

ELIOT FISK

I first heard Eliot Fisk play at the Wigmore Hall in the mid-1980s. I had long admired his fluent playing, his extraordinary technique, the seeming ease with which he overcame technical problems that most guitarists would not even have attempted to solve. I was not prepared for the almost physical excitement of hearing him in the flesh, magisterial, authoritative, sweeping all obstacles before him as he proceeded on his imperious way. There was a warmth, an immediacy of communication that I had not heard in his recordings, impressive though they are in their own way. Only when that particular warmth can be captured on disc will the recording supersede the concert hall and the live performance. Until then, there is no substitute for a concert of music during which the communication between artist and audience suddenly crystallizes into a realization that here is something very special. There was a touch of greatness in the Wigmore Hall that night.

Eliot had agreed to an interview the following day. After the excitements of Sunday evening, Monday morning was anticlimactic. My questions sounded labored, Eliot's replies sounded perfunctory. There was a danger that it was going to develop into one of those occasions, every interviewer's nightmare, when, in his efforts to make his questions more interesting, the hapless interviewer makes them longer and longer, while the interviewee's replies become shorter and shorter. The ultimate is a question lasting a minute and a half, to which the answer is monosyllable, usually No.

Then people began to arrive. I had not invited them. Perhaps Eliot had issued a casual invitation the previous evening. Perhaps they came uninvited. Whatever the reason, all of a sudden there were five or six people in the room where there had been only two. Normally I might have resented such an intrusion into my professional work, but on this occasion it worked like a charm. Eliot, responding to the presence of an audience like the great performer he is, revealed himself to be an impassioned supporter of musical truth, an equally passionate denouncer of apathy and indifference, and an eloquent crusader on behalf of what he felt to be right. The excitement was infectious, and soon we were all involved in what turned out to be one of CG's liveliest interviews ever.

Eliot Fisk: I started to play when I was seven. My mother thought it would be a nice thing to have a little bit of music in the house so she sent my father out to buy a banjo. He'd played banjo in college, and the idea was that we could sing songs at home with my brother, who is handicapped by Down's Syndrome.

My father came back with not just a banjo but a six-dollar steel-stringed Gibson guitar, and that's how it began. I started first on the banjo and played it for about a month. It was an awfully bad banjo, and I also got a little bit tired of that pinging quality. So I started to play the guitar. We had this record and booklet that went with the record, showing how to play all the different chords. I remember playing *Home on the Range* in A major.

I taught myself the chords, and after three months, as I was still fooling around on the thing, my parents offered me lessons. Roger Scott, first double-bass player in the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra, was an old family friend and he said I should study classical guitar, so I went to Peter Colonna, a student of Segovia.

I was never serious in the beginning. I wasn't pushed



Photo by Allen Bloomfield

by my parents. I just started to play for myself, for fun. I really preferred running around outside, playing sports. I was very athletic, and played a lot of

sports. As a kid, I practised guitar only about half an hour a week.

Then we went to Sweden, where my father had a sabbatical from 1965 to 1966, and there at first I was a bit lonely because I was going to a Swedish school and I didn't yet speak the language. That's when I started to practice more, about two hours a day. Then I went back to America. I had learned Swedish by that time, but I'd also got more involved with the guitar. And then I had my first really important teacher, William Viola.

He was a very important influence on me. Among other things, he would say 'You'll never be satisfied'. How prophetic that was! He was a very demanding teacher, which was good for me because it was just what I needed at that time. It was really then that I built the foundations of all the guitar technique I ever developed, from this one man who had mostly taught himself from the records of Segovia.

I had two years of weekly lessons with him, from the age of twelve to 14, then we moved. For a number of years I studied, in the summers only, with Oscar Ghiglia at Aspen. One summer I had the good fortune to study with Alirio Diaz at Banff. Soon after that I met Segovia, who was always my inspiration, always my great idol. I had the chance to play for Segovia. Every year, when he came to New York, I'd go to see him a couple of times and play for him at his hotel.

Meanwhile I had become old enough to go to college. I went to Yale. By good fortune — again — it happened that Ralph Kirkpatrick was teaching there, and I studied with him. I would say that my first important teachers in the long term were William Viola, Oscar Ghiglia and then Ralph Kirkpatrick, who helped me to lay the basis for all my subsequent musical development.

