week's course was astonishing; some fairly humble amateur players found themselves playing quite extraordinary music — Ben's own *Some Towns and Cities*, for instance — with an enthusiasm and a precision they would scarcely have believed had you told them about it beforehand. Ben's particular brand of energy is very infectious. Leo Brouwer called him 'A fantastic creative mind in a young country', and you can see why.*

*To go back to that first appearance in London, Ben played Bach's 6th Cello Suite to a QEH audience that was still shuffling in noisily. Once seated, they applauded vigorously every time Ben paused between Bach's dances. It was enough to break the concentration of many a seasoned guitarist, but Ben did not seem to be aware of it.*

**Benjamin Verdery:** In an odd way you don't really notice it. I was so excited to be playing — my adrenaline was up, of course — that I didn't take note. Towards the end of the Suite was the only time I was a little bit disturbed by the clapping. Because it breaks the flow. But basically it doesn't bother me. I've played in a number of different circumstances where a lot of things have happened, so really it wasn't anything absolutely extraordinary.

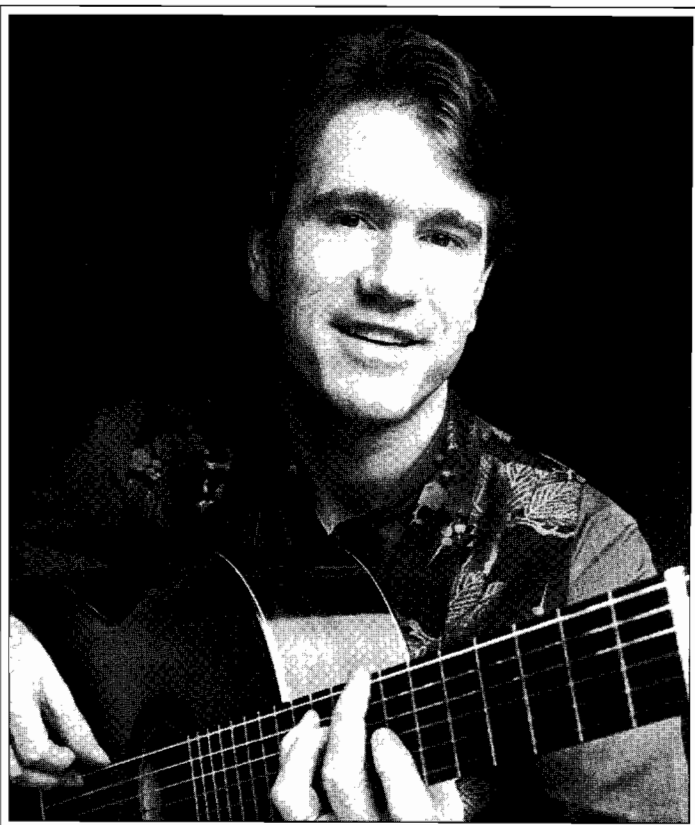
I will say that it was tremendously exciting to play Bach to a full house. And of course to be billed with John and Paco in the same concert was a tremendous honor. Overwhelming.

*Have you opened a concert with the Bach before?*  
No. It occurred to me two days before the concert. Usually it's about third in the program, finishing the first half. But I love the music so much, and I thought, well, in a way it's fine for me. Perhaps for the audience it might have been a little much to start with a major piece, so grand. But given the situation, I think it was the best way to do it.

You know how these things happen. To have started with a shorter piece might have implied more of a solo concert, and I was really there only to do one piece. There was an idea that I might split it; play a little Bach and then something else. But we decided it was best to put one whole work on. A substantial work.

*What sort of problems did you have to overcome when you transcribed the 6th Cello Suite?*

My feeling about Bach and the guitar is that almost everything works. So I really don't give myself any great credit for having transcribed it. Bach is so easily transcribable on any instrument. Anthony Newman once said that Bach sounds great on tuned bathtubs! His music is so universal. I've heard a steel band playing the 3rd Brandenburg. It sounded unbelievably good.



