

# DAVID RUSSELL

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*It was the late 1970s. Coming down from my study for a mid-morning cup of coffee, I switched on BBC Radio 3. A guitarist was playing, Normally I would have turned up the volume and gone into the kitchen. This time I stayed until the end, not wanting to miss a note, eager to hear who the player was. It was neither Segovia nor Bream, whose respective styles I knew well enough. It was not John Williams, whose playing I had also come to recognize. I ran through the list of possibles. Diaz. Bonell. Parkening. Lagoya. Behrend. Rey de la Torre. No one I knew of fitted the bill. There was something unique about this player's graceful but sinewy melodic line, so finely crafted, leading you on to expect more — and then giving it to you. I have never been in such a state of suspense when listening to a piece of guitar music. As in a story by Raymond Chandler, I wanted to know what happened next.*

*The name meant nothing to me. David Russell. To an Englishman, it sounded very ordinary. But I remembered it, and when he came to play at a community centre not far from my house in north London, I naturally went to hear him. There were just twelve people in the audience. David's partner on that occasion was an excellent double-bass player, Dennis Milne, whose promising career was not long afterwards brutally terminated in a tragic car crash.*

*David's solos fulfilled expectation. Youthful vigor, a singer's way with a melody, a perfect balance across the six strings, a seductive sound, and above all this rhythmical strength, convinced me that here was a very special talent.*

*His apartment in Golders Green was only a mile or two from my house, and I became a frequent visitor. I would often go by bicycle, avoiding the frantic traffic in Lyttelton Way as far as I could, arriving slightly out of breath (there were three flights of stairs to be negotiated before you reached David's rooftop flat). 'Listen to this,' David would say as he began to play his latest discovery. He would not be sitting down in a formal posture, but standing and resting a foot on a chair, or perhaps squatting or sitting cross-legged on the floor. David's athletic body can adapt itself with ease to virtually any playing position the circumstances require.*

*Thus I heard, among other things, the Carnival of Venice Variations by Tárrega. Not great music, but certainly great entertainment. 'Will you play it in public?' I asked, recovering from my astonished wonderment. 'I don't know,' he replied. But he did, and it was a success.*

*After our first interview, we went up to the roof for some photography. One of the shots turned out exceptionally well. Long blond hair blown by the wind, an engaging grin, guitar held casually, he looked the very picture of a young and vibrant artist, open and friendly, offering his talent to the world with the hope of youth but also with the confidence that comes with a sense of one's own ability. That picture was reproduced over and over again in guitar magazines, newspapers and record sleeves.*

*Time passed. David became internationally celebrated, and other photographers took over. But I was quite pleased with that early photograph. And when I count up the hours I have spent listening to David's magnetic playing, I realize how fortunate I am to know so remarkable an artist.*

*My first question concerned his ability to give his audiences something to hold on to at every level. Even if they knew nothing about the guitar, there was always something to attract them; yet at the highest level the sternest critic could be satisfied. No one felt left behind, or too far ahead.*

**David Russell:** I think there is a basic kind of musicality. In some ways a simple tune is musically the most powerful or the most intimate, the part that can get past all the intellectual criticism, the equipment that is there to analyze and to tear apart. When you get past that, you come to the depth, a deep subconscious feeling.

There are two ways past it. One is through complete simplicity, where there's nothing to criticize anyway and all a player has to do is produce a beautiful line with good tone, simple notes that in theory a beginner could play. That is one route to a beautiful musical

experience, which may be technically difficult or it may be technically easy.

The other way is through the overwhelming of the analytical and critical faculties by means of sheer excellence in technique and style. I find that experience in some of Bach's complex fugal works, where at first the mind is analyzing what's going on. Eventually it blows the mind, because you can't hang on to all the strings and keep track of what's going on. And then I start to get a musical experience.

Sometimes my analytical apparatus is overwhelmed because the player I'm listening to is playing so well. Or the piece is so simple and straight that my analytical abilities have nothing to do. For example, the performer can leave a space of silence, and you can feel the whole hall listening to that silence, no coughs, no nothing, for maybe just a second or two. That is something slightly more magical than normal everyday life.