I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't met Ralph Kirkpatrick. What was so great about his teaching was that he didn't deliver facts but would always proceed in a Socratic way by asking questions. Or he would just draw your attention to something and let you stumble around there for a while. Then he'd drop another clue and you'd stumble a bit more. If you really got off the track, he'd drop another clue. This was probably the greatest teaching I ever had.

But I don't think I would have been able to understand it if I hadn't had all those years of studying with Oscar

Ghiglia at Aspen. Oscar always thinks in terms of the music first. I never really studied *guitar* with Oscar, I studied *music* with him. I remember one lesson that was devoted to producing the sound with the right hand — Oscar always had such a beautiful sound — but basically it was about music, and that was a great source of stimulation for me.

I had very little time with Segovia, though all in all I would say that he has been my greatest inspiration. I still go back to his records as an inexhaustible source of new insights — even from the same record. New insights and new learning always take place when I hear Segovia in person or listen to his records.

I know you have firm ideas about teaching. How far are they based on your own early experiences?

I probably teach most similarly to Oscar, of all the people I've studied with, although I don't know if I've got as much patience as he has. I like to teach through the personality of the student. I don't like to impose. In that way I follow the example of Ralph Kirkpatrick. I like the student to do the seeking.

I think the duty of the teacher is to supply the student with a method of thinking, a method in inquiry, more than it is to supply the student with the nuts and bolts of how to play. That presumes, of course, a basic level of technique. Obviously in the early stages there are ways to use the hands efficiently and ways to use the hands inefficiently, and you've got to have some very definite guidelines. But the further you go, the less definite the guidelines become.

The more advanced the student, the more it becomes an exchange of ideas. I find that I learn enormously from that. I have a great range of students. I have some who are just about professional level, and some who are beginners, and just about everything in between. And sometimes I learn more from the beginners than I do from the ones who play very well.

It's very nice to have an ongoing contact with a number of students. You get to observe how a personality develops over a time, how it flowers.

I don't think of myself as educating future great virtuosos. I don't think I have anybody who is necessarily going to revolutionize the guitar world. At the same time I think that exactly what the guitar needs is more depth in the echelons just below those of the touring virtuosos. There can never be too rich a supporting culture.

I like a student who doesn't agree with me. It challenges me. It forces me to reassess a lot of assumptions I may have made. It's very productive. It shakes you up. And that's maybe the thing I value most about teaching. I would like to see more of this in the guitar world in general, this spirit of inquiry, this Socratic method of going about things where you say that *the only thing we know is that we don't know anything*. And the only thing that we are doing is seeking. So let's at least make our seeking interesting and engaging and maybe even entertaining. In our seeking we might find something for a moment. But the next moment we're a different person and that won't satisfy us any more. We've got to find something else.

This is a frightening thing, because if the only reality is change, you can't fix it, you can't grab hold of any moment. There is always past, and there is always future; the present continually eludes your grasp. And that's also true in terms of artistic development. You can't say 'I am this' or 'I am that', because the next minute you'll change. And with the guitar it's a challenge to get your technique flexible enough: a flexible *Weltanschauung*, a world view flexible enough so that you can change with each moment, so that you can reflect what you are experiencing. I love those stories about Django Reinhardt. Sometimes he had an important performance, and he would just become lost in a daydream and go off wandering around in the streets. There was no barrier between feeling, sentiment, emotion and the expression; it was a wonderful, spontaneous unity.

Or, for example, take the tragic stories of Dinu Lipatti. Listening to his records is always a humbling experience. He takes about two measures — and you're in a transfigured mode. Now you can't study how to play like that physically; it's a communication of mood, of sentiment, of being; it's a transference, a reflection of a state of being, and I think that is what we all have to bear in mind — and what we have to treasure.

This again relates to teaching. Each one of my students has something special, maybe not whole big areas but something that he or she does really well, and something that only he or she can do. That's what I try to bring out in a pupil.

Getting back to Lipatti: he hadn't been able to practice for his famous last concert, but had just been lying in bed with a temperature of 104, trying to control the fever. And all these people had come miles and miles to hear him play. His friends and family said, 'Dinu,

you must cancel the concert', but he said 'No, these people have come, I have to play'. And he hauled himself out of bed and went to play.

