

# CHRISTOPHER PARKENING

*The American guitarist Christopher Parkening has the reputation of having made more money out of his recordings than any other guitarist in history. I do know how true that is, nor does it seem very important when we are talking about music. He has certainly been playing for a long time, coming to the notice of audiences back in the 1960s, when he was still in his teens.*

*His talent was noticed by Segovia, whose masterclasses he attended. That certainly helped in the launching of his conspicuously successful career. Another important influence was Gregor Piatigorsky, the cellist, with whom he studied interpretation.*

*Christopher Parkening's association with Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco was also fruitful. He studied the Concerto in D with the composer, and Castelnuovo-Tedesco was so impressed that he dedicated his second guitar concerto to him. He also wrote one of his 'greetings cards' for the young guitarist: Ballatella, like others in the series, is based on the letters of the dedicatee's name.*

*We met at a hotel in the West End of London. Christopher Parkening was friendly and courteous, and I only wish I had been able to talk with him about fly fishing, which is his passion. He learned the art on the waters of the rivers Test and Itchen, in Hampshire, two of the great trout rivers in Europe when they are not being polluted by some industrial organization.*

*His concert on the South Bank was clearly designed to please the large numbers of record-buying fans who flocked into the Queen Elizabeth Hall. They knew him through his recordings; they had helped to pay for the ranch in Montana, the ample time devoted to fly fishing, the lifestyle of a millionaire of refined tastes, and it was only right that they should be rewarded. The fact remains that more than 30 times that evening the audience put its hands together and applauded. Nice work if a guitarist can get it! With an average of less than three minutes for each piece followed by sustained applause, the workload can scarcely be said to be onerous.*

*There was, of course, much to applaud; Parkening is a very good and a very serious guitarist when he is not handing out lollipops to his admirers, and many of his recordings prove it. Interestingly, there was a time when he more or less gave up giving concerts; he did not need the money, and fly fishing was demanding most of his attention and effort. Why he changed his mind and came back to the concert platform formed one of the topics of our discussion.*

*Two of the most important influences in your career have been Andrés Segovia and Castelnuovo-Tedesco. Did you study composition with Castelnuovo, or was it interpretation only?*

**Christopher Parkening:** I studied the interpretation of his first Guitar Concerto with him, and was able to premiere his second guitar concerto (*dedicated to Parkening*) in Los Angeles. We formed a long-time friendship, so I was very grateful for being able to know such a fine composer. Through that friendship I met Segovia, and was able to study with him on scholarship at the University of California at Berkeley in 1964, at his first United States masterclass.

*The second concerto is the C major, isn't it? How is it we never seem to hear it these days?*

The first concerto is probably the more popular of the two. The second is a very lovely piece, however, especially the second movement, which is a set of variations. Of course, the Rodrigo concertos are perhaps the most well known and more often played. I've just played, this last Thursday night, the *Fantasia para un Gentilhombre* by Rodrigo, with the Los



Angeles Philharmonic in the Hollywood Bowl. That's a large place to play the guitar outside!

I have over 70 concerts this season. From here I'll go to Berlin and several other places in Germany, to Vienna and then to Madrid. But principally my tour will take me around the United States and Canada. My European tour begins on Saturday at Windsor, then I play on Monday night at the Queen Elizabeth Hall. I'm enjoying being over here; it's been such a long time.

*Have you noticed many changes?*

It's probably a little more crowded than I remember it. But that seems to be the case in most cities. I was born and raised in southern California, and I've gradually noticed the increase in population there. It's a rare day when you drive on the freeway there and you don't have to stop because of the traffic. You used to be able to sail through, apart from the rush hour.

*You have a place in Montana — there must be plenty of wide open spaces there still?*

You know, I actually live in southern California, though we have a ranch in Montana, where my wife and I try and spend two or three months in the summer. I have quite a love of fly fishing for trout — which, by the way, was developed in this country of yours, on the rivers Test and Itchen. One of the reasons we spend part of the summer in Montana is because of the fine trout fishing there. Of course, the beautiful scenery, the mountains — it's nice to breathe some clean air away from Los Angeles.

*Like playing the guitar, fly fishing must be a very demanding skill.*

It is. It requires a good technique. I used to compete in tournament casting. My dad and I competed in the western United States Championship in casting. It requires a fairly decent technique in order to be effective. Wrists, timing, a good eye, and proper equipment — and then, as far as success in fishing goes, it's knowing the water and knowing where the trout lie. I doubt that your readers would be very interested. Is it a fishing magazine now?

*Perhaps I'll send this interview to the Angling Times. But I wondered if the two techniques, guitar and fly fishing, were of mutual assistance in any way?*

Well, I think probably with any sport there is a relationship at least with the discipline that one needs to get good at it.

*The other thing I wanted to mention is your religious involvement. There seems to be a movement back towards a deeper spiritual attitude to music among some guitarists, of whom Thomas Heck is one notable example. Have you noticed any trend there? And can you define your own attitudes and beliefs as they relate to guitar music?*

You know, I've always been greatly influenced by the music of Bach. He said, and I'm quoting, that the aim and final reason of all music is none else but the glory of God. And as you know, he wrote at the end of many of his compositions the initials S.D.G. — Solo Dei Gloria, for God alone the glory.

