

# MANUEL BARRUECO

*Manuel Barrueco's surname means 'Baroque', and certainly he plays the music of Bach and other composers of the Baroque very well indeed. To me, however, he is the supreme classicist in his approach to the instrument. The very way he strikes the string is delightful. His posture on the platform is one of total balance between the tension that every artist feels — a necessary tension if you are going to play the guitar at all — and a state of mental relaxation in which mind and memory can operate to the full, unhindered by any sense of strain. The result is peak performance virtually every time.*

*The circumstances of our first interview were unusual. He had been taking part in the Mid-Wales Festival, and had given a recital in the church of St. Andrew, Presteigne. The BBC, personified by Gareth Walters and the staff who worked from the Outside Broadcasts van, were present to record the occasion. Somehow the audience, walking through the unlit churchyard to their pews, had managed to avoid tripping over the heavy cables that connected van with church.*

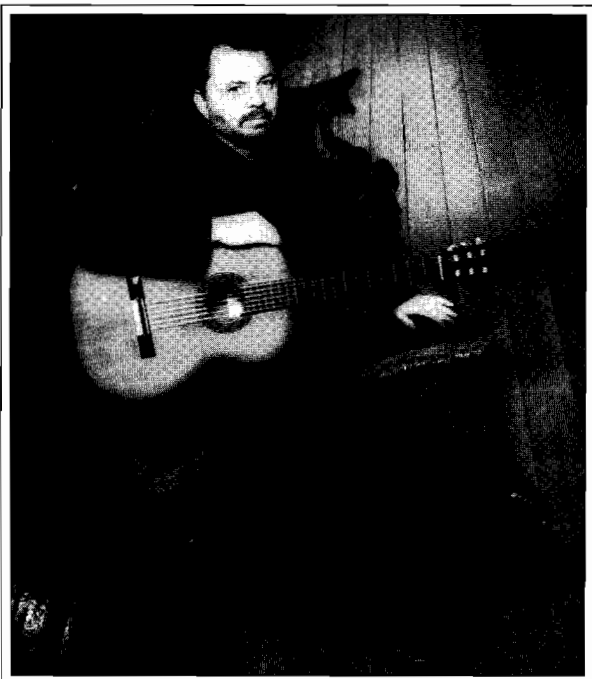
*The following morning we were enjoying coffee at the house of another Gareth, Gareth Rees-Roberts, and his singer wife Lyndon. One of the organizers of the Festival, Gareth is himself an excellent guitarist who had won the Julian Bream prize at the Royal Academy of Music. I was hoping for a chance to interview Manuel, but animated conversation continued without the possibility of interruption.*

*Interruption there had to be, however, because Manuel had a plane to catch from Gatwick. Since I had volunteered to drive him there, I consoled myself with the thought that there would be plenty of time during the drive of some 200 miles. My first suggestion that it was about time we left met with general agreement, but the conversation continued. Knowing the winding Welsh roads only too well, I finally got him into the car, with, as I thought, plenty of time to spare.*

*It turned out that Manuel had been under the misapprehension that Presteigne was not far from London, and that there would be time for a little shopping in the capital before making the short trip down to the airport. But though distances in Britain are small compared with those in the United States, there are no motorways in Wales; I knew from experience that the journey was going to take the best part of four hours, an average of 50 mph if we were lucky.*

*With that in mind, I put my foot down as far as I dared, handing over the microphone of the tape recorder to my passenger so that we could conduct at least some sort of an interview. To be discussing Baroque ornamentation while hurtling round the bends in narrow Welsh roads at the maximum speed compatible with safety was a new experience.*

*We finished the interview and got to Gatwick in time for the flight, but without any time for shopping. We have met many times since, and I never cease to marvel at the playing of this supremely well-equipped musician.*



*Photo by Simon Fowler*

*You seem to have a special feeling for the Baroque. Weiss, Bach, Scarlatti. Can you say something about your approach to it?*

**Manuel Barrueco:** The only thing I can say is that I have worked. I have studied to a certain extent how to play baroque music. Of course, that's only part of it. I guess I feel comfortable with it. It's come to the point with me that, whether it's right or wrong, it feels natural to me. I remember, years ago as a student, trying to understand this music, and it was always a struggle; what you do here, what you do there, not understanding certain passages, not understanding certain concepts. I think for the last few years, I've come to the point where I don't have too many questions. That's not to say that there may not be some other faults in it; I know that. But I've become sort of comfortable, playing in this way.

*Spanish music too is something that you play exceptionally well. We in England shall never forget your first appearance at the Wigmore Hall, and the dazzling way you played Albéniz and Granados. Is there any particular music you don't play or don't want to play?*

You know, I feel comfortable with many different kinds of music. I am flexible. Not only in music, but in other things too. The only music that I have stayed away from has been the Renaissance. And honestly, the reason why I haven't played it in concert is because I feel that it's a specialized area. I feel that it's something I would like to know more about before I play it in public. So I may play a piece or two from the Renaissance, but I'm not going to make an issue of it at this stage until I'm more familiar with it.