Those are the sort of things that my analytical abilities have nothing to do with. Yet there can be a magical feeling. And sometimes, in my own concerts, when I reach the end of a movement, there's that little space of time before the next begins — and that can seem almost the whole reason for that movement. Or within a piece you sometimes have a huge pile of notes and you think, 'This is really exciting', but it's at the end of it, moving into another passage, that you have the most beautiful bit. The three minutes of excitement before existed only for that moment of transition.

They're all ways of getting past the analytical. That's why people write new languages or extend the language. Because if you work too much within the language, then everyone begins to understand too much what's going on.

*It seems that too much understanding can drive out the magic. How does that apply to modern music?*  
I find that a lot of modern music tends to be an intellectual endeavor, especially at first. After a while I'm able to achieve a certain, for want of a better word, spiritual feeling through certain kinds of music. One of the problems is that nowadays there's a lack of tradition, or the tradition's not used so much. So composers and groups of composers are trying to invent their own language rather than extend the existing language. Originality and 'differentness' have become such important things for this century. Because historically some people were the first to do something, they are now considered to be the best or the most important, rather than those who developed it or who used it best.

Many composers are trying to do original things now. Sometimes it's very good; sometimes it just means there's another language to learn before you can get any real musical feeling out of it. If you relate it to poetry, someone may speak rudimentary English well, but they're not going to get a really deep feeling out of poetry until it's virtually their own language. And they're not going to be able to give a good recital of



Courtesy Classical Guitar Magazine

poetry until they really do understand it.

I think the same thing happens with a lot of music. If the language is difficult, new or whatever, then it's difficult to give a good performance. We've got to bash away at it and work really hard, trying to understand it in order to give a good performance. So I don't want to rush through all the modern repertoire until I start enjoying it — and I don't want to play anything that I don't enjoy. I would like to have the feeling that every time I'm playing something, it's my favorite piece — at that moment.

Having said all that, I play modern music most weeks. Sometimes I enjoy it, sometimes I don't. Sometimes it's not the sort of thing I want to do. I find it easier to cope with when I'm feeling settled and comfortable. When I'm not particularly settled, I prefer soothing or abstract pieces in a language I understand very well, like the baroque and the later classical.

But as guitarists we have to be pretty omnivorous and play a bit of everything, so I don't want to restrict myself. I don't go to modern music concerts for personal enjoyment — more for instruction. It's something I want to know more about.

I was reading your interview with John Williams, who said that it was funny that all his playing of modern music had gone unnoticed. It's the same with me — I

play it every week. But I play a whole lot of other stuff as well, and that tends to be the most memorable part of the concert.

I have to play at many concerts. I have to give musical pleasure to many different kinds of audience, so it's necessary to find out what people enjoy as well as what I think I should be playing. I don't teach anywhere, I make my living out of doing concerts. I need people to come to my concerts. I don't want to play Villa-Lobos and Torroba all the time, yet I know hundreds of people in many places would enjoy that program. On the other hand, I don't want to play hundreds of pieces that are not going to attract anybody. Because nobody would come to my concerts, in which case I'd have to take on some teaching position somewhere. I'd also probably have to see a psychiatrist! For that reason I prefer to play accessible music. Maybe one or two pieces that are not so modern, which anyone can enjoy, and a few pieces of modern music as long as they're well placed in the program and well chosen. An accessible program of not very well-known music. I spend a lot of time searching around.

There used to be a saying that the problem with the guitar is its repertoire. I don't think that's the problem with the guitar; I think it's a problem with guitarists. It's their repertoire, the repertoire that has been played, not the existing repertoire. There's a lot more to be played. And there is still a lot in the modern field that is accessible and has yet to be played.

If I want a really musical experience, I don't usually go to a guitar concert for it. I go to a guitar concert for instruction, out of curiosity, perhaps because I know the guitarist, or I want to hear the repertoire. Sometimes I get a musical experience, but I know what's going on, I know what a person is doing, and the magic disappears a little bit. There are times, certainly, when some of the best players — and even some of the not-so-good players — have given me a good musical moment. But if I go to hear another instrument, the technical elements don't involve me, so basically I'm open to more enjoyment.

I think that's one of the things that kills your enjoyment. We increase our critical abilities, so we become less innocent. But the less innocent we are, the less likely we are to enjoy something.

Perhaps I'm talking in black and white. We need a certain amount of knowledge to be able to enjoy something. But if you go to something that you know a lot

about and you go with a critical eye, you will get an intellectual experience. On the other hand, if you go with a non-critical open-hearted feeling, you're likely to get much more of a heartfelt, spiritual experience.

