

PEPE ROMERO

See him going for a walk in the park, and you will surely never suspect that there goes someone quite out of the ordinary. But conversation enlightens you rapidly. Some critics say he is one of those rare all-time virtuosos, projecting his genius onto the six strings of an instrument that is heavily involved in the fight for survival among all the other classical instruments; others are associating him with names like Franz Liszt or Alexis Weissenberg (b. Sofia 1929), both pianists. I believe Pepe Romero to be one of the last true romantics.

Romantic? Yes, in the sense of being dedicated to the arts, bound to music, living for the guitar and the beauty of its music, not caring about fashionable evolutions, compromise or trends. But Pepe Romero, as he says, tends towards being happy, and although that is easy to read it is to be seen in different aspects: playing the guitar, having plans and ideas, always being creative and not static, loving people and giving them what they might regard as an enrichment.

I don't think anyone can really say what the guitar means to Pepe Romero, but two episodes speak for themselves. Years ago he engaged in some jogging sessions, but while his thoughts were probably circling around a concert he had to give on the following day, he broke his ankle. Mounted with a heavy plaster of Paris dressing, unable to walk except on crutches, he was driven the next day to the concert hall, where he was heaved on to his chair by the conductor himself. Another chair supported the aching gypsum-covered leg — and Pepe was playing the *Aranjuez*.

In 1986, a large truck caused an accident on an American highway. Pepe's car was pushed off the road, and looped the loop several times. He tells the story:

'Being then in a desolate situation, with my head downwards, I was asked by the truck driver if I were dead. I was not, so I told him; but I felt that man was closer to shock than I myself, asking me if there were *anyone else* dead! No one was, but I felt my left wrist aching, and I thought the best way to find out if it was broken or not would be to play the guitar. The hard guitar shell had hit me right in the back, so I was aware where the guitar was. Somehow I managed to get out of that crumpled car. I found that the guitar had not suffered at all from the crash, and so I played it. Afterwards I was told that people were standing



Photo by Philips Classics Productions/Christian Steiner

around me with strange looks on their faces.'

It was July 1986 when we met again, at Salzburg, where the International Summer Academy Mozarteum had invited young and gifted musicians from all over the world. Pepe was leading a masterclass there. He did not have a guitar with him. 'No, I do not play to let the students know what probably could be done better,' he said. 'It's up to them to discover the things that have to be changed. I am there to watch them play, and after that we speak about this or that. So we come closer to the essential points, I think.'

He is calm when talking, and less vivacious than you might expect. 'Students do not need sermons,' he explains. 'A few words hitting the mark are more effective than lots of sentences.' And he respects the individual: 'I always try to put myself into their place, so sometimes there really are two or even more different teaching methods relating to one and the same thing. What's good for one does not necessarily have to be good for the next one as well.'

They had come from different parts of the world to join that masterclass: England, Italy, the USA, even Brazil. Asked why she had crossed half the continent to attend Pepe's masterclass, a young student said: 'I've never watched Pepe teaching, but I have heard so much about it. Maybe I was looking for that special atmosphere

where teaching can change so many things.'

Another student: 'Pepe Romero is the guitar authority to me. But I know that he himself is far from being an authoritarian, and I would have flown to China if necessary.'

'Teaching,' Pepe says, 'is something important and essential. If there is something you are able to offer to others, you should do so.' Watching the students' reactions and recognizing the effects of his teaching, one senses a special atmosphere being built up, a natural 'student—music-teacher' relationship that enables everyone to verbalize his or her problems. 'No, there are no plans, rules or things like that,' Pepe admits. 'Maybe you will miss a special kind of preparation. There isn't any. But there is an order in it, of course. So, the first thing is to hold the guitar in the most comfortable way. Many a guitarist, even a good one, does not know that things could be more comfortable if he held the guitar in a correct way. And "correct" means fitting to the individual. The second step: the students are to play themselves, pieces they feel at home with. We all listen to them, and then I look at the mistake or mistakes that really have a chance to be eliminated during this three-weeks course. There is no use sticking to a problem when you know that it is really impossible to eliminate the mistake while we are together. The student must not go home and rack his brains about something the teacher might have had in mind and that he can't recall concretely. So we look at what can be done during these three weeks. Having heard him play for the first time, we will see what comes out the following day after several hours of practicing alone, and then there are concrete plans how to proceed. So, technical things come first, followed by questions relating to the music itself. During the course, and at the end of it, each student is given the chance to perform, and there's a wide variety ranging from guitar solo to guitar with oboe, or even guitar and orchestra. We prepare for these events very carefully. I will attend each concert, and afterwards we discuss things relating to the performance.'

Then we changed the topic. Asked what the guitar meant to him, Pepe answered: 'It could be easily said: my life, my love.' The guitar is for Pepe Romero a subject of total integration and identification. Whatever he plays, it is interpreted with the authority of a man who knows exactly what he is doing, with a tremendous knowledge of the relevant backgrounds.

'It all depends on the way in which it is done, or in

which it should be done, at least. It depends on one's own ideas and the will to bring those ideas to a realization.' And Pepe plays the Bach Partita as if there were just one legitimate 'idea', that of the composer himself. 'People can do anything on or with the guitar; they may transcribe or arrange whatever they think could or should be done. There is no question about what is allowed or what is not,' he adds, with past discussions in mind. 'The contradictory aspects of last year's emotions and discussion often demonstrate an inability to accept things which others have seriously thought about. I do not think that there are strict rules in general when we are talking about the pros and cons of transcriptions and arrangements. Music is living, it is far from being a static something. Why not wait and see what the future brings?'

I asked if *Pictures from an exhibition* would be a challenge for him.

(The Japanese guitarist Kazuhito Yamashita had recently caused a sensation by playing an arrangement for solo guitar of Mussorgsky's piano work. — Ed.)

'I don't think so, at least not at the moment. There are other things of more interest to me. I am seriously thinking about recording Giuliani's *Rossiniane*; they are beautiful compositions and very demanding for the player. There is so much good music that has not been played before.'

We talked about the guitar today and its related activities. In every country one can see tendencies that make one ponder on the future of the instrument. To put it another way, is there a future for classical guitar music?

'We know that there are fewer people deeply interested in or involved with classical guitar music than there were, say, three to five years ago. But on the other hand, we certainly have more splendid young guitarists than probably ever before. In my opinion, so long as there are enthusiastic people like Brian Jeffery and Thomas Heck, who are doing important research into composers' lives and music history in general, we need not be too nervous about the future of the classical guitar. I think we happen to be living in a really exciting time in which many pieces, even masterpieces, by many a brilliant composer of the past are being discovered, and many contemporary composers are engaged with the concert guitar. So maybe one should ask the same question again in ten years. No one really knows what's going to happen.'

Finally, we talked about the different styles of guitar music, about those seemingly endless discussions concerning the question ‘What is classical?’, and if folk music should or should not play a part.

‘If there is a tendency in Germany or elsewhere to make a strict difference between the so-called “classical” and the folk elements, it is another thing in America or Spain. I myself do not like those analytical characteristics, for music is so far-reaching and extensive, especially guitar music — simply because the guitar has been influenced by so many important movements in its history, and the instrument developed side by side with the technique. This was as true in the 16th century as it is today.

‘Those who try to see the guitar simply and solely on just one branch — the pure, classical branch — have not understood the essence of our instrument; they are used to sticking obstinately to only one aspect and, for whatever reason, will not tolerate any deflection. But one should not overestimate things like that. Art means, not least, freedom of thought. It is not a means or a medium for accomplishing one’s own will.’

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