

# DAVID STAROBIN

*Few guitarists have done as much for contemporary music as David Starobin. In addition to his activities as a performer, he is the president of Bridge Records, which he runs in partnership with his wife Becky. The contribution made by Bridge Records to the contemporary repertoire is enriching beyond calculation. One of his projects has been the commercial release of historical recordings from the Library of Congress.*

*He is also an ardent exponent of music from the Romantic period. In particular, his championship of Regondi's 10 Etudes, thought to be lost until Matanya Ophee rediscovered them in Russia, did much to rehabilitate that Chopinesque figure of the 19th century.*

*It might seem odd, this juxtaposition of the old with the new — Regondi alongside Elliott Carter and Poul Ruders — but when you have heard David play you realize that it is all of a piece with his incandescent musicianship, his drive to uncover the good music, whether old or new, that is often obscured by dogma and suspicion. Elliott Carter difficult to understand? Regondi trivial? David Starobin will have none of this 'received wisdom'. In unfolding the music for you, he overcomes all objections; you find yourself listening as you have never listened before. And as you listen, the music invades your unconsciousness, opening doors that have remained locked for too long.*

*Yet, despite his persuasive — and successful — work to establish the music of the composers he admires, David remains a musician first and a pioneer second. To put it another way, the pioneering is accomplished through his music-making, and it is that which has secured this unique guitarist his very many admirers.*

*Does your forthcoming Wigmore Hall program of 19th-century music represent a turning away from the contemporary music you have pioneered so successfully in the past?*

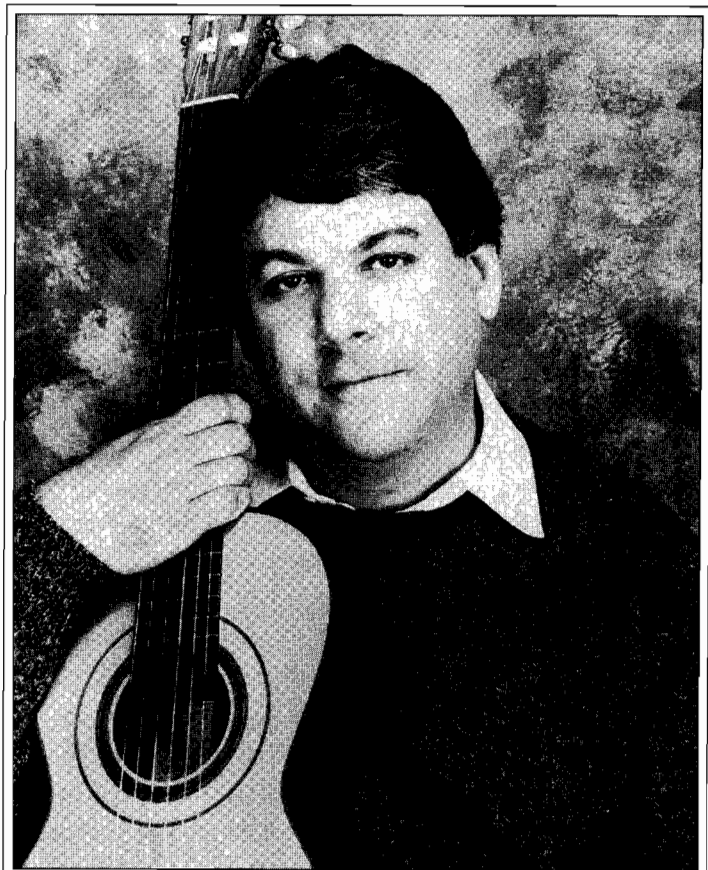
**David Starobin:** Well, looking now in my datebook... in a way it does. I've got a ten-day hiatus between Amsterdam (where I'm playing American guitar music of the 1980s) and the 19th-century Wigmore program. I'll be turning away from my Humphrey and intensively playing the Panormo for the better part of those ten days.

