JOHN WILLIAMS

My most vivid memory of John Williams is a rehearsal in the BBC studios, Maida Vale. Leo Brouwer was there to conduct a recording of his Concierto de Toronto, with John Williams as the soloist. It was a memorable occasion, with John at his best and the Langham Orchestra responding magnificently to Leo's dynamic direction. An account of it appears in Classical Guitar Vol.7 No.4, but for the purposes of this book I prefer to go back to an earlier occasion, when CG's then reviews editor Chris Kilvington and I interviewed John Williams in his house in North London. The year was 1987, around the time when a heavier emphasis was beginning to be placed on ensemble guitar music in Britain's music schools, with two of which John Williams has close connections: The Royal College of Music, London, and The Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester. He had been to the RCM to see guitar professor Charles Ramirez and vice-director Ian Horsburgh, and happened to remark in passing that he would be happy to come back 'as an old student and past teacher'. And that is exactly what he did, initiating a series of regular visits in order to encourage participation in chamber music.

Invited to comment on this initiative, John immediately launched into an attack — a fully justified one, as every thoughtful observer knows — on the general sightreading ability of guitarists.

CC

John Williams: Sooner or later, guitarists have to face the fact that, note for note, the guitar is no more difficult than a wind instrument or a stringed instrument. Compared to other instrumentalists, 99 per cent of guitarists on that basis are appalling sightreaders, appalling ensemble players, and have bad ears in terms of phrasing. That for me is an uncomfortable truth. We have a lovely instrument and some of us play it very beautifully, etcetera, but those are the facts. An advanced, graduated guitar student phrasing a simple classical theme is a joke compared to a fiddler or a flautist. And there's no reasonable excuse for it.

It's an embarrassing truth, and unless something's done in terms of education it's going to go on getting worse. Ironically, we're entrenching the problem by getting the guitar more and more established in colleges; we're making the gulf even more painfully obvious. We're asking more and more favors of the musical establishment, people who love the guitar. I'm not being patronizing about this, they genuinely love it, and that's why it's there. And the more allowances they feel they have to make for bad musicianship amongst the guitarists, the worse it's going to get.

Chris Kilvington: *Would you agree that people have become very preoccupied with their solo careers? There are far too many excellent and gifted young players around anyway, not all of whom can make it. So perhaps it's either an alternative way of looking at things for them, or the possibility of a career in ensemble.*

JW: Ultimately the thing's going to be changed when the same ethic that applies to primary school and recorder classes is adapted to the guitar, so that as young guitarists go up the educational scale, they don't lose touch in secondary school with the ensemble. Whereas the wind players and the strings go in to Saturday morning orchestra, the guitar players start losing out. So at all levels it's got to see some change.

It's no good crying over spilt milk, but we can improve. We can improve it even if we're 50-year-old amateurs. Instead of sweating your guts out trying to play a Villa-Lobos prelude that's too difficult, just get a couple of friends and sit down with some ensemble music.

The other big area is repertoire. Guitarists are imprisoned by thinking about whose edition they are going to buy, where's the fingering going to be, and where can they get it. I approached Tony Rooley about four years ago, before going to Spain, and asked him if there was any old lute music that would be suitable for ensemble playing — because I wanted to introduce it into Spain. And he said, 'Well, any of it — all of that old consort music, whether it's broken consorts, viols, recorders, wind, mixed wind or whether it's unspecified.' All that stuff was pretty makeshift, anyway — the Praetorius collection, for instance. Well, he recommended Anthony Holborne, various galliards and things like that. Which is fantastic.

I went into Peters' to get the parts of Haydn's 'Bird' Quartet (Op. 33 No. 3), which I wanted to give to students, and in just two minutes I found two little volumes of old things in five and six parts. I told the college students to try to get into the habit, when they're in a music shop, instead of going to the guitar shelf and looking there, of casting a glance along the old music shelf — which is what I did yesterday, picking up this and that. You can see straight away: it has nice simple lines. What fun! Suppose you're going

to a party at the weekend — you don't want to have to practice duets for an hour every day beforehand in order to make it presentable. Go and buy something and sightread it — which is what quartet players do. At the College, we have the Haydn quartets, everything up to Op. 33. We have trios, quartets and quintets etc. It's wonderful. You get so much back from the students. It's new to them.