As I said before, I'm flexible. I can play renaissance music and feel comfortable with it, but there I still have questions to which I don't know the answers. That's not to say I don't still have a lot of questions about all the music that I play, but I feel that I have enough answers. With renaissance music, I feel that I don't have enough answers. Also, for a long time I didn't like a lot of renaissance music, but I think a lot of it had to do with the way it was played, which I found to be too mechanical and strict. It was not too long before I heard a couple who were playing renaissance music with a freedom that really opened doors for me.

*How much freedom can an artist have? I believe you teach — do you find that helpful, or does it get in the way of your performing? In other words, does it restrict your freedom?*

When my concert schedule got too busy, I stopped teaching for a couple of years. I've gone back. I missed it. Years ago, an old teacher at the school where I was teaching told me that it was always good for a player to teach. He didn't go into details. Now I think that it is true.

For me, the answer is that to make music, to make art as well as you can, and to give a performance, are maybe two different things at times. If it's going to be art, I think it's something that has to be able to withstand repeated listening and careful observation.

In a concert situation, I think it's much more the impact of the moment, the impression it's giving at the time. If you examine it later, it may not be as good as that impression. I think my playing had begun to rely on effects a little bit too much. I think by having

students, if you practice what you preach, it sort of puts a responsibility on you to maintain a certain level, not only musically but even technically. If somebody gets a little bit of a name, I think people are sometimes inclined to forgive the bad things that one may do.

There is a Spanish expression of which the translation would be: 'Make yourself famous, and then go to sleep'. You are doing minimal work, really, just patching-up kind of work. It's not as thorough as it should be. But I now realize that one has to do something.

I would like to say something about the freedom you mention. Some people get caught up — I say some people but *I* have got caught up at times, and at times I still get caught up on ideas and thoughts and information and this kind of thing. I think ultimately an artist has to do what he thinks is good — what he likes. And then he hopes that other people will like it. For example, I will not play a piece in a certain way because I think people will like hearing it in that way. It would probably not have any conviction. I have to do it in the way I think is good. I have to go with that. That has to be my game, and I just hope that people like it.

It's sad in a way that you can't please everybody. You just can't. You have to do what you think is right, to be honest with yourself.

*Is that the difference between an artist and a performer?*

Perhaps. I mean there are many times, especially when one's musicianship is developing, when one is confused, you know. You may feel one way about something, while your intellect tells you something else. This is at the developmental stage. Once you arrive at a conclusion that this is what you think is right, you have to do it. You can't *not* do it, afraid of what somebody will say. That's what makes it interesting to me.

*Two or three years ago in this country you had the reputation of being a very fast player. This is a dangerous kind of label to give to a musician, isn't it?* That really doesn't bother me too much. The only way in which it used to bother me was that some years ago I would try to live up to what people said I was. This is not a contradiction to what I was saying before. For example, I would hear people say 'he plays without mistakes'. Then I would try so hard to play without mistakes. The point is, I have never played without

mistakes, and from what I can see I never shall! So I tried to be something that people were telling me I was. On the other hand, I'm sure it has helped to keep up a certain standard.

Nobody in their right mind would deny themselves the opportunity of having a good technique. The more technique you have, the more you can do with the music. No question about it. Technique is necessary. People interpret technique differently. Some people think technique is playing fast and loud. Some people may interpret it as not only that but also individual control of notes. Some people, for example, can play really loud. I wouldn't be so interested in that without these other aspects of technique.

People sometimes take a narrow view of it. It doesn't bother me when people say 'he's fast', 'he's slow', 'he's warm', 'he's cold', 'he's musical' or 'he's not musical'. It's human nature. Different people come to concerts for different reasons. If they enjoy it, I think they can enjoy it on any level they want to.

There are always influences. As much as one tries to be as honest as one can, there are still influences. I don't think they can be avoided. I think one has to learn to deal with them as much as possible. I find myself all the time getting off the track somewhere, and then going back in again. Hopefully!

I have come to a certain point now, and I can't even describe to myself what it is. The easiest way for me to describe it is to say that I will do what I think I should do, what I like, what I think is good. I will try to be as honest as I can about it. And then let things happen, let things be the way they want to be. That probably sounds awfully simple...

*... But of course it isn't. You have arrived at that point by way of a lot of hard work.*

You have to work. Of course, I haven't stopped working — that's not the case at all. You know, I think it's very normal to kind of fall asleep. I think if one becomes famous it's easier for one to impress other people. People will tell one perhaps how great one is perhaps more often. One gets a better reaction from the public simply because one has more of a name. One starts believing that one is really something rather special. And I think it's a normal human reaction. Anyone having this happen to them would probably react in the same way. It would take an unusual human being not to be too much affected by that. But I think we all do to some extent or another.

