

SÉRGIO AND ODAIR ASSAD

I had arranged to interview Sérgio and Odair Assad in the café of the Hotel Cracovia in Kraków. Barely had we taken a preparatory sip of coffee when a representative of the Kraków Philharmonic Orchestra arrived to say that the time of the afternoon rehearsal had been brought forward and a car was waiting.

And that was it. No further opportunity presented itself. The concert took place, the Assad brothers played two concertos brilliantly, and afterwards there was a party. Sérgio and Odair left early the following morning, and my last chance had gone. There were to be other meetings, of course, but we were committed to an article about the brothers: I would have to write it on the basis of what I already knew about them.

Well, it was written and it was published; but since one of the perceived virtues of the face-to-face interview is that it allows artists to give their own opinions in their own words, I prefer to offer an earlier interview. It was conducted by Bauke Oosterhout, an engaging Dutchman who not only played the guitar himself but also acted as agent for other guitarists, among them the great David Russell. Bauke's early death was a tragic loss to the guitar community. CC

Odair Assad: I started playing the guitar when I was eight years old. Sérgio started at twelve. We played together from the beginning and, as you can see, we're still at it!

We didn't actually choose to learn the guitar, but my father needed a couple of guitarists. We didn't have lessons. In Brazil you don't usually study an instrument. By that I mean that when you buy, for example, a guitar, you go along to a teacher and have your first lesson with him, but in Brazil we do it more the natural way and fiddle around with it, picking up things here and there. You hear music around you all day. It's the custom to play choros in a small ensemble consisting of different instruments like the mandolin and the cavaquinho (a small 4-string guitar). Two guitars play the accompaniment, using chords and playing the bass lines in thirds with the thumb.

My father plays the mandolin. He became tired of looking for guitarists to accompany him and, as he is very fanatical about music, he bought us guitars and taught us a bit about harmony so that we could play together.

After a while my father was very surprised that we had progressed so rapidly, and didn't know what to teach us any more. He went in search of a teacher but couldn't find anybody. We lived in a small village near São Paulo. Reading music we learned ourselves.

By coincidence, a reporter heard us play and seemed very impressed by it. He was acquainted with the Abreu brothers and knew their teacher in Rio. He introduced us to Monina Távora, a former student of Andrés Segovia. She never taught us technique; only the music was important to her. She is a great lady and very special to me.

Monina Távora helped you to get your concert career going?



Courtesy GHS Records

Yes, she did. We played all over Brazil. After that competition in Bratislava, we were getting more concerts in Europe. The well-known Brazilian composer Marlos Nobre took us to Europe. He worked for Unesco in those days.

Did he write for you?

Not exactly. He transcribed one of his own piano pieces for us.

You both have a very relaxed way of playing and not

being bothered by technical problems at all.

Maybe that's because of our musical upbringing. We have our roots in Brazilian folk music. When we were young we didn't hear anything else and played only choros, sambas, etcetera. Most of it was just improvising, which is a very good basis for a musician.

You are really fast players.

Paco de Lucia plays a lot faster. It's never our intention to play fast on purpose, because we just play what we feel at that particular moment, but to other people it can seem very fast. We do get criticized a lot for it. Maybe when we were kids we made a joke of it because everybody was saying 'Look how fast those boys can play!' I don't feel I'm playing very fast, but experience it as quite natural and normal.

What we look for in music is a lot of expression and the sheer pleasure of playing. We enjoy playing very much. We take all the risks, because we never plan how we are going to play the music in concert. That way every concert is new for us, and maybe that gives it that spontaneous feeling. Sometimes we change things right in the middle of it. A few notes extra, or improvisation. It's ridiculous to plan, for example, your dynamics beforehand because they'll never go the way you wanted them. All these things are evident in the music itself, and this way it's a lot more alive and sparkling.

Also the influence of the audience can change your way of playing. That bit of magic that can exist between public and artist is very important. It's different in every country. There is quite a difference between an English and a Chinese audience. When we played in Hong Kong and Taiwan we were in doubt all the time. You stand up after having played a piece; looking at the people, we couldn't figure out whether they were smiling or sleeping. That does affect your playing. Only after the concert we knew if they liked it or not.

You never play solo?

No, not really. From the start we have always played together. Mind you, we don't practice together but only play together. We study our parts separately. When we do, we usually play different pieces at the same time!

Have you made any records in Brazil?