There's a record of the concert. First of all, it's technically perfect. It's just as if the man had taken flight. You want to resort to religious terminology, because there doesn't seem to be any other way to describe what happened there. He plays the Chopin waltzes, and at the end of the concert he hasn't got the strength to play the last one. But you still hear this desperate desire to communicate. To me, that is the highest level. We can't hope to attain it, but I hold it to be a model of achievement.

It is not achieved through physical means. Lipatti hadn't been sitting in his room practicing that day. But he had built a technique from the age of four, so flexible and so perfect that he could just get out of bed, go to the concert hall and play this breathtaking, tragic, moving, unbelievable recital.

A few months later he was actually dying. He was listening to a Beethoven String Quartet — Opus 95, if I remember right. He got out of bed and played two pieces, the last one of which was the Siciliana from Bach's Flute Sonata in E flat. He'd made a transcription for piano. He played that, and died very soon afterwards.

This immediate connection between being and expressing — that's a real goal that each person can strive for in his or her own way. No two people can achieve it in the same way. Everybody supplies part of the whole; everybody contributes. In Dante's *Purgatorio*, when one soul makes an advance, all the others are jubilant, they jump for joy. And that's what I think about playing the guitar — or anything else you do in life; when an advance is made, it's a spiritual advance. Everyone is the richer for it. We should all jump for joy, not turn green with envy, when we hear someone else play well.

Of course technique has to be studied too. We have a lot of focus on technique in the guitar world, and because of that the technical level — even in the last ten years — has risen to a height I would never have believed possible. And it's thrilling, it's wonderful. Now we're at the point where we can begin to focus on the deeper issues.

Is your first approach to a piece of music a technical one? Or do you consider the entire piece from the

beginning?

How you approach each piece varies with the piece. You need a different approach for each ethic. It's important to enter the *Zeitgeist* of each ethic. If possible, one ought to try to get to know the literature, the art of that time. Imagine yourself as a human being alive at that time. You need to have as much information as you can get in the way of general historical background which is available in books and libraries, but I also think it's helpful — if you're fortunate enough to have the chance — to go to the countries where these people flourished.

Sometimes hearing the language is helpful. Of course, many things have changed, but some have stayed the same. There is still something that distinguishes English culture from German culture, Italian culture from Spanish. Regional accents still play a part in the understanding of music produced by these various cultures.

In my own case, it also helps me physically to play the pieces better, instead of beating them into the ground with repetitious practice. Of course you have to practice well, you have to study. But I love creating an ambience around the piece; so many more ideas come to you than if you're just working out of your own imagination.

Do you feel that, generally, there is too much emphasis on playing the guitar as a physical process?

I think there is a danger, because the guitar is so complex physically. To manipulate the guitar is a nightmare. As Segovia liked to say, for composers it's like writing for the piano with one hand, or for a violin with six strings. And it is a tremendously cumbersome instrument, so it's easy to become focused on the physical problems involved in trying to manipulate it. But at the same time, what is increasingly going to become interesting for guitar audiences, as a superior technique becomes more and more taken for granted, is: what has somebody got to say?

Often, if somebody has something to say, it completely overwhelms technical barriers. If somebody doesn't have anything burning inside, doesn't have a passion burning, doesn't have a fire inside that has to come out, to make contact with other people, I don't really see why they're trying to make an international career. I see what they're doing as loving the guitar, playing it in their spare time, teaching the guitar, maybe playing it for their friends. But who said

everybody has to become Julian Bream? There's only one of those.

Who knows why we need to communicate? You can find a whole lot of philosophical reasons and sociological reasons and psychological reasons. But most of the people in art who have captivated me have had that burning desire to say something, to communicate.

I feel, especially in the guitar world, that there's a conservatism and a great fear of innovation — and also, conversely, a tendency to accept without question anything that comes from a well-established source. At the same time people tend not to accept very fine things that come from unknown sources. This is true not just of the guitar world but of human nature. I'd like to see more people thinking for themselves.

This relates to teaching, because it's one of the things I try to encourage in my students. It also leads on to something else I wanted to say, about factionalism and in-fighting. We need to come together now as a community and try to interest more people in the guitar, to expand our audience. And that's why new talent is always welcome. In America we have an effective program called Affiliate Artists, funded partly by the government and partly by private industry. What happens is that you go into an area where there's very little culture, and you live there for a period, usually staying with a family. Years ago, in Illinois, I gave 40 performances in 21 days.

It was an effective way of reaching out to people. I think of people sitting around in institutions. Not every institution is going to want the classical guitar, but I think this kind of reaching out is greatly needed.