When I go to a concert, I can hear the things that are going wrong. But perhaps the person sitting beside me doesn't notice these things and is consequently able to see a lot of other things that I'm missing. But I can't help it. And when I'm playing myself, I wish I didn't notice those little things that no-one hears from ten feet away. So it's not that you get less from it; it's just that it's more *difficult* to enjoy.

One of the reasons why the standard of playing is going up is because people are becoming more critical. They are not getting musical enjoyment out of a duff concert. The players have to be better, they have to play more musically. You can't get away with just a beautiful sound nowadays, nor with just plunking all the notes. It has to be on a higher level altogether. Which is good.

On the other hand, I sometimes hanker for those moments when I was 15 and used to play some of my records and they made my back shiver. Now I can understand what's going on, and it's very seldom that happens.

*Now you are in the business of making other backs shiver — of creating magic for other people to enjoy. That can't be easy in front of a sometimes restless audience.*

I think you have to draw people in. The audience have to participate, in a way. It shouldn't be a conscious thing, although that may be necessary at first. I think your mind should be free to wander — though with the music, not off on its own. As long as you're playing really well, your audience is with you. When you're not playing particularly well, you notice that people cough more; you lose your audience if your playing begins to get ragged. It's a fact of life.

The guitar's an unfortunate instrument in that mistakes and buzzes are actually louder than the good notes. You move a finger from B to C and there's a big squeak, louder than the notes. Then you buzz on the F, and it's louder than the last three notes put together. It makes it very difficult for all players. It also makes it very easy for the listeners to notice the bad things — and more difficult for them to immerse themselves in the good things. But perhaps the very fragility of it is one of the charms of the instrument. It's also one of the challenges.

There's one thing I wish didn't happen. Sometimes you can build up to a moment of complete silence, after a beautiful short passage, perhaps a group of only three or four notes but the centerpiece of a big passage. On the guitar they are very often the more quiet and intimate notes rather than the large and extravagant. And someone out of the 500 people chooses that moment to cough. It makes me feel I want to go over that bit again. It would be nice not to do concerts in February or March.

*When you played L'Aube du Dernier Jour, by Francis Kleynjans, at the Wigmore Hall recently, you got another kind of audience reaction — a laugh when the 6th string imitates the opening of the cell door after the footsteps. What attracted you to this particular piece?*

Well, I do a lot of concerts that are not just for guitarists. And I like to have some modern pieces. When I heard it, I enjoyed it, and that's the main reason. It uses the guitar in quite an original way, even if some of it verges on Hammer horror movies. Someone is describing how it feels, waiting for execution. You have that marvellous clock at the beginning. And the chimes — a marvellous sound. Then the jailer comes up and opens the door — and so on.

It was the first time I'd played it in public. I don't really want a laugh there, obviously. I would prefer the piece to be taken seriously. But people sometimes laugh when they feel uncomfortable. Just a touch of fear can induce humor. It goes up the wrong emotional channel, if you like.

We're talking about the ways people protect themselves. They can do it with criticism or with an analytical ability. And I think cynicism is in some ways a protection against other emotions, perhaps the more dangerous or disturbing ones. Cynicism says 'I know better than this'. I suppose many guitarists have done that opening-door trick. The strange thing is, the chimes just before the door opens don't make anyone laugh.

*How do you get that effect?*

You pull the 6th over the 5th and hold it down at the 7th fret. Instead of plucking the 6th string, you pluck the 5th, very gently, near the bridge. It rings on. If you pluck the 6th string, you get the snare drum effect. It's because it's not a clean note that you get so many partials, as in a bell, which create the effect. Sometimes even the fundamental gets lost in the dozens of strong harmonics.

We were talking about moments of silence. That was one of them. I'd just done the tick-tock effect after the chord, bringing it up very loud and taking it away again. Now people were still listening for it. When it died away to nothing, I played the 'bell' effect, very quietly — because people's ears had tuned right down and there was complete silence. I was lucky that there was no Bakerloo train going past underneath. (*A well-known hazard at the Wigmore Hall — Ed.*)

*A great piece of story-telling — but is it also a great piece of music? Will people be playing it in a hundred years' time?*

I don't know what's going to happen to music. But it's a piece that fits into the repertoire. It suits the guitar so well; it fits on the guitar, it's guitaristic. Parts of it are difficult, but certain things that sound extravagant, with piles of notes flying out all over the place, actually fit into the fingers very well. It's not like the Santórsola piece I played last year, for example, which didn't fit into the fingers; he wanted certain kinds of sound which were really quite difficult to achieve on the guitar.