*Isn't that why the best artists are unusual people — because they can stand up against that kind of human weakness? They don't believe their own publicity. That could be a weakness in itself. It may be that a certain kind of temperament is so critical that it doesn't allow one to relax.*

There are at least two ways of enjoying one's work. By your own standards as compared to others; and to keep judging yourself by your own standards. That's the important thing.

There are also certain other aspects. Perhaps it's hard for, let's say, guitar students, music fans in general, to understand unless they've gone through it. If one wants to build a career the normal way, meaning from the bottom up, I think there are times when certain risks are taken. And sometimes one is going to fail. Maybe somebody comes to a concert and sees one in a situation where one has failed. They may arrive at all sorts of conclusions without really knowing what's going on behind the scenes. That doesn't mean to say they don't have the right to be critical and to complain. I think they should, and I think this will keep the artist more honest — I hope.

This is related to what I said before, about having come to a point at which I'm comfortable. It's something else I wanted to say, because I know that there are guitarists and guitar students, for example, who many times have asked questions about what they have to do in order to be comfortable.

Also I feel, and I have contributed in part to it, that there's a kind of negative cloud around the guitar world. I don't know if you would agree with me, but I have sensed that kind of being critical, kind of 'I don't want to be a guitarist for this or a guitarist for that' attitude — and this is from a guitarist!

Do you understand what I mean? You know, it would be perhaps funny to have a caricature or a cartoon or something of somebody holding a guitar and saying 'I hate guitarists.'

In a sense I actually love the instrument more than I have in a long time. I understand its beauties a little bit more. It's a really beautiful instrument, but really misunderstood very often. Not only by people outside the guitar, but also by guitarists themselves.

With the guitar, we've gone through an incredible stage which I think is a development of questioning so

much about it — you know, is it valid, is the repertoire good? What I'm saying is that after this, I've finally come up with positive answers.

*Do guitarists perhaps develop these negative attitudes because they are aware of how other people regard the guitar?*

Sometimes. The other day I did a television show in Germany, and one of the pieces I did was the *Chaconne* by Bach. And one question was 'Why did you play this on the guitar?' I could have said, well, you know, Bach transcribed some of his violin music for the harpsichord. But all these kinds of things in the end are just excuses. The only answer is: listen to it! I'm saying this, assuming it's a good performance on the guitar. If you don't like it, then don't listen to it. It's that simple. When I hear good music well played on the guitar, to me it's really a beautiful experience. I think also that there is no doubt that we have a lot to overcome before people can hear the guitar. Some people become very snobbish, you know, and I do believe that snobbishness is a type of ignorance. But then again, one has the right to make certain choices and say 'I don't like this' or 'I don't like that' or 'I won't give this any time'. It's their prerogative. The truth of the matter is that we also have a long way to go in improving the musicianship of our guitar playing in general. How many times people come to the guitar and don't necessarily hear a musical performance! They may think that this is the guitar, when in fact it's not the guitar but only the guitarist. Aside from the fact that some people may not like the guitar, I really do not believe that anybody, given a good performance, could possibly dislike the instrument. It's something I cannot see. I can see them taking a while, perhaps. But I cannot see them disliking it.

On the other hand, I have to admit that when I hear the guitar poorly played, I cannot see anybody liking it. Talk about the violin being a horrible instrument to listen to when it's poorly played — I think the guitar gives it damned good competition. A poorly played guitar is a horrible thing to listen to.

*What does one do when one hears the guitar poorly played? Discourage the player — or encourage him in the hope that things will improve?*

I believe in being straight and honest about it, and letting things take their own course. If somebody's concerned about the guitar out of love for it, the best thing they can do is to try to do the best job they can in what they do, whether writing, playing or composing, or whatever field they're in. That's what's happening

to the guitar at the moment.

*The bad players eventually become lost to view, it's true, but meanwhile they can lose audiences for everybody else.*

I don't think you can have the good without the bad. To expect there will be only good players is unrealistic.

*Do you think that the guitar is still at a stage where there is a higher proportion of bad players than with violin or piano?*

I think if somebody feels that it's bad to have so many bad concerts, then they shouldn't go to these concerts. If they don't go to the concerts, then there will not be those concerts. Nature will take care of that! If they go to those concerts, they are supporting them. Besides, you know, ultimately people are human beings, and I find it's very difficult to judge for oneself. I'm sure that the vast majority of people who get up and play a bad concert probably do not realize they're playing a bad concert. They probably think they're doing at least a decent concert — at least I hope that's the case. And they need to learn, they need to know.

I really believe that time takes care of things.

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Photo by Jane Hamborsky