Seriously, though, I've been playing the 19th-century guitar repertoire since the age of seven. My first instructor, the late Puerto Rican guitarist Manuel Gayol, was a fanatic about the stuff. We played reams of Sor, Giuliani, Legnani, Molino, Carcassi, Carulli and Mertz. I still keep the notebooks in which he would copy out (from memory) this then unavailable repertoire.

For me, the cornerstone of my chamber music activity has been the chamber and vocal works by Boccherini, Paganini, Giuliani, Weber, Hummel, Schubert and Spohr. While I was still in school, I was extremely fortunate to perform and record works by Boccherini and Paganini with the beloved Italian violinist Pina Carmirelli. Pina's pioneering Boccherini research has saved much of this beautiful music from obscurity.

*Do you play chamber music using period instruments?*

Yes. I perform in a duo with violinist Benjamin Hudson. Ben is known in England as leader of the Hanover Band. We play a lot of Paganini and Giuliani. With these instruments, it's possible to put the 'V' back into virtuosity.



*Could you be a bit more specific?*

Well, first of all, there is the matter of string length. I'm presently playing a Panormo copy (built by Gary Southwell) which has a 63cm scale. This allows me (and I've got fairly large hands) to make all of the reaches that Sor asks for, without crippling myself. Given average hand size, playing on a smaller scale allows the player a shot at tempos which might be unattainable on a 66cm scale.

With the lower action and string tension of these instruments, left-hand articulation becomes a relative breeze, and the resultant sound quality is different too. On a large modern instrument, the gap between normal plucked sound and left-hand articulation is quite wide. On my Panormo, the left-hand articulation is closer in amplitude and color to a normal plucked attack. This makes for an integrated sound world that I find quite thrilling.

Even more important, though, is the balance between the treble and bass choirs. The comparatively duller treble of a Lacôte or Panormo actually *emphasizes* the contrapuntal nature of a composer like Sor. Bass lines come to the fore, and middle voices cut through independently and with warmth.

I try not to ignore the areas in which modern instruments surpass these little guitars. I presently play all of this repertoire on both old and modern instruments. The possibilities of each instrument seem to contribute a lot to my learning process.

*19th-century solo repertoire sometimes comes in for criticism, mainly, it seems to me, because it is hard to measure against the acknowledged masterpieces written for the piano. What do you really think of our 19th-century solo guitar repertoire?*

With the republication of Sor's complete guitar works, it became apparent to me that the best guitar music of this period had been virtually gathering dust. In works such as his Opp. 30, 56, 59 and 63, Sor shows us that though he is not a music revolutionary, he is nonetheless a musically progressive romantic poet, capable in his best pages of the soulfulness of a Schubert and the impeccable instrumental virtuosity of a Chopin.

We are only beginning to learn how to perform these long-dormant treasures, and it is safe to predict that Sor's reputation will only grow as his best works are more frequently played. Guitarists everywhere are indebted to Brian Jeffery for his research and publishing activities. With Thomas Heck's pioneering Giuliani research, Jeffery's recently completed

Giuliani edition makes it possible, for the first time, to evaluate the other key figure in the 19th-century guitar's history.

For too long, bad scholarship and ignorance have been the guiding factors in our view of the instrument's repertoire. Can you imagine the piano's two greatest 19th-century composers being subjected to incomplete, poorly edited editions until 1989? A good many of these Giuliani and Sor works (including some of the best) could not be found in any edition.

*Where do you see your tastes and inclinations leading you in the years to come?*

To answer that broadly, I'd have to say 'give me more of the same' — that is, lots of variety. To be more specific, I should explain that my musical activities are somewhat segmented. In addition to the guitar playing, I maintain a handful of university positions, and I'm one of the conductors of Speculum Musicae, a terrific new music ensemble in New York. I try to spend spare time with my wife and two children.