CK: *Do you find that their musicianship in ensemble is weak until you give them some guidance — no matter how good they may be as soloists?*
Absolutely. The musicianship doesn't exist. There are different cross-sections in different collections of students, but certainly at both the London and the Northern Colleges, I'd say there would have been one or two players at most in a whole guitar department. One or two were aware of it at the summer course in Spain, but couldn't do it very well. Hardly one of them knows how to nod his head or count in. It is appalling, but it is true. We know the guitar is difficult, but these things are simple; they can be taught.

CK: *Will you eventually try to incorporate other instruments into this scheme?*
I think they will do that themselves. It follows on.

Photo by Julian Nieman

There's no reason why you shouldn't have two guitars, two flutes and one fiddle, for example. You get into the problem of volume and difficult blending with wind instruments and, say, viola and cello, and you really can't hear the guitar very well. The guitar's going to have to bash out the notes, and then you get a percussive sound.

The first thing is to get them to do the kind of thing that makes clear the gap between the dynamics in ensemble and the blending of sound that we expect in the guitar, i.e. take three parts that you could easily play on one guitar but which great quartet players would spend five or ten minutes on, blending their sound and dynamics. To play most of the music, unless you get to very late Mozart or Haydn, where you get rather difficult fiddling parts, is technically, nothing for a quartet player. Blending a sound like a C and an open E is something that we accept as a part of guitar technique, but a quartet will take time off for 30 seconds just to make sure their bowing's right. But we never give it a moment's thought. Then you've got the bass line....

The guitar's got to get out of the frame of mind of thinking, 'Why should I do that when I can do it on one guitar?'

CK: *How have the guitarists you've met responded to this kind of work?*
They respond absolutely immediately. It's a bit like a self-evident truth: you point out something that we're all aware of, and everybody says 'Of course. We've been trying to forget it!'.

I've had the odd argument on the basis that it is just a little bit more difficult on the guitar to coordinate the two hands. You've got so many different positions in which to finger the notes, therefore there's more excuse for guitarists finding it more difficult. Within the guitar repertoire, that's true, because the guitar repertoire has been written by various guitarists who have exploited the technique. But we're now talking about note for note, single notes.

With kids, again, I don't know exactly what the different courses are, or the different ways it's being done. But, given the traditional way — as when I started — of going through open strings, scales, and on to easy Aguado and Sor, my feeling now would be that actually that is getting on to so-called easy pieces too soon.

CK: *That kind of thing is done at the cost of developing phrasing and upper fingerboard knowledge. You tend to learn the notes down at the other end, doing basic chords and simple studies. The upper fingerboard isn't used in a cantabile fashion.*
That's what I would have thought. It seems to me there must be scope for altering the emphasis of that early teaching, even for kids, so that it takes account of that more.

What about specifically grouping kids together, under direction, at an earlier age than they might have done? So that after, say, four, five or six lessons, where they might start to play a little easy solo piece, they instead play a little ensemble piece? Because that's what happens on recorders in primary schools. They do solos later on, but basically it's an ensemble instrument.

The music is there. You can actually play the recorder repertoire. The big block in changing the curriculum syllabus has always been based on needing guitar editions of it. But it's not necessary, because it's all there: you just use recorder parts, any early music, Haydn quartets, etcetera.

CK: *Some of the people I come across are physically incapable of playing the instrument. Do you feel there's a cut-off point somewhere? How far does egalitarianism go?*
On the one hand, it's a difficult question to answer. On the other hand, related to ensemble playing in general, in its widest application and at all levels, it's an easy question to answer — if you dismiss the false expectations of playing solo pieces which are too difficult. We're all struggling with music which most of the time is relatively more difficult for all of us, compared to what the equivalent stuff would be on another instrument.

It doesn't operate on other instruments. 50 per cent of the time, when you're playing a Beethoven or Mozart sonata, or even large chunks of Schubert and Chopin on the piano, they're actually not that difficult to play. The whole piece may be, but you're talking about half of it, whereas on the guitar you're struggling 95 per cent of the time.