The same applies to the guitar. Especially. Granted, the Cello Suite is a little thinner in texture, so that one would want to add more bass notes. The 6th Suite didn't have much added at all; It's quite sparse. I think I might have done a little more than I did, especially in movements like the Allemande. But I still like the idea of 'implied harmony', not always spelling out the harmony but leaving it implied, as Bach did. And I think that perhaps in order to make it work for the guitar — that is, with so much single-line playing — one should pick the tempi up just a little bit. Of course I listen to cellos playing it, but it's a different instrument. One should consider that it's a guitar, and that's one of the things I did consider in terms of tempi.

To go back to my original feeling, that almost any piece by Bach lends itself to the guitar. It doesn't take any great musical mind to do it. That's why I don't think I'll publish it. A player who's good enough to play that music will want to do his own arrangement anyway.

*Some arrangements try to retain the feeling of a cello. A critic in The Times said it was best to forget the original instrument. Would you agree?*

Yes, though not totally. I do think cellistically in certain spots, but I'm playing a guitar. Not a cello. Not a harpsichord. I probably approach the Suite more from the harpsichord point of view than that of a cello — you know, in the ornaments and things. We can learn, certainly, from listening to the cello. But I have six strings, not four.

*After all, Bach must have been the first person to discover that his music worked on other instruments.*

Absolutely! It's no secret, now, that you can play Bach on anything. And certainly on a guitar. Bach sounds particularly great on the guitar.

The best definition of a good transcription is that it doesn't sound like a transcription. It sounds like a guitar piece, a flute piece or whatever.

I've heard thousands of transcriptions where the playing is remarkable. It's great that it was done, but to me it sounds ultimately too difficult. It just doesn't sound natural enough. I've done that myself, especially with flute and guitar, because my wife (Rie Schmidt) is a flutist. I've been excited about a piece and had all the best intentions, but after playing it a few times I can see that it just doesn't make it. It's the same with arrangements. You don't really know until you've done it and played it through at tempo.

It's so exciting when you do a transcription that really works. A friend of mine, Arthur Levering, a very good arranger, did a transcription of Poulenc's *Mouvement Perpetuelle* for flute and guitar, and it's a gem. I think it'll stay in the flute and guitar repertoire for ever.

Gerald Garcia is another. I've just heard his arrangements of Chinese folk songs for guitar and violin — unbelievable! It's not an easy thing to do. I'm a beginner in that area. But it's a big thrill when it works out well.

Transcriptions have been done throughout musical history. Not just the Baroque era but right up to Ravel. We're stuck in a pure era just now: don't do this, and don't do that!

*I imagine that one of the things you find attractive about John Williams is his readiness to have a go at almost anything that comes along — whether it works or not.*

Absolutely! I really cannot applaud that enough. It's the true pioneering spirit. It's wonderful to see.

*Would you say it represented a spreading outwards rather than a growing upwards?*

No, I wouldn't agree with that. When he gets it right it's fantastic.

We're all spreading out in order to go up. The idea is to go up — or to go wherever. To broaden our own horizons in some way and to make music playable. Again, it's what you choose to do. It's what he chooses to do, and if you don't like it you don't come to the concert.

*In an earlier interview you talked about 'stretching' the instrument. How many ways are there in which that can be done? Transcription is obviously one...*

Doing what John Williams and Peter Hurford did with the organ is another. Playing with a variety of different instruments, and in different contexts. Stretching the instrument in terms of new music; having composers write for you whom you respect, good composers who have written for other instruments, not just the guitar, and who have a real knowledge of how all instruments work. That's what I mean.

It's really up to the individual. What I love about the world is that there are so many diverse people in it. Everybody does something different. And that's what I love about the guitar. It's an instrument where there are so many different experts in so many different

fields. There's no other instrument like that. Flamenco guitar, classical guitar, blues guitar, rock guitar, country, flat-picking, bluegrass — it's incredible! And you'll find real virtuosi in all of those fields.