I became a Christian about eight years ago, and it had a great effect on my guitar playing. In my twenties I played over 90 concerts a year, actually with the idea of retiring at an early age — which I pretty much did. I took several years' sabbatical, you might say; I had everything that I thought would make me happy; I had my ranch with the trout streams on it; my wife raised horses, and I didn't need to make any more money playing the guitar. So for a few years I stopped playing. Then, when I became a Christian, I realized that there was a better purpose for playing the guitar, for me, than just to use the instrument to make money to buy what you want. Consequently, when I became a Christian, I read in the Bible where it said, whatever you do, do all for the glory of God.

I only knew two things: one was fly fishing for trout, and the other was playing the guitar. It seemed that the second of these was the better option to pursue. So I started playing and recording again, but this time with really a whole different motive. It's given me a quite a bit more fulfillment in my life, and is really the major reason why I'm playing the guitar now. I feel I would like to use whatever ability or talent the Lord has given me to try and give Him glory and give some pleasure, hopefully, to the audience.

*One of your records is called Sacred Music for the Guitar, or 'Simple Gifts'. Is sacred music a very rich area for the guitar?*

I found that some of the most beautiful pieces ever written were written expressly for the glory of God. I don't think that because you're playing sacred music it has to be inferior to secular music. However, I also don't believe that it's necessary to play only sacred music in order to fulfil your purpose. So I'm doing a variety of music. For instance, the program I'm doing at the Queen Elizabeth Hall will be all secular music, apart from perhaps an encore I might play from that

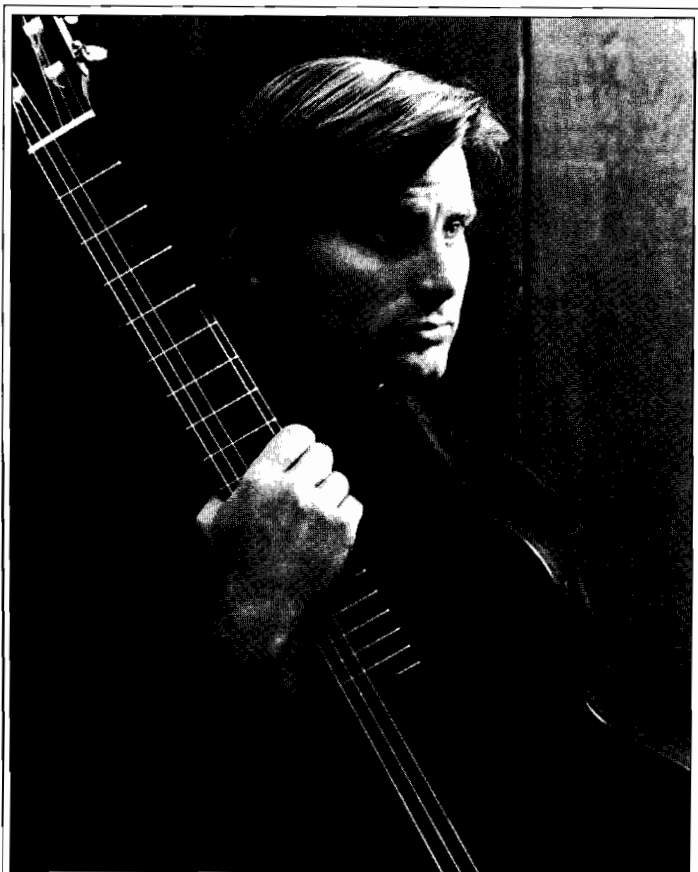
Simple Gifts album. Then there's another album I did with the soprano Kathleen Battle. She has a beautiful voice, very high and clear and pure-sounding; it's a nice blend with the guitar, I think.

You have no shortage of great guitarists here in England. Julian Bream and John Williams — my goodness! I saw John Williams when he was in Los Angeles; I was in a guitar series with him and Julian Bream and Segovia. I was on tour when Julian Bream was in California, so I wasn't able to see him, but I was able to have lunch with John Williams, and a nice chat. Such a great player!

*Of course you met Segovia again during his recent masterclass at USC....*

There was a panel, with some of Segovia's older students, like Oscar Ghiglia and Michael Lorimer. As a matter of fact, they asked us some questions which were related basically to what we felt when we were studying with Segovia. The Maestro was sitting in the first row, so he was hearing all of our comments. He seemed to be pleased and also amused by them.

I was able to have dinner with Segovia, and got a chance to spend some time with him. He's very well, I'm happy to say, and just as witty as ever. He was very sharp in the masterclass in California; his principal criticism was the interpretation of the music, and



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he would go over and over phrases with students to improve their interpretation. When I asked him what he felt about the class, he gave an interesting comment. He said that all the students, and I believe there were twelve performing students, had more than enough technique, but only one had music in her heart. I found that an interesting comment, that out of that whole class of twelve only one had that innate musicianship which he was looking for.