Of course that goes all the way down the scale to amateurs — and, coming back to your point, to people who are not physically cut out owing to their hand shape or fingernails or whatever. It's tragically wrong, the pressure that is put on them, the expectations that they will be able to achieve something of their own. But in its own way that also applies to a lot of amateur string and woodwind players if they had to play solo. It doesn't apply when they join their mates at the weekend and say 'Let's have a quartet evening'. People who perhaps were music students and then later in life have become, say, doctors or accountants but still love music — they don't play very well, but they can still read through a little quartet the first Wednesday in every month. That is the thing. It dispels immediately and finally that pressure and that expectation. People would love it — if they knew.

With minimal guidance, people can go and get a little ensemble and read through music with a few friends. And that's really what it's all about. What else is music about? It's not about breeding out-of-work solo musicians.

Colin Cooper: *Would you say that ensemble experience improves solo performance?*
That's why I like it in the curriculum at college level. In time it will affect attitudes to other things, but it in no way means a sudden change or alteration in existing curricula or even in existing playing. Hopefully the addition of the thing will act as an unconscious, good influence on the solo playing. It certainly can't hurt it.

CC: *Can you discount the arguments that, playing in ensemble, we tend to lose the color range of the guitar? And that playing transcribed music is somehow not quite the thing — isn't all this irrelevant?*
The color range of the guitar that is supposed to be retained or protected by the status quo is a very artificial one. It's not flexible, as with a string or a wind player. It's a thing of guitar 'sweetness' or harpsichord ponticello; it's not based on a constantly changing melodic color, though obviously one or two players do it instinctively. In terms of the way most students play, it's not. Whereas string players, as soon as they start to get a proficient technique, start to feel it in their bow pressure. We don't have anything like that.

Depending on the psychology of the individual, I think that most people — not all — would find that they look back on those occasions when they've played ensemble music. I know, speaking for myself — and I know that Julian feels the same when we're playing duets or when he's playing with other people — that there is an added dimension which is nothing to do with the achievement of performing on the stage. You do actually get enjoyment from hearing other people play at the same time. You're almost like

a listener, because you're participating in something that someone else is doing. I think there's no end to the possibilities.

I don't want to interfere with other people's curriculum, but I think it would be good if Manchester (The Royal Northern College) and London (The Royal College) have got it going by next September. If there is ensemble curriculum every week in both colleges, it would be a valuable precedent. Everyone would have to do it.

CK: *Quite apart from what the students are going to get out of it, which is very considerable, what are you going to get out of it?*
It's very difficult to work out what you enjoy in a job, because your own enjoyment is what propagates the thing in the first place.

It's very exciting. Simple though it is, you get a quartet of students — OK, we've heard a guitar quartet before, playing special music, but suddenly you think of a particular Haydn quartet. I don't know what suddenly made me first think of it. I'd heard it, and I had a score, I think, of the 'Bird', Opus 33 No. 3, and I just happened to look at it, and I thought, well, not only can they do all the consort music and all that, but if they want something more challenging they can do this quartet. Now the excitement when the quartet in Córdoba did this — ! Stefano Cardi was the best player that year, so he played the first fiddle part, which is a bit more difficult than the others. But the excitement of hearing these four players! Within ten days they'd prepared, for argument's sake, all the quartet. In fact they did half the first movement, including the exposition and half the development; they did all of the scherzo, all of the slow movement except the recap in a slightly different key, and they did all the last movement — in ten days! Hearing that was really quite something.

'The Bird' is not the only one; most of the quartets up to Op. 33 go. But 'The Bird' is a lovely quartet musically. We're so used to Sor and Giuliani, who are lovely at their best, and every now and then you get a nice sort of neo-Beethoven diminished progression or Neapolitan sixth or something, and you think, 'That's really nice'. But it's not like Haydn. .

CK: *A Grade three player ought to be able to cope with the viola part. It would be boring for a good player, perhaps, but amateur players have always been glad of those quartets — for the sheer pleasure of being able to do them.*
Exactly. For a lot of the time, the viola player and second fiddle of, say, the Amadeus or the Gabrieli Quartets are playing very boring parts. So it's a bit much for guitarist to start complaining that those parts are boring

CC: *The whole is a good piece of music. Guitarists have to learn how to cope with seemingly boring parts of the whole, and to make them interesting — to themselves as well as to everybody else. It's a change of mental attitude as much as anything else. To a true artist, two bars' rest can be creative.*
Take the modulation I mentioned earlier in the Haydn quartet; as I was saying, you get to that point, and you might have been playing viola, a C and an A in each bar, but you're part of the whole development of the piece, and when you get to this point, it's only one little modulation. But it's such a good one.

