

ROLAND DYENS

There is a touch of the magician in Roland Dyens. In performance, this ability enables him to follow one of his own jazz-influenced compositions with music by Fernando Sor, and it does not seem incongruous. At least, it does not seem incongruous to those who are able to keep their minds open to relationships between not merely notes but also pieces and the periods in which they were created.

Unfortunately, a kind of rigidity has become the norm, fuelled by the Early Music movement, in which only the boldest spirits dare step out of line. Roland is one of those spirits, and he incurs criticism among those who have made up their minds in advance: about, for instance, the place of jazz, or the way an ornament not only should be played but must be played. These are the people who believe that there is only one way to play Sor. They have contributed a lot to knowledge, but they are not so expert when it comes to evaluating a living individual's creative talent. Thus one or two individuals shook their heads in a worried fashion when Roland Dyens played for the first time in England, muttering that Sor should not be played like that. All I can say is that he was played like that, and it was wonderful. The only golden rule is that music must be created during a performance; if it is, then departures from received wisdom can be accepted; if it is not, all the 'authenticity' in the world will not save it.

When I asked Roland — no doubt impertinently, because one should be careful about asking a magician questions — he replied, somewhat enigmatically, that he 'listened to the silence'. In other words, the space around the notes is as important as the notes themselves. It is an approach that would probably not get you very far in some music — Bach, for instance, who was more interested in the structured intricacy of the notes themselves than in the spaces around them — but it can show other composers in a new light, as Roland Dyens demonstrated brilliantly.

Roland Dyens is one of a small handful of composer-guitarists whose work seems to me to be reaching beyond the confines of 'classical' guitar. Through their knowledge of the fingerboard, through their understanding of what the guitar is capable of, through their essential creativity, these artists are composing guitar music that is new in every sense. It is difficult to classify it, but that is our problem, not theirs. Their work reasserts the supremacy of the guitar as an individual's instrument above all other instruments.

Our interview was conducted in the back of a swaying, lurching minibus in Poland one autumn afternoon, and was printed in Classical Guitar in March 1995 with the title 'The Sound and the Silence'.

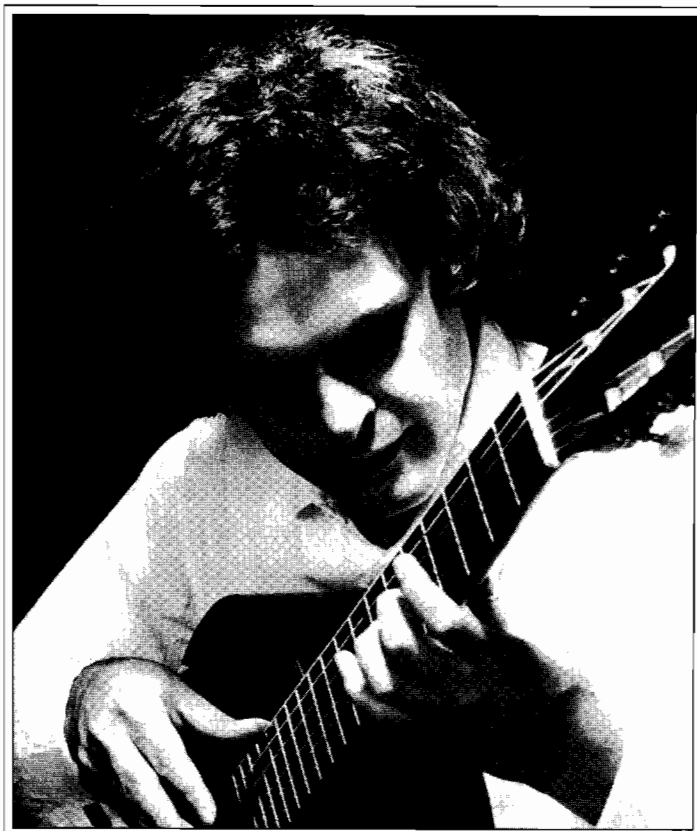


Photo by Jacques Vangansbeke

Roland Dyens was born in Tunisia, North Africa, in 1955. He won the Palestrina International Competition in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 1979, and in the same year won the Special Prize in the Alessandria Competition, Italy. He studied composition with Raymond Weber and Desire Dondoyne, and is currently Professor of Guitar at the Conservatoire de Chaville (Hauts-de-Seine). He was later appointed professor of guitar at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique of Paris. He spends most of his year in France, but is much in demand at international guitar festivals around the world.