I'm looking forward to the coming season with great anticipation. Many new works are being written by composers whom I greatly admire. In November I'll play two new works: a Trio by William Bland, and a chamber concerto by George Crumb. I've been asking Mr Crumb for a piece for 20 years, and the confluence of his interest and a commission from Augustine Strings will finally make that dream a reality.\* Later on, I'll be playing a MIDI guitar in a new guitar duo by Tod Machover. The other guitarist is Pat Metheny, and I expect we'll have a blast playing that one. The Danish composer Poul Ruders and the American composer John A. Lennon are both writing me concertos, and Milton Babbitt is writing a flute and guitar duo.

I'm also playing a lot of duo concerts with my long-time baritone partner Patrick Mason. Pat and I are celebrating our 20th anniversary as a duo by touring in the US, the UK, Holland, Luxembourg and Japan. For the far future, Paul O'Dette and I have been threatening to record Sor duos on little guitars. I recently took off my nails for a bit of preparatory experimentation.

*What about your record production activities?*

My next two or three months are also eclectic. I'll be finishing production on a Mahler/Berlioz disc, a disc of Elliott Carter's vocal music, a disc of Tibetan Buddhist rituals. A disc of Balinese Kecak, and the four Ives Violin Sonatas. Help!

*How do you keep from drowning in it all?*

My wife Becky. It's really that simple. Our lives are interlocked maritally and parentally, we're partners in business, she manages my playing career, and if I'm lucky, I even get to see her now and then.

*How do you see the guitar in the context of general music? Does it have a permanent place, or are we heading for a decline of the sort it had in the mid-19th century?*

With the vast and diverse repertoire composed during the 20th century, combined with the best works of the 19th century, 21st-century guitarists should be able to perform concerts of guitar music (as opposed to borrowed repertoire) that should be able to move audiences from tears to ecstasy and back. What more could we possibly ask for? Segovia's dream of guitar tuition in all of our institutions has virtually been realized. As a disseminating vehicle, recordings have taken the place of the 3000-seat hall, which so often defeated our intimate instrument. Just look at how many excellent guitarists are presently vying for professional fame and fortune!

If one believes (and I do!) that the growing quantity and quality of repertoire will demand broader, thus deeper performers, then guitar players of the future will certainly have enough to sustain themselves and their audiences through any lean times.

*In your last Wigmore Hall recital, you included a piece for solo guitar and prepared tape. We see a roughly similar phenomenon in London's Underground, where a busker may play accompanied by an amplified tape. What are your feelings about this compositional trend?*

I believe that the advent of electro-acoustical music will some day yield great music, if it has not already done so. The ability to dissect sounds on an almost microscopic level, to subtly develop them, and then reconstruct them with infinite control of nuance — these are all tools, or instruments, if you will, that our composers are just being introduced to.

Much of today's research is being geared toward the intelligent response of computers to performer input. Thus, a virtuoso's every reaction — his attack, timbre, vibrato, dynamics etcetera — can be monitored and measured by the computer. The composer can then provide the computer with information that will allow the computer to react musically to what is being shaped by the player. This procedure, now in its

infancy, is preferable to playing against an unyielding tape. This ongoing instrument building and invention, which many of our best musical minds have devoted themselves to, has very little to do with the 'boom-box' tracks that you're hearing on the Piccadilly Line.

*Will this lead to music that has a permanent place in our affections, as the music of the 18th- and 19th-century classicists and romantics has?*

I don't think instruments have anything to do with this. The most popular music of the latter half of this century has been produced on electronic instruments, and is listened to through loudspeakers. The best of this 'popular' music seems to have achieved the status of 'classic'. I'm referring, of course, to rock music, which seems to have a permanent place in many people's affections.

In the field of 'classical' music, we have certainly not achieved anything like the accomplishments of the 18th- and 19th-centuries. However, I believe that this is true for acoustic as well as electronic instruments, though this has more to do with the unsettling effect that linguistic uncertainty has visited upon our composers, than on the mere changing of instrumental palette.