CK: *Is there any possibility of your working with a formal quartet for a while?*
Not really, no. First of all, I don't think it's relevant at this stage. And without very close examination of the different pieces, I'm not sure that any of the Haydn and the Mozart quartets would actually justify an actual professional performance. In other words, it's needed as an exercise — a perfect exercise.

That having been said, my instinct is that actually there must be, at a quick glance, three or four of the complete Haydn quartets that would fully justify a guitar quartet performance at a concert. That's only a quick judgment, but I certainly think it's valuable material. And of course a lot of the early consort music.

There are some practical difficulties when you come to the Haydn quartets. First of all, the range of the fiddle where it goes too high: you often have to juggle with the parts for them to fit together successfully. And there's the viola clef, which I don't think people can be expected to have to sightread. And there's the cello part, not because of the bass clef — which everybody ought to be able to read anyway — but where it goes down to C. On these rare occasions you have to put the odd note or two, or even short passage, up an octave. The viola part is easy to write out. It's not like writing out guitar music, where you've got hundreds of notes in each bar. You can write out a whole movement of the viola clef in half an hour, so there's no impediment. So the practical problems are small: the viola clef, the low C in the cello and the odd fiddle parts.

But it is communication and enjoyment We can't continually have the object of all music education being to produce the magic number of solo people who are going to earn a living. That's a crazy approach.

CK: *Every parent with a musical child is faced with a dilemma: whether to apply pressure and so risk losing the child's willingness to work, or whether to let things take their course, with the possibility of equally dire results. How was persuasion applied in your own case?*
I was persuaded quite heavily into practice, being told that I was good, and that it was natural that I should do it. It was sort of assumed that was what I would do, and therefore I should practise. And I used to say, when I was about 20, I would have liked to have *decided* to do it. But looking back, all I can say is, 'Thank God I was pushed into it!' I can't imagine anything better.

But it's a difficult area. There are very, very general guidelines, but there's no rule. You can take a famous violinist who might have been forced into playing scales by his father with a whip over him from the age of two — and there have been a couple of examples of that — and they've turned out to be fantastic fiddlers, but their lives might be an absolute misery in terms of their internal existence. So who's going to make the judgment as to whether it was right or not? I could say, with patronizing hindsight, 'Well, you know, my father never gave me any choice — that's what I was going to be'. And then, immodestly and honestly, I'd have to look back and say 'Actually, yes, he was right, and I'm very glad he did push me into it.' But I couldn't go from that to saying that every child whose parents thinks that he or she is talented should be pushed into it.

CK: *You can only say, in retrospect, that in your case it worked out?*
That's it.

CC: *On the other hand, within the limits of the guitar, you've never been without another option, and your career has gone off in quite different directions from time to time. You aren't confined in the conventional mould of the classical performer, are you?*
No. But that's luck again. It's predisposition; something in my personality. Musically, I've grown up in London, having done the preliminary musical training at college. And I've done a hell of a lot with other musicians, limited though the guitar repertoire is. In the 60s I did concerts with the singer Wilfred Brown for ten years, which included for a couple of years a religious overseas radio program, where I was doing about five arrangements of songs a week. And playing the very small chamber music repertoire for guitar over and over again with a group called Musica da Camera, and then with the Melos Ensemble, doing new music. I rather took to all that, and I sort of carried on. I still do the odd concerts with the Sinfonietta, even though Tim Walker does most of them. So the different directions for me have come through these situations, and it applies in exactly the same way to anything so-called 'commercial'.

It seems strange to say so, but it's never, ever, been self-conscious or even conscious. Then again, looking back, I think it might have been obvious what I was doing.

CC: *But it was the sort of channelling that could have resulted in a solo career in which you spent your whole existence jetting around and playing the Aranjuez in every city in the world.*
It's also connected very deeply with one's ordinary, social private life. I've been married twice and I've split up twice. I have a daughter who's grown up and a son who's growing up, so I don't want to be away for six or nine months of the year, playing the *Aranjuez* or whatever. I won't go away for more than one three-week trip in a year. I mean, a few days, ten days, a week here, a week there, is OK, but I don't want to do too much. So if you like, it's an added excuse to keep me disciplined!