*These days, with teaching so much improved, we should take technique for granted.*

I agree. The standard of guitar playing has come up so much.

*So what do we need to make us all better musicians? Can we do it ourselves?*

You know, I had a very wonderful beginning in regard to that. When I went to the University of Southern California, there was no guitar department per se, so in order for me to finish my degree I had to study interpretation. Heifetz was there, and Piatigorsky was there. So my IBM card read 'cello major'. But I didn't play a note on the cello!

So I was forced into studying interpretation of the music with these fine musicians, which was actually, as I found out later, a real advantage. Because they would look at the music unbiased from the standpoint of the problems that a guitarist might face. They would just strictly look at the music. So it was a real blessing for me to be able to work with such great musicians early on. Of course, I also studied privately with Segovia every time he came to Los Angeles, along with Castelnuovo-Tedesco — privately — and the interpretation of his music. And with Joaquín Rodrigo when I performed his two guitar concertos throughout Japan. Studying with him was also a great experience.

*So one of the answers would be for a guitarist to seek out good musicians, irrespective of whether they play the guitar or not?*

I would certainly recommend that.

*On the other hand, it's rare for a violinist to go and study with a pianist. I suppose there are more good teachers for those instruments.*

That might be true. There's certainly a wider range of excellent musicians to choose from. I worked with a violinist, a cellist, a pianist and a harpsichordist. In every case, they enjoyed working with the guitar. It was kind of a break for them, from always being near

their own instrument, and perhaps they enjoyed the change from routine.

*You and others who were at the USC masterclass have confirmed that Segovia's wits are as sharp as ever. Some people — quite unreasonably — tend to associate him with a beautiful tone but not much else. But Eliot Fisk said that the qualities about Segovia that impressed him, even at the age of 90, were his 'passion, expressivity and daring'. Is that your experience of him too?*

I would totally agree with everything he said. Segovia has that magical combination of technique and the sound which goes with technique, innate musicianship, that artistic instinct which he has in combination with his charisma on stage. Put all that together, and it makes for a great artist, to whom we are all certainly indebted. I admire him so much.

It's amazing to me, every time I see Segovia walk on stage, that he can play so well. He's just an amazing person all the way round. I really don't think that anyone will ever do for the guitar what Segovia has done for it. I'm very grateful to have had the opportunity to work with him, certainly in his prime.

*Do you play much contemporary music?*

Not too much. I guess I would have to say that I am a little old-fashioned, in that I favor more lyric and beautiful music as opposed to strictly atonal music. If the music moves my heart, I guess that's what's important to me — something that is beautiful. Then I feel that I have a chance of interpreting it correctly. I have to love a piece of music.

*I know that Bach is preeminent among the composers whose music you play. Who are some of the others who have a special significance for you?*

Oh gee, there are so many that I enjoy. The program on Monday night will rely heavily on Spanish music, principally because I'm doing an all-Spanish album. But I love the music of John Dowland, and certainly individual pieces by certain composers will take my fancy.

*When you play concertos, you amplify, presumably?*

As I mentioned to you, I played for over 11,000 people in the Hollywood Bowl last Thursday night, and of course in an outdoors amphitheater, especially with an orchestra, it's mandatory to amplify the guitar. But if you have a good microphone and a good sound man who knows what a good quality of sound is, and what a proper balance between orchestra and guitar is,

then I think it's possible to create a nice experience for the listener.

As a matter of fact, the reviewers were saying about the concert that the Hollywood Bowl was transformed into a kind of cozy living room. They all mentioned the fact that the sound was excellent. That, of course, is due to my sound man in Los Angeles. With orchestra, I think it's mandatory: a discreet amount of amplification, hopefully something that sounds quite natural and preserves the beautiful sound of the instrument.

In halls of 1,000 to 1,500 seats with good acoustics, I will generally not use a microphone when playing solo, but in halls with 3,000 seats it's necessary. I talked to John Williams about the type of microphone he used, and ended up by purchasing one myself. I carry that with me wherever I go, then at least I'm feeding the house system with a decent sound, a good signal.

*Most guitarists have to be content with using the house system with all its imperfections. That doesn't do the guitar any good in the long run, does it?*

If you're not able to take your own personal sound man with you, the next best option is to have friends who can advise. I have friends in each major city, and I pretty much trust their ear. So I'll invite them to the rehearsal, and they will work with the house sound technician, getting a nice balance and a good quality sound. And of course I'll take my own microphone, so that's half the battle.

*So the least a travelling guitarist can do is to invest in a good microphone?*

At least that — and carry it with them. At least feed the system a nice sound. It would be awkward, at least for me, to carry around my own amplifier and speakers and mixing console and all that.

*Segovia can still attract several thousand people to a concert hall at the age of 93. Have you any ambition to play as long as that?*

I'll play as long as the good Lord thinks I'm able. I can't envisage myself living that long, frankly.

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