I personally love the 20th-century repertoire for its variety and surprises. The absence of 'common practice' has opened the way for very personal expression by those masters who have been successful in forging a language. The guitar is indeed fortunate to have compositions by a broad range of today's composers, and if it is not too early to predict, I feel sure that a good number will be played, loved and cherished by guitarists, long after we are all gone.

*David Starobin returned to London a few years later to perform Giulio Regondi's recently rediscovered 10 Etudes, and a new concerto by Poul Ruders. The concert formed part of Classical Guitar's Celebrity Concerts series, and naturally I took the opportunity to talk to David about it before the event. By that time he was playing a copy of a 19th-century guitar by Staufer, also made by Gary Southwell but, in David's opinion, of a superior design to the Panormo copy he had played on his previous visit. The Ruders work, incidentally, was performed on a modern amplified guitar. Two very different works, and two very different instruments. Was there anything that united the two halves of this concert?*

**David Starobin:** Regondi's *10 Etudes* is a work



Courtesy Classical Guitar Magazine

lasting approximately 40 minutes. They were most probably meant to be heard as a set, as Regondi has carefully chosen a contrasting tempo and character continuity, and has also employed parallel and relative key juxtapositions between pieces. Poul Ruders's *Psalmodies* is a concert suite/chamber concerto in eleven interconnected movements, designed as a very grand 30-minute arch. Both of these multi-movement works create an impact that is a cumulative result of their respective large scale forms.

More importantly, both composers have succeeded, in their own very different ways, in achieving a communicative balance between technical means and expressive results. Within his ten passionately romantic outbursts, Regondi has exhibited more compositional 'technique' than in other 19th-century guitar music that I am aware of. A favored device, almost a signature in these etudes, is his use of 'encapsulating codas'. Here, Regondi routinely takes materials from two different sections and combines them, developing and transforming his argument into an all-encompassing recapitulation. He accomplishes this so artfully and smoothly that one is almost unaware of the miracles that have taken place.

Poul Ruders also achieves an intense blend of intellect and heart, employing means far more extreme than Regondi's. In many of Ruders's scores 'remembered musics' bump up against exhilaratingly modernistic

inventions. His masterful technical control always seems to preside over the violent and uplifting path that his scores often follow.

*Regondi's 10 Etudes was recently discovered in the Soviet Union by Matanya Ophee. Other than historical interest, what special qualities does this work have?*

These pieces are special in just about every way that it is possible to be special. The set is a 40-minute cycle of Romantic music. How many of those do we have in our repertory? The high musical quality, the range and variety of expression, and Regondi's incomparable guitarism guarantee them the highest place in our instrument's active repertoire.

Thrust before the French and British public as a child prodigy, Regondi was clearly a major talent. Fernando Sor would not be dedicating his 'Souvenir d'Amitié' to just any eight-year old, nor would Leigh Hunt be writing about a nine-year old guitarist in the same breath as Mozart and Paganini, were it not for the appearance of such a phenomenon.

Giulio Regondi was that rare and quintessential mid-19th-century artist — a virtuoso performer gifted with creative vision, and the requisite discipline to realize that vision. As only a portion of Regondi's output for the guitar is extant, the discovery of the *10 Etudes* considerably expands our view of his compositional range. The location of missing Regondi guitar works should become a priority for anyone who truly loves the guitar and its music.

With the republication of Op.19-23 in Simon Wynberg's Chanterelle Edition in 1981, 20th-century guitarists could clearly see that Regondi was a master guitarist. He was a performer whose left hand knew no fear, and whose right hand ranged from the dreamy and lyrical utterances of Op.19's tremolo to Op.23's flamboyant octave displays. With the discovery of the *10 Etudes*, an even broader harmonic vocabulary has been revealed, and an even greater talent exposed. In *10 Etudes*, Regondi's chief concern shifts from the writing of display vehicles to a more subtle virtuosity linked to deeper interior compositional logic. This is not to say that Opp.19-23 lack logic, or that the études are easy works to play. Clearly, the same formidable musician is at work, but writing with very different purpose and result.