After the Kleynjans, I played, for an encore, some Bach that I think is a great piece of music. And it's a very simple tune. That would rank as a great piece. And a lot of Mozart is very simple, yet you would have to call it great.

*In tercentenary year it's inevitable that we should be getting a lot of Bach and, to a lesser extent, Scarlatti on the guitar, but not much Handel. You have arranged a Handel suite with distinction, but on the whole his music is not guitar territory.*

With every centenary, Bach is there in front of him, so he gets a little bit overshadowed sometimes. But I love Handel's music.

*More theatrical and outgoing than Bach's, so possibly not as suitable for the guitar?*

More extrovert, yes. His harpsichord music, which is perhaps the first or even the only thing a guitarist would look at, is very 'notey' sometimes. He uses the instrument a lot. Bach's music is often more abstract, but Handel's is more directly on to the instrument, which makes it more difficult to transcribe.

I didn't have to make too many changes in the suite I transcribed, but it's difficult to play. I had to thin out the Overture quite a lot. Bach has moving lines, but Handel has those big chunky chords, with three oc-

taves repeating one note. And often he's got lines that are going in thirds and in octaves, so it can actually work very easily on the guitar.

When I first started doing transcriptions of Handel I was viewing them with the same sort of view I take with Bach, where the bass line is very important; the way the counterpoint works, the way you think of things in a linear way. In Handel it's not so necessary — though of course sometimes it is. At times he's very concise. I think he forgoes some of that kind of almost mathematical precision in composition, and I think it takes a while to understand what he's doing. But I love the music, and it's really enjoyable to play some stuff that guitarists haven't heard.

*You have an international reputation as a soloist, yet you play a lot of ensemble music — your duo with Dennis Milne, with Raphaëlla Smits, with Robert Brightmore, to mention only a few. And now you're working with a singer.*

If most of your work is doing solo concerts, as mine is, people don't notice the other things you do. It's other people who put the labels on, other people who make your reputation. John Williams said, indirectly, that all the time he was doing one thing, he was also doing other things. The labels are put on by the people who

listen — and they tend to listen to what they like most.

What I said earlier about some modern music doesn't reflect all my views, because I do play a lot of it. Yet certain people would label me as a non-modern music player. I would say that modern music makes up about 20 per cent of my repertoire. It's a fair amount.

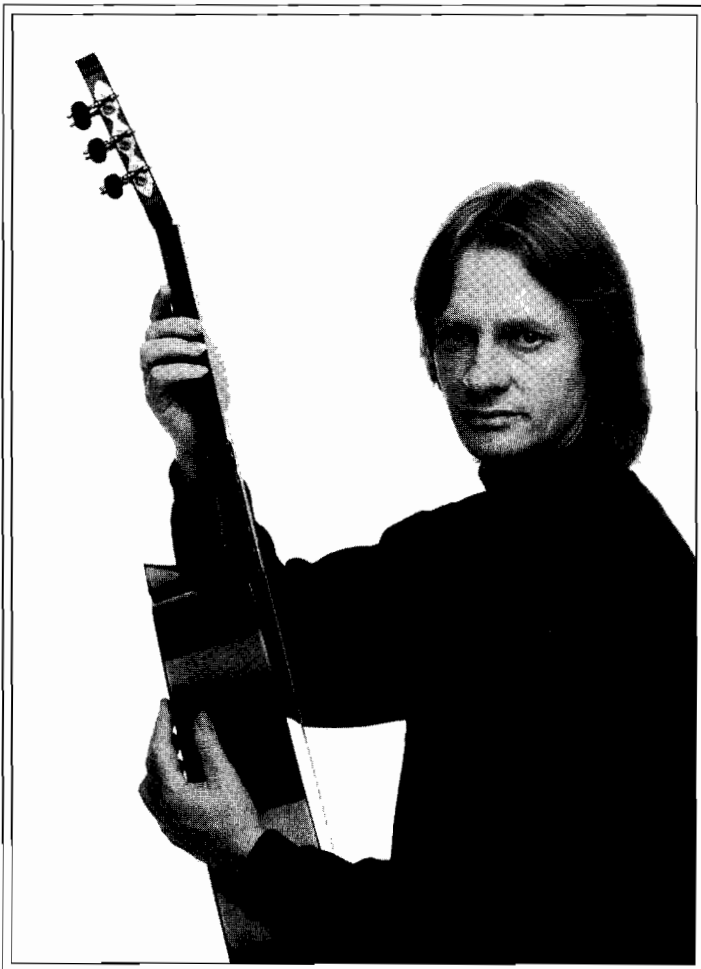
*What do you think of the current fashion for speed?*  
I don't particularly like the way some guitar enthusiasts place speed quite high up on their list of necessities, the idea that if you can play fast, then you're a virtuoso. I think it's unfortunate that, because it's difficult to play fast on the guitar, it becomes an important thing. It's necessary to play fast sometimes, because much of the repertoire is soloistic, virtuoso stuff. But I can sit down at the piano and with two fingers play faster than I can on the guitar. And so can anyone.