*In addition to your many and varied activities as performer and teacher, you are the Artistic Director of the D'Addario Foundation for the Performing Arts.*

*Will you, briefly, say something about the Foundation's work?*

Right now it's just a concert series, in San Francisco and New York. Hopefully we'll perhaps get another city in there. Thus far it's been guitar concerts with different types of artists. We hope to broaden that by bringing in even more. This year I was really enthused with Paco Peña's festival in Córdoba. I've played there twice — and that's another great honor. Paco has an incredibly broad mind, in his musical tastes and in the guitar. This year (1984) he had a number of different types of guitar playing there, like Eduardo Falú, the great Argentinian folk singer, and the group Inti Illimani. I'm not all that familiar with that kind of music, so I would like to see that happening in our series as well.

We try to present a spectrum of different kinds of guitarist. In New York there are so many guitarists of wonderful playing ability, and we do try to put on one or two local artists a year. It's terribly exciting to be involved with it. And it gives a lot of guitarists an opportunity to play in New York. Like London, it's difficult to put on a concert there — and very expensive.

This year we have a really exciting series. Paco Peña, of course. The Assad Brothers — an incredible guitar duo. David Leisner is going to play, a great American guitarist. Each year we like to do a debut, and this year we decided to present the winner of the Toronto guitar competition.

*Touching on attitudes and postures for the moment, your style is a very relaxed one...*

I did study Alexander Technique. Not long enough! It was absolutely wonderful, the whole business of neck-free. I studied because my playing was tense, so tense that I could barely play. This is what usually happens when we need a change in our life; we get to the bottom before we can pick ourselves up again.

This teacher introduced me to the guitar cushion, which I really love. Aesthetically it doesn't look like much, but it sure feels great to have both feet on the ground. It instantly puts your back straight. Though of

course I do look to my left.

For guitarists, tension is the number one problem. I'm continually aware of that. Some people are really so relaxed, it's incredible. John Williams, for instance; I've never seen anyone so relaxed. I don't know if it's natural or what, but it certainly seems natural.

There was a time when I had to make a conscious effort to keep my back straight and to breathe well. I think we forget how to breathe when we're holding a guitar. The guitar cushion has helped. And Alexander Technique. A terrific amount of tension is created from the neck and shoulders area. Even when we sit at a table. I'll be sitting and talking to someone. And all of a sudden I'll let down my shoulders, which have been up and tense. I can't believe that all day long I've been carrying around this tension.

And that applies to the instrument. You've got to realize that it's a very physical activity when you pick up an instrument. If you don't approach it in a delicate way you can strain yourself. That's why we have people with tendinitis and backaches. So it can't but help to improve your playing and make you realize how little effort is needed to play the guitar. I'm continuously aware that I barely have to press down — if it's a good instrument, not one with the strings ten feet off the fingerboard. You don't have to press down so hard. And you realize that you're not going to get a lot of extra volume by digging down into the strings. All that has to do with an attitude of posture. I feel very strongly about it. I don't think teachers talk about it enough.

*You rest the instrument on the seat — as Sor is said to have rested it on the table.*

I like to do it; it seems sort of natural. And when you have a wooden chair, it's stupendous — because it picks up the vibrations. But it's comfortable that way. And I'm particularly keen on having both feet on the ground.

Obviously the footstool has worked for thousands of great players. For me, it didn't seem so great. And I can use the knee cushion in trains and planes — the footstool doesn't make a very good pillow!

All we have to realize, especially in teaching, is that everybody has a different set of hands. My theory has always been 'a right ball park', as we say in America, meaning that if you're in the ball park you're basically in the right direction. The best way to approach the

instrument is, what is natural for that person? What feels correct, if you can use such a word — since it's not very natural to play an instrument to begin with. You can work from there. And then everybody's going to come up with their own ideas. There are a million different ways of looking at it. But you start off with basic principles and work from those, being very sensitive to the fact that every person is different.

*Do you enjoy teaching?*

I love teaching. I'm teaching ensemble at Manhattan guitar and ensemble, chamber music. It's a lot of fun. Guitar duos, guitar and flute, whatever. Also the State University of New York at Purchase, which is where I went to school. And Queen's. So it sounds impressive, but I actually just have two from here, four from there — you know. I don't actually go to each college. In fact one of my students saw me at a concert and said 'I didn't know you wore shoes' — because I always teach in bare feet. But I really do love to teach.