I don't know what I would have done if I'd been on another instrument. If instead of just *Aranjuez*, I'd had a repertoire of 20 concertos for another instrument — would it have been different? Would I have been more tempted? Would I have been a different person? If—if—if —

CC: *Did the guitar as an instrument give you a little more freedom in that respect?*
Absolutely! That's the luck. But certainly, I am and have always, to my recollection, been able to take responsibility for myself, so if I complain that I've been away too long in the year, well, that's my fault because I've not foreseen it enough. There's been no financial need. There's not many of us on the guitar in that position. And the things I've done happen to be around London, because I've been here for a combination of musical and personal, private and social reasons.

You can't explain yourself all the time either. I had a letter asking me to go Esztergom, but it's August. August is school holidays for kids, and I sort of want to be around. For years and years I never played a single date between July the 20th and September the 15th, when my daughter had her school holidays. We always used to rent a place in France and have lots of friends to stay — you know, trying to live the sort of routine that most people with families do, having school holidays and weekends.

And I wouldn't play at weekends. You're either free or you're not, and that's my way of looking at things.

CK: *Are you interested in any of the East European music that's coming out? Koshkin and Rak, for example?*
I heard *The Prince's Toys* on Radio 3 (*by Nikita Koshkin. John Williams later took the same composer's Usher Waltz into his repertory — Ed.*). It's quite nice, but I've heard lots of things that I like a lot. I quite see myself getting music for the odd occasion, but I can't see myself sweating and practising every day to learn something by memory. It's this gulf between performance and listening; I'm quite happy to listen to someone else playing it without feeling it's incumbent on me to necessarily play it myself.

It's purely personal. I get on to music that interests me particularly. I'm not saying it's better or worse, only that it interests me, involves me. Paul Hart's piece with NYJO (National Youth Jazz Orchestra) is, I think, a wonderful piece; it gives me so much musical and playing satisfaction. NYJO is 40 strong, and I use an amplified Takamine live, but my Smallman on the recording. It was so lovely; it's got everything in it that music is supposed to have.

Paul Hart has written three other little pieces, which are wonderful. One of them's a peach, with just a piano and synth and guitar. Another is piano and guitar, and the other one is just synths with a tiny bit of guitar.

It's very difficult to explain in terms of guitar repertoire what appeals to me musically. I find it very difficult to differentiate between what I like playing and what I like listening to, and one doesn't necessarily involve the other. I might like listening to other guitarists playing. Out of curiosity and out of enjoyment, I'll like hearing them play a new piece — without the slightest urge to learn it or play it myself.