The guitar world needs an organizer of genius to figure out how to expand the audience. Because we have the base now; good players, magazines like yours and others, an increasingly high level of writing, of criticism — of everything. The infrastructure's already in place; now we need an organizational genius to bring it all together for the good of all of us

There is a widely held view that a guitarist acquires a technique at first, then looks around for something to play with it. In your philosophy, the music comes first....

You hear this so often. 'First I'm going to learn the notes, and then I'll put the expression in'! From my earliest days I have never, ever, learned a piece that way, and I don't know anyone who can play beauti-

fully who ever has. My God, if you don't react to the music, it *can't* be good.

It's one thing if you want sometimes to practise a difficult passage for the right hand. Some people like to practise only the open strings, then they put the left hand back on. I can understand that in certain isolated instances, but after a while you're going to be able to hear nothing but the open strings. You're going to deaden your ear.

It cannot be good to induce this *tin-earedness*. I don't care if your technique runs along like a little machine afterwards, it's not going to have a good effect on your playing in the long term. I think you work technique at the same time as you work music; always one in conjunction with the other, because they help each other. That makes the process go faster, not slower. That's the way I have always learned — always, always, always.

I'm in a state now where the technique comes pretty fast. I know how to fix technique. I practise very small groups of notes and I string them together. I don't think of groups of 24 notes; I think of six groups of four notes. Anybody can play four notes fast. Then you just do it six times — and you've got 24 notes. But if you think of 24 notes — *aaagh!* You won't be able to play one of them well.

So many times people ask me, 'What do you do about nerves?' They're going to play one concert a year, and they expect they're not going to be nervous! Before a concert I play for friends. And if I don't have enough concerts, I play for friends. If I only had one concert, I'd play the programs for friends at least once, and hopefully twice. And it's much harder to play for friends in a small room than it is to play in public. Then when I go to the hall, the audience is just an extension of my friends.

You have to realize that the audience is just like you; just human beings. They've got their insecurities, their fears, their loves, their hates, they're just like you are.

There is an element of the unpredictable in your performance. Is that one of the secrets of your success? Of everything in life! You can't predict that you're going to fall in love with someone. And if you do fall in love, you can't predict that you're going to have a beautiful time on a certain day. Everything in life is like that.

Some things have to be reliable. It's nice when the bus comes on time. But the really great things hardly ever come like that.

But despite the unpredictability and the need for it, you still have to plan a concert.

You simply react to the unpredictable when it comes along. In a macabre way, it's the cornered beast theory: necessity makes you very resourceful. Improvising around a cough — sometimes you can space a note around a cough, you know. Or maybe you played one part too fast, so you play the next part too slow. Improvising the balance of art work.

It's as if Leonardo had to paint the Mona Lisa in front of an audience instead of in the studio. This is what my generation wants to do; they want to paint the Mona Lisa in the studio. But performance isn't like that. You've got to improvise a new one every time. Maybe this time some of the brush strokes don't look so good. But, you know, those are the breaks.

This really is the difference between the performer and the good musician. The good musician need not be a performer, but the performer must be a good musician — and something else as well.

That's a very good point, because many people, teaching in universities, perhaps, are better musicians than people making very big international careers — not just in guitar, but in piano and violin. But they don't seem to have that performance spark, whatever it is. They don't have that ability to improvise with the unpredictable.

Then there are people who do have the ability, but who decide that they just don't want the lifestyle of an international artist. This is a very sane decision, I can only say. But there are not so many guitar concerts, and no matter how big your career is, I don't think you're in danger of burning out. So guitarists have it about right, I'd say. People in my generation who are doing comparable things, like Manuel Barrueco, Vladimir Mikulka, David Russell. Göran Söllscher and others, travel a lot, but not too much. We get a lot of very nice support from the audiences, but not so much that it puts your head out of line.

As you get older, you want more and more for each minute to have meaning. You get to look for things that aren't so superficial, that aren't so glib; you get to understand the difference between entertainment and art. I can think of a couple of very big careers that are based more on entertainment than on art, and to me

that wouldn't be worth it. I love entertainment; you can't go around being serious the whole time. But most of all I want to understand, to seek and comprehend and try to be an artist.