*Will you say something about your guitar and flute duo with your wife, Rie Schmidt?*

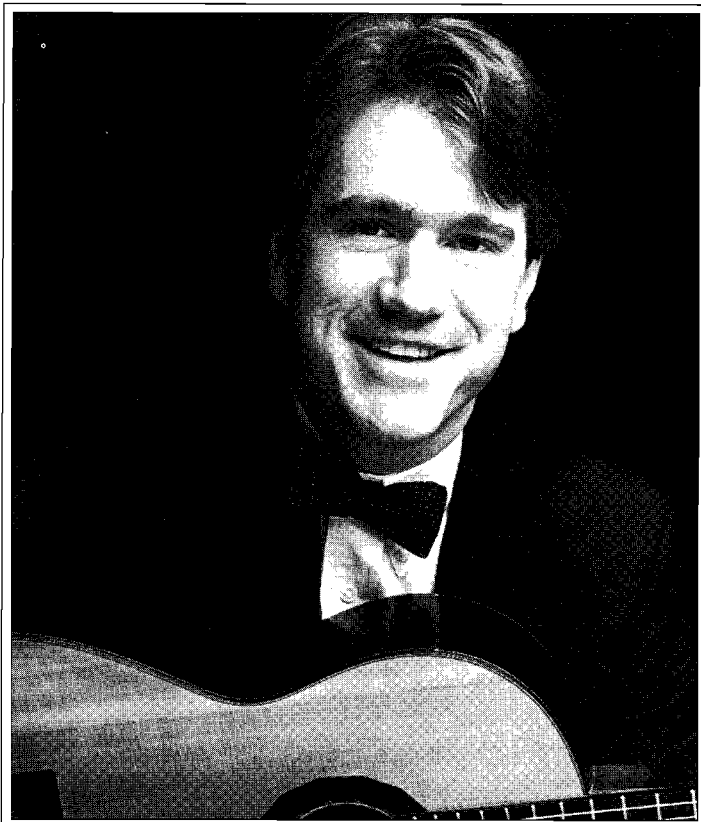
We've just finished a recording, which should be out soon. French music, mostly transcriptions. We're really excited about that. I hope to finish a recording of a C. P. E. Bach concerto I arranged. He wrote the same concerto for flute, cello and harpsichord. So I stole a bit from this, a little from that, and I think it makes a really neat guitar concerto. It sounds to me as a guitar concerto should sound.

I haven't decided what other concerto I'm going to put on the recording. Some baroque concerto. With the Bach recording already issued, I originally had the idea of a concerto on one side and solo guitar on the other, but the company wasn't so pleased about that; they wanted just the solos.

I feel very lucky that I've had the opportunity to do so much performing. Each time you play you learn something new. Each concert for me has been a learning experience — after which you go home and think about what really went on. If you're aware, you should be able to remember.

I still feel young in concert experience. I feel it's something you can only improve at by doing it a million times and getting more relaxed — so that you can do in public what you can do so well in your own living room.

It's quite serious to get up and play with other musi-



*Photo by Gary Wheeler*

icians. Of course you respect them musically, but it really is great when you get along. If you don't have a wonderful rapport, it shows in the music. So it's great to play music with my wife — and rehearsal times are ideal. We've really grown as a duo. She's taught me a tremendous amount — she's a better musician than I am. She has an active life in New York. She does a lot of freelance work. She also has a flute quartet, which is a wild sound. Wild! A lot of the pieces sound like the Wizard of Oz. She also plays solo recitals, and is active in a couple of chamber music groups. We're both involved in a contemporary music group, which gives me a chance to play chamber music.

So we can't always travel together. It's difficult, that aspect of being a musician. It's wonderful to play everywhere, but you can get lonely. I think everybody does. It's a funny thing to be the centre of attention for one evening among very nice people — yet you're so lonely. You're having a great time, but.... The funny thing is, when you leave them, you're always sad because you've made really nice friends. You know you're not going to see them again for some time, maybe never again. So both parties become very attentive to each other and don't take each other for granted for a minute. You learn a tremendous amount about that person. It's fascinating. Especially when you get to see how different countries work.