*You will be performing 10 Etudes on a copy of a Stauffer guitar. What is your reasoning for this choice, and does this make the music easier to perform?*

Well, it certainly does not make the music easy to perform! I play on a copy of a Staufer/Legnani model, which I consider to be one of the best-designed guitars ever built. In addition to its unique sonic characteristics, this instrument features the famous 'flying fingerboard'. With my ratchet key in hand, I am able to adjust the action of this instrument in ten seconds' time. In music of very high velocity the ability to quickly 'fine tune' the guitar's action is very advantageous. With this device, the player can easily compensate for factors such as changing humidity and its effect upon the guitar's top, the particular musical requirements of an individual composition, or even the player's subtlest physical changes, from hour to hour. I hope that some of today's forward-looking guitar builders will allow themselves a backward glance, and experiment with the inclusion of this remarkable invention.

*What of the issue of so-called 'authenticity'? Should these pieces be played on a Staufer, an instrument that Regondi himself is said to have played on, or are they better served on a fine modern instrument?*

That is a very complex question to answer. One could argue the merits of one side or the other, with any argument being immediately dashed to pieces by the genius of a given player on a given instrument. Clearly, individual taste and choice are governing factors here. However, the study of historical practice is, hopefully at the least, a starting point in our search for reaching solutions.

I personally admire performances that meet the composer's level of creativity with equally vivid levels of performer re-creativity. Experimenting with old and new instruments is one part of this re-creative process. The thinking performer's view of a particular composer or composition would hopefully lead to that individual's choice of instrument.

*What other 19th-century composers have you been performing recently, and on which instruments have you been playing their music?*

I've just made a CD of Giuliani solos played on a Staufer, and will soon be making a Regondi disc on this same instrument. I've been playing a lot of Sor on Panormo and Lacôte, and I'm doing some Coste on a 6-stringer. I'd like to find a Scherzer 10-string to fill that gap.

*The Danish composer Poul Ruders has composed Psalmodies for you. Will you say something about the composer and the circumstances which led to this*

*composition ?*

I came to know Ruders's music when I conducted his *Four Compositions* in New York. I also remember the impact of a great performance of his *Manhattan Abstraction* that Oliver Knussen conducted at Tanglewood. These two experiences made deep impressions, and I approached Ruders, asking for a little chamber concerto. Rose Augustine commissioned Poul, and two years later the score was completed.

One of the greatest joys of being a musician in our time is our ability to 'access the record' so easily — to have at our ears and eyes a veritable tornado of human creativity, constantly destroying our assumptions and forcing us to reinvent our view of the past. The music of Ruders is one such force for me. His music is as gratifying to listen to as it is to perform. At its best it is truly transporting.

In trying to describe *Psalmodies*, I think it best to print a portion of the composer's own program note:

*'Psalmodies.* The word has its origin in ancient Greek: Psalmoidia, i.e. "singing to the harp", and we find the word again in Psalter, derived from "Psallein": playing the strings with the fingers. *Psalmodies* has no specific religious contents or aim; the collection of eleven pieces forms a concert suite displaying a wide range of emotions; from the jubilant to the dismal, the guitar playing the natural leading part "inside" a chorus of woodwinds and strings.'

*Have you performed music by other Danish composers?*

Yes. I've played quite a bit of music by Per Nørgård, and this season I'll be conducting a performance of Bent Sorensen's *Les Tuchins*, an excellent work which has two fine electric guitar parts. There is a wonderfully active 'new guitar' scene in Denmark, fostered largely by players such as Erling Møldrup and Karl Petersen.

*What are your own aspirations for the guitar?*

In the area of repertoire expansion, I hope that the current direction continues apace. We have finally begun to attract the best of present-day composers to our instrument, while simultaneously uncovering hidden jewels from our past. In the area of performance, the guitar has found new life amidst the gradually emerging expertise of today's players. My own goal is to be a positive part of this reawakening.

*\* George Crumb's Canis Mundi was performed several times in 1999, with the composer himself playing the percussion parts.*