'My first teacher was one of these very rare teachers that came to your home. In this period, in the 60s, there were no real teachers in Paris. He was one of the last of these people, very old, coming on a motorcycle. It gave me the taste for the guitar. His name was Maison. In my records, when I have the opportunity to mention him, I do: "Roland Dyens, élève de Robert Maison et Alberto Ponce" — but nobody knows about Maison. It's a gesture to him.

Everybody asks me, who is Robert Maison? It's an opportunity to explain who he was." Roland Dyens began to compose very early. "When I got my first guitar, my first wish was to create something, some songs, to improvise. It was my own feeling. I don't remember when I decided to become a composer. At the same time as the interpretation and the technique, there were always the two aspects in my life. I never separated interpretation from creation. It was like a recreation. While I was studying Villa-Lobos or Pujol, sometimes there was an overdose of working, so I improvised on a phrase of Villa-Lobos or a bar of Pujol. I took it and made some re-recreation, then came back to the music.'

Sor's *Bagatelles Op.43 'Mes Ennuis'* ('My troubles') is a work that does not often find its way into the concert hall. Roland told me how he came to find it — for this was before the days of Brian Jeffery's Complete Facsimile Edition for Tecla. It makes a nice little story:

'In Marseilles there was a very old teacher, Louis Davalle, a bit like the French Segovia, not very well known but a good teacher who had a number of students, among whom was René Bartoli. I'd heard about Davalle, and one day I decided to meet him. I was in the south of France, and I had to give a concert near Marseilles. I got his phone number, and he invited me to his home. He was a docker who had fallen in love with the guitar one day in the 30s. I went to his house, and he told me about his life, which was rich in anecdotes and stories — you can imagine. He showed me his very old Ramirez, from 1924, and pictures. Incredible. And he showed me some of his favorite music, among which was *Mes Ennuis*. And he asked me to play it by sight. I played it — and fell in love. I said to him — because I love challenges — "I have my concert tomorrow, and I want to play it." And I played it one day later, by heart. Six months later he died. So I had the good luck to meet him. He was very old, over 90. Every time I play this music I think of him.'

Like all free spirits, Roland Dyens has had his share of criticism from people who would prefer that so-called 'classical' music is kept rigidly within a certain mold. He, like Sérgio and Odair Assad, has never had the slightest hesitation in superimposing his own strong creative impulses. It is what great interpreters have done throughout the ages. Only recently have we become obsessed with 'what the composer wanted', as though the composer were still around and able to

influence events. Such an obsession places music firmly on the shelves of a museum, rather than making it the living, breathing thing that living people love and revere. There are only two kinds of music: good and bad; and if Sor would not have been entranced by what Roland Dyens did with *Mes Ennuis* last October in Poland, then Sor wasn't the man I take him to be.

It is an unfashionable view, not held by the scholars and musicologists (Roland Dyens calls them 'integrist') who insist on classical music being played strictly in accordance with a classical tradition, with little or no possibility of new light being shed. Imagine Shakespeare being performed in this stifling way! The Royal Shakespeare Company would have to sack all its actresses and engage a bunch of adolescent boys. It would lose its audience overnight, and deservedly.

'They come to a concert only to look for faults and mistakes,' said Roland about his 'integrist'. 'They never have the idea of bringing something fresh. The people who today interest me, in the guitar, are those who bring something — a little stone, a little dust, even, but something, something new and fresh. I don't really understand the way of playing the same repertoire in the same way. What's new, pussycat? What's new? *Rien de nouveau!* That's why the Assad brothers are really the musicians I feel closest too — because we have the same chemistry.'

Now, this question of silence. Good painters often perceive not the objects in front of them but the space around them. The result is often an unsuspected freshness. Is Roland's perception of silence something of the same sort?

'For me, the silence is one of my favorite things in the music. It's something I learned only quite recently. It's something that comes with age. When you speak about silence to students of 20 years old, they understand, but only with the brain, mentally. To them, music must be sound. What is silence? Silence is when it's finished? No! It's like the air in painting, you know. The silence between two notes. The last note you play, you can even see this note falling down. Like a tennis player hitting the ball at the very last moment. That's a great feeling.'

Roland has mastered the art of persuading an audience to listen to these perfectly timed silences. Is it something that anyone can learn?



Courtesy Classical Guitar Magazine

'I'm not a demagogue about music. I think, for example, that a-rhythmical people can never be rhythmical people. Music is not an obligatory, democratic thing. To think that everybody can be an artist, or a great artist, is wrong. It's something you have. You can spend, hours, years, trying to teach this idea to some people, but it is impossible. It will remain an intellectual idea, but the most important thing about music is that it is felt in your body, in a very natural way. I may appear to be an abnormal musician, an atypical musician, but I feel normal; I'm improvising, composing and playing, I'm an interpreter, I joke with the music, I'm ready with music. What else? I'm a musician at the end of the 20th century, nothing else. An active, living musician.