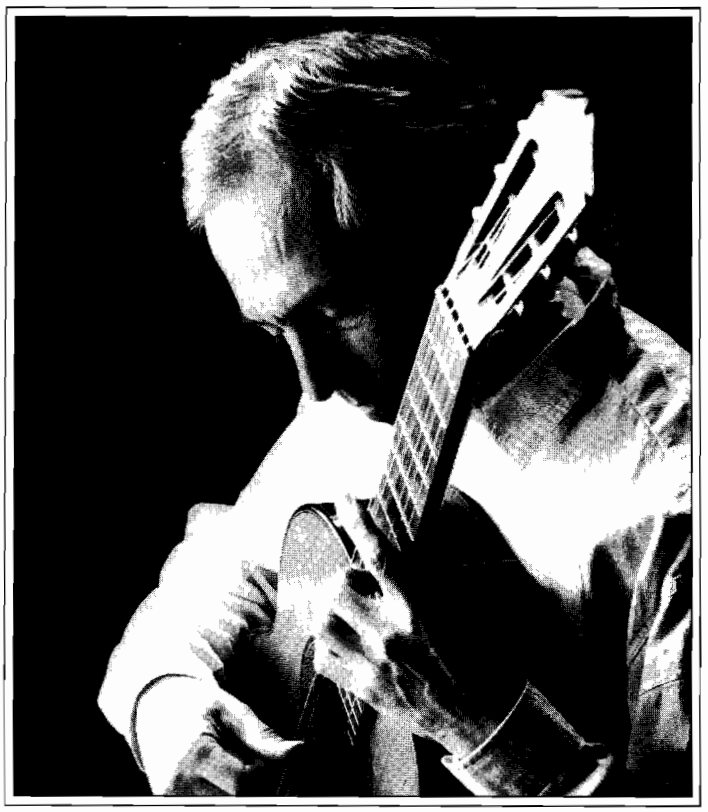

Photo by Julian Niemar/Courtesy Sony Classics

I've commissioned Steve Gray to write a concerto for me. Steve is the keyboard player in Sky; he's a wonderful musician and, unlike all the guitar concerto composers, he's a real, with a capital R, orchestrator.

CC: *To go back to teaching for a moment — is it all ensemble now, or do you find time to teach solo?*
For the last two or three years I haven't taught solo at all. I'm sick of sitting down in front of people and playing, say, *Asturias*. There are so many ways of playing Asturias . . .

CK: *Do people come along with preconceived ideas of what you might expect and how they ought to do it?*
No, I think they come along expecting directions as to how to play it like I play it! Sometimes you get misunderstandings, because I'm loath to direct people in that way. It is important, but it's ceased to have the importance that the ensemble thing has for me.

It's no good mixing it. In one of these Córdoba courses I was doing both. People were putting up with the ensemble thing so that they could get a chance to play. I thought, no, there's only one answer to this — no solo tuition.

Again, it's that business about regular solo teaching. Instead of a reason, or investigating their own ability to teach themselves and develop their own personality, it becomes a crutch: 'Give me the formula, and I'll play it like you' — that's what it amounts to.

The last couple of times I've done solo teaching, I took to saying: 'Well, look, if you want to know my attitude to this course, whether it's ten days or two weeks, the best thing I'd be able to hear from anyone would be that at the end of the course they never want to, or need to, come anywhere near me again.'

I've found with a few people with whom I've maintained connections at most courses that they know exactly what it is they've wanted or been able to take from me. Stefano Cardi, for example, was fantastic at understanding this. In the end the penny drops; the brightest ones know how to teach themselves.

CK: *We mentioned earlier the comparative shortage of English students at overseas guitar courses, and your course at Córdoba is apparently no exception. Is this something to do with the fact that we're an island race?*
It's to do with all the arts. We're still elitist here. It seems extraordinary that there seems to be such a big gap in attitudes and abilities at these courses. Belgians, Dutch and French also turn up. Whether there's a historical reason for this I don't know, but they turn up and understand. There was an Italian trio in the first year, and they had such flair. Is it that the English students don't travel so well?

CK: *Do you think we're a complacent race?*
I think, generally, yes; and as a result the English guitar scene is behind now, overall. In my observations — and unexpectedly so — behind America as well. America used to be the great lagger. In my younger time, in the 50s and 60s, America really was behind everyone. We always used to wonder, in amazement, how a country with so many facilities and a population of a couple of hundred million could have such an appallingly bad standard. I think the reason was that the only ones pushed into classical guitar were from well-off middle-class families who thought that by buying their kids a Ramírez and sending them to a Segovia 'workshop' in Spain, it would 'buy' them culture and a musical career.

It's just not the case at all now. I think that at last the true wealth of America's cultural and racial diversity is teaching us all a lesson. On all levels, there's a lot of guitar activity all over the place, and of a very good standard. I did pick that up when I was there. The teaching organization in, for example, Dallas is a model. The guitar society there has a full-time paid director who organizes teaching, senior citizens, entertainment, playing at schools, all done by the society. In England, I just wonder.

England overall, musically and educationally as far as audiences, numbers of orchestras and numbers of other practicing musicians — all that outcome of post-second world war egalitarian secondary education and all that — is still musically ahead of everybody else in the western world. With that basis, why is it that the guitar standard, as I see it, is so much lower in musical and technical attitude than in most continental countries?

We have 14 or 15 orchestras in London. Paris doesn't have 14 or 15 orchestras. New York doesn't have 14 or 15 orchestras and the audiences that we have in London — quite apart from the orchestras in the other cities, of a terrific standard: Birmingham, and so on. I don't understand how this terrific musicality is not reflected in the guitar standard.

CC/CK