I would love to go to Japan. Especially because my wife is half-Japanese. I have a tremendous interest in Eastern religion and art. And I'd love to go to China. And Africa — but I don't know most of Europe yet.

I'm crazy about England, believe it or not. I guess I'm something of an Anglophile, though I've only been to London. Today I bought the History of England, which I plan to read so that when I come back in March I can go to Westminster Abbey and I'll know something. But there's something about this country I'm crazy about. But I'm also crazy about every place I've ever been. I just recently fell in love with Spain. Last year, in Spain with Paco. I got to see Córdoba and Sevilla and Cadiz — all those places that Albéniz wrote about. And I didn't particularly like Spanish music on the guitar. It was Bach and contemporary music for me, but when I went to Spain and heard Paco and all these people playing.... Guitars — they grow on trees! Every street you go down....

I'm crazy about America too. This year I got the opportunity to travel to little towns there. You think, oh, I'm going to Syllacauga, Alabama — who knows where that is? Well, it was the greatest thing in my life. I played outside on someone's porch, which was like a ranch — like in one of those American films like *Bonanza*, with horses and cattle. And they invited all the local townspeople. We're talking about people who'd probably never heard a classical guitar, not to mention classical music. They brought a 'cover supper' — everybody brings a plate. So you had these huge tables, with all this home-made food, with about 150 people. It was just incredible to be there.

In these little pockets of America, these little states with different mentalities and ideas, every audience is important. Of course, London has that — what New York means to a Londoner, London means to me. But I realized that you have to play your best everywhere, whether it's for schoolchildren at 8 o'clock in the morning or the Queen Elizabeth Hall at 7.45 in the evening. You really have to, as a communicator. People know it if you don't prepare well. You're not doing your job.

Concert musicians sometimes forget. You travel so much, you walk onto the stage, you play your concert, and everybody says how great you are, how well you played — hopefully, that's what happens. And then you leave. Maybe you spend the night at somebody's house. But you forget that people put that concert on; you forget the work it took. Going to a relatively small town like Syllacauga, I saw how people put themselves out. It's only because people love music that they bring you there. You know what I mean? We take

it for granted that there's a hall, that there are people who run the place, put out the publicity and generally put a lot of time into it. I think it's important for the artist to realize that. It gives you more of a sense of responsibility.

*Would this sense of responsibility lead you to tailor a program to suit a particular audience?*

That can be a very tricky point. In a case like Syllacauga, I think it was important to play tuneful pieces that were close to what they were familiar with. You've got to draw your audience in. The way we were talking earlier, about perhaps opening with a shorter piece before playing the Bach — it's the same thing. You have to get people accustomed to the sound.

In that way you do have to tailor, but when it's a concert series and I'm asked to play, I can say pretty safely that I've never played anything I didn't really love, whether it was contemporary or not. And I usually play two contemporary pieces in every program. Now I realize there are a lot of mediocre contemporary pieces. The main point is to love the music — that's the bottom line.

I get a kick out of playing music by my friends. I'd much rather play a Grade B piece by a friend than a Grade A piece from the 19th century. Again, when it comes to a concert series I think it's important to play what you really feel. The number of times I've been told 'Don't play any contemporary music'! And sometimes I've been told 'Don't play any Bach'.

People sometimes forget about Bach. For me, listening to Bach is not easy. It's my favorite music, but I can't say I've got it the first time I hear a fugue. I'm still hearing voices left and right from the fugue from the *Prelude, Fugue and Allegro*. Each time I hear it I hear something I didn't hear before. We assume that because it's Bach or old that it's immediately accessible. It's just as hard to listen to as a lot of contemporary music.

*How would you categorize yourself? What do you call yourself?*

I don't know. What *do* I call myself? A musician who plays the guitar. A musician who has chosen the guitar as his mode of expression.

I feel tremendously lucky to be able to play even remotely well. I'm always unbelievably amazed when I watch anyone play an instrument. I don't know how they do it. So I feel really lucky to be able to do it and actually make a living from it. I wake up every morning and say, 'Don't take this away from me'.

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