There's a big record store in the States that has a little magazine. They had a big article on Julian Bream, and then they did something about me, so it was a sort of 'younger virtuoso—older virtuoso'. The guy was trying to say 'Well, what do you think about Julian Bream?'—as if he was saying 'He's all washed up'. So I said I think he's wonderful. I like him because he plays with a lot of guts and takes every risk in the book.

My generation has gotten so *serious!* So *humorless!* Where's the *joie de vivre*? You find young players coming out and playing like stiffs. Young players who are so boring, so dull and so timid. Towards the end of



Photo by Johan Fjellstrom

his life, Rubinstein used to say: 'All these younger pianists, you know, they play a hell of a lot better than me, but when they walk out on the stage they look like old insurance salesmen.' Those may not be his actual words. But these players exude no charisma. And this is what's going to kill the guitar if it keeps up, this tendency to be so careful and so god-awful bloody boring and take no risks and no chances, everybody trying to be correct and trying not to offend anybody with anything that might be just a little bit unusual.

And young players — this is the ridiculous thing — young players are no longer allowed to develop. They're expected to drop out of the forehead of Zeus, fully formed. You're not allowed to be a young player, bursting with piss and vinegar and maybe it sometimes comes out right and sometimes it doesn't — you've got to be perfectly formed, mature. Mature, you know! Boredom passes for maturity in the guitar world. It makes me sick.

I've shot my mouth off on that one, but that's what I think.

This kind of communication with an audience is not taught in the colleges. Ought it to be? Can it be? If you play like that for an entrance exam, you get into trouble.

The worst problem for the guitar is that it's so quiet. If it's going to be so quiet, you'd better do something interesting. The future of the guitar is not in being a too-quiet instrument.

The man who is most misunderstood is Segovia. 'Oh, the old man,' people say, 'It's amazing that he can still play concerts at the age of 92.' This is the great left-handed compliment that gets dished out to Segovia.

I think these people must have wool in their ears. In my book, Segovia still *plays* the guitar. In his prime he played it better than any of us younger people. Much better, because he made more meaning with it, he had more expression. He made the guitar bigger than it had ever been. Maybe we play faster, we play more notes per measure — so what? We are barking up the wrong tree — the tree of accuracy. We're trying to do with the guitar the things a machine does well, not the things a guitar does well.

The guitar is an instrument of suggestion, of implication. When you try to make the guitar sound like a piano, you're going the wrong way. I'm the first to say independence of parts; know all the parts, sing the parts, hear all the intervals. That goes without saying. But the great thing about Segovia is that he makes the guitar sound like the voice, not like the piano. Nobody else has come close to it. And nobody's even trying to do it any more.

That's the amazing thing. I go back to Segovia, I go back to those old records, and I get knocked out. You hear that passion, that expressivity, that daring. And the way he *changes* the music is so fantastic. He

rewrites things. What comes out is what the composer *wanted* to say but didn't know *how* to say with the guitar.

I heard him play Torroba's *Sonatina* not long ago in Cologne. After the concert I got the music and wrote out all the changes that Segovia had made, and they were fantastic. Here he is at 92, and his musical mind and his musical sensibility are so superior. We aren't even at the bottom of purgatory, you know; we're still climbing up from the bottom of the Inferno, while he's up there in Paradise somewhere, to take a Dantesque metaphor.

It's been said that all philosophy is a footnote to Plato. The longer I work on the guitar, the more it seems to me that all classical guitar playing is a footnote to Segovia. It would be a horrible loss if people forgot just how revolutionary he was, how daring.

This burning fire, this need to communicate being impelled outwards by his personality — that's what we're missing in the guitar world, and that's why, to me, he's always the model.

It makes me so angry that people are forgetting his wisdom. It makes you see how little understood he probably was. That people can have come to that point of condescension towards him — it enrages me. 'Of course, the tone!', they say — but it's *beyond* tone. If it's tone you want, there are plenty of imitation Segovias who produce a beautiful tone. But they don't sound like Segovia. Not every tone that Segovia produces is beautiful. The tones that *have* to be beautiful, *are* beautiful, often because they come next to something that isn't so beautiful. Truth isn't all beauty. You have to have a little bit of evil in you too; you're not going to be interesting if you're just sweet and good all the time. Segovia has got a little devil in there.

But the younger players of my generation scare me. So when this interviewer asked me about Julian Bream, I said 'Thank God he's there'. Because that's what I would like to aspire to. That direction, rather than the direction of my own generation.

CC