'I can't understand the divorce between composers and interpreters. I fight against that. The divorce was more or less declared in the middle of the 19th century by the first composer who wrote a cadenza. For me that's the date of the crime. It was the death of improvisation in classical music. And therefore the interpreters play what is written by the composer — and nothing else! When I play a concerto I always improvise the cadenza. I would like others to do the same. I'm not seeking loneliness on my planet, but it's a fact. And it's a pity.'

One knows exactly what he means. During the last round of the competition in Tychy, Giuliani's A major Concerto was played four times — and each time with the same cadenzas. There can't have been a musical intelligence in that hall that did not long for something different. But the players did not dare to do it, Roland said, '— because they don't know how. It is assumed

that the composers of the last century were always very serious people. But they were also very happy people, sometimes jokers, you know? We are making religious people out of them, very serious classical people. I think music in the classical world is getting very serious. It was the contrary at the time, I think. Because the composers who played their own music improvised. What is a prelude etymologically? It is "before playing". What I do at the beginning of a recital is the same. I'm connected to these people, yet I'm thought of as some special guy. I feel really normal, you know. And I feel lonely. I would like others to do what I am doing.

'A journalist once wrote that I was "a classical musician in the hands, and a jazz musician in the head". For me, that is the best definition. But classical music is my house, my family. I love to travel and I love to come back. That's why I always play Sor in my concerts. I have always been in love with Sor's music, and this is my way of saying to people "I'm a classical guitarist like you". But I have *un peu de gourmandise*. *Je suis gourmand! J'ai beaucoup d'appetit*.

'I am a classical player visiting jazz music, re-reading jazz in his own conception. I bring it to the classical guitar. If I were a jazz player, I would have bought a Stratocaster or a Les Paul electric guitar. But I'm not a jazz player. I'm classical — and curious! I do some travelling, I go to the market, then I return to my house, the classical guitar.

'I feel really flexible. I love every discipline of music. Everything interests me in music. Accompanying a popular singer with my guitar — for the first time — as well as playing a suite by Bach, playing in Sweden for the Arvika Festival, one of the oldest festivals. They were celebrating their Jubilee. Jazz and classical guitar at the same time. Every night I played with jazz players. The Swedish school of jazz is very good. And I played in the pub every night, with the jazz musicians. And in Arvika the classical teachers told me that never before had an invited classical guitarist played with the jazz musicians. For me it was normal. I never felt forced to do these things. Jekyll and Hyde! During the day I'm playing classical — and at night, the jam sessions! I feel very good in each situation.'

The world of Roland Dyens has opened up so widely now that the possibilities seem almost infinite. Yet in his teens he was advised to make a choice: one thing or the other.

'I was 18 or so, in France, where music is very traditional, very conventional. I'd already heard this sentence: "My dear, one day you will have to choose which camp you are going to join". Classical or jazz, you had to choose. But I never made the choice. And it's too late now! But I'm happy never to have made that choice, because my public in France is so mixed. I have all the bourgeois people, with the rockers as well. And rock players do like my attitude towards the classics. My best souvenir of a masterclass is paradoxical. It was in Cannes, a class in a classical guitar festival for rockers, hard rockers. And the organizer said to me: "Roland, I've got a crazy idea. Could you come to Cannes and teach a masterclass for rock players?" I was a bit afraid, but it was incredible: I've never got such silence, such attention. I was explaining the different colors on only one string. It was amazing, when you think of their materials, the wah-wah pedal and everything, and I'm just playing in a primitive way with a wooden guitar, from the bridge to the fingerboard, and making different sounds, harpsichord sounds, lute sounds, baby sounds. It was crazy, surrealistic! He asked me because he knew I was open to this kind of thing. Someone who spoke rigidly in classical language would not have connected. They would feel themselves almost to be assaulted by him.'

Roland's masterclasses in Tychy were given to classical students, of course, and were highly successful. Did he in any way find it difficult to communicate?

'No. I loved it. My language is more implicit than intellectual or analytical or musicological. I'm speaking so that an old man or an old woman not in the guitar world could understand what I'm saying. It's full of examples, jokes, examples from jazz, from songs, from Sor, something from what the student is playing. For example, I stop him during the third bar of Sor and say "If Charlie Parker had played this...." You know? It's really open. My masterclasses are the reverse of something rigid and boring — at least I hope so.'

Like the creative artist he is, Roland Dyens has any number of irons in the fire. One current 'baby' is his concerto for guitar and string orchestra, which he would like to be better known. As for the future, he says he has no premeditated ideas.

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