There's a difference between something being a necessity sometimes and actually making a feature of it. There's a difference between art and athletics.

It's not my place to criticize other players. They're my colleagues, not my adversaries. And I don't think it's right for a player to be a reviewer. In private I'll certainly have my views on different ways of playing.

Sometime I'd like to give reviewers my point of view on what they do. And perhaps on the way they affect us players. Most of us get very affected by, for example, the way an audience reacts. So I get upset when, playing a concert, I see a whole audience clapping except for one guy sitting there, determinedly not clapping because he's come there in a professional capacity. I'm sure you know the kind of thing I mean. Sometimes you try to do a certain thing, and the reviewer or critic misinterprets it. Obviously it's bound to happen. I'm not saying there's no place for it, but, as we mentioned before, if you look at something with a critical eye, you're to some extent insulating yourself from the appreciation of some of the other qualities that lie behind the intellectual.

If a reviewer goes along with certain tastes, it can be difficult for that person to appreciate some of the other things. There's also the unfortunate situation where you don't particularly care for the person who's doing something, so it's easy to have negative feelings about many of the good things they're doing. On the other hand, I may go to someone's concert, someone whose style of playing is completely different from mine, and



I may really like it.

It's sad if the reviewer happens to be a modern music buff and the guitarist doesn't play any modern music. What's the reviewer doing at that concert? I've read unjust reviews which may be just from the point of view of the reviewer but which have missed the whole point. And the unjustness goes both ways, in that concerts that in no way deserve a good review sometimes get one.

A review in some ways should be an explanation of what happened. Perhaps the critics can write some of their opinions into it — but they are only opinions, and opinions that very often are by very opinionated non-professional musicians. In the magazines, the part where it says 'Reviews' should say 'Opinion'; and the reviews should be an explanation of what happened.

*By professional musicians?*

By non-professional musicians who are professional writers. And unprejudiced, you hope, by the professionalism in the same circle. Certainly they have to be knowledgeable.

I do get affected when I get adverse criticism. Some people are able to cope with it better than others. I'm less affected by fair adverse criticism than by unfair adverse criticism, which I have no way of understanding. It only makes me slightly angry.

Perhaps I shouldn't talk about my own experiences. But a reviewer who is a non-professional musician often has a scale of expectations and so criticizes this player at one scale and that player at another. A reader in some little town in the north of Scotland gets the impression that the two players are on a par, whereas player A is on a higher level than player B. But the reviewer has lowered his expectations for player B, and consequently enjoyed the concert much more than A's, which he went to with higher expectations.

I don't want to mention any names, but some of the best players have suffered in this way. I realize it's a great problem for the critics, to know how to balance this up.

*Ought we to have a scale of absolute values?*

That's the difference between a review and a criticism. If we have absolute values, then we all become critics, pigeonholing players according to their level. On the other hand, you can't review a concert without actually giving your view of it. I would prefer to have

someone saying in a review, 'I didn't particularly enjoy this piece', rather than saying 'The player did this wrong and that wrong, and didn't play this in style, and made some stupid ornaments there'.

I have been very lucky in that generally critics or reviewers have been very good to me. But, you know, I've had a few good reviews of concerts that I didn't feel deserved a good review. Those you just forget about. It's a nice bonus.

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