We did two. On the first, we play on one side with an orchestra. The other side, just the two of us. It was recorded many years ago. I don't recommend it to you. For the recording with the orchestra we had to go to a town in the north of Brazil. The orchestral players were quarrelling continuously, and we spent a long

time just recording one side. The other side we had to record with them the next day. That same night in the hotel I opened a beer can and nearly cut my thumb in half. Sérgio was jumping up and down in complete panic. It seemed to hurt him more than me. I was holding my thumb together with my other hand, afraid that a large chunk might fall off. A doctor stitched it together. Very badly, I might say. Months later we recorded the other side in Rio, but without the orchestra.

We did another album for — don't laugh — Coca-Cola. Actually it's a double album and they used it as a Christmas present for their business associates in Brazil. We recorded all the Villa-Lobos pieces written for guitar. I play one part solo, Sérgio the other part. Actually, Coca-Cola sponsored our first tour through the US.

Our third record was made in Belgium. This year (1986) we recorded an album in the US for Nonesuch Records, which contains South-American music including Piazzolla's *Tango Suite*. Next year we are going to do a record of only Brazilian music, also for Nonesuch.

Astor Piazzolla wrote Tango Suite for you. Did you commission it?

Sérgio Assad: No, we did not. Through our good friend Roberto Aussel, we were invited to the home of a mutual friend in Paris. Astor Piazzolla was there also, after a concert he had given that same night. We played a few arrangements of his music for him. He loved it and said he would compose a piece for two guitars, dedicating it to us. All this happened in the autumn of 1933. I had forgotten all about it, but to my surprise I received it through the mail in February 1984. It's a great piece of music and very suited to us. We have been playing it in our program ever since.

There is a bit of percussion on the guitar in the beginning which is written down only in a few markings, not indicating how to do it. It took days to figure it out.

Gnattali wrote a lot for you too.

Ah yes, a good friend and a very productive composer. At home he had stacks of music he wrote for guitar. Also chamber music, orchestral works etcetera. He is the type of guy who dislikes intensely going into battles with publishers about contracts and percentages. The result is that he never anything gets published, and it doesn't interest him a bit. We were actually the first ones who played his music outside Brazil, where he isn't well known either.

The new generation of composers, like Almeida

Prado, Marlos Nobre and Edino Krieger, are strongly influenced by European avant-garde music. Until a few years ago it was like a fever running through the Brazilian music world. Composers like Francisco Mignone have written music in every style. Camargo Guarniere is more in the style of Villa-Lobos, only more avant-garde. Another one is Lourenzo Fernandez, a more academic composer. There are only a few composers who didn't depart from traditional Brazilian music and have produced a unique repertoire. Gnattali always wrote Brazilian music, although the influences of North-American jazz are evident.

I do have the feeling these composers think they have to write contemporary music like everybody else in order to get recognized as serious composers, this being the reason for departing from the more popular Brazilian idiom. I think they are mistaken, because they are more at home in writing Brazilian music. But things are changing. Ten years ago everybody played avant-garde music. Nowadays it seems to be going out of fashion, and there is a comeback of more traditional music. Look at Leo Brouwer, for instance. I believe South Americans should write their own music and use the immense richness of our folk music based on European harmonies and African rhythms. This is very important to me, and that's why we play so much of it in our programs.

Once I spoke to a young composer and asked him whether he would compromise in order to be successful, and he replied he couldn't because he believed in the teachings of Alban Berg and that would be the future of music! This is the mentality of most of them. That's why I admire Gnattali so much. His music is pure Brazilian. He couldn't care less what people might think of him, and goes his own way. As I said before, things are changing. There are many more young composers than the ones I've mentioned and I'm astounded by the talent we have in our country, but it's very hard to make a living out of it. The only government-controlled TV channel is showing mostly cultural programs, and it is surprising to see so many people doing very good work. It's a pity most people watch the usual crap on the other channels. Well, it's more or less the same problem all over the world.

In Europe there seems to be a revival of interest in South American music. I only have to mention Astor Piazzolla. Piazzolla is very well known in Europe now. His group is playing in nearly every country, and very successfully. Meanwhile he has been playing and living in France for decades. It's only in the last few years that his group has become popular internationally.

What about Villa-Lobos?

Of course, we guitarists are very pleased with his compositions. What we tend to forget is that his other works are in fact a lot better. They are never played. A sad thing, because their quality is of a high standard.

You are also a composer. Your Three Brazilian Dances are in the Duo's program.

I usually do all the arrangements also. The Three Dances were an attempt to solve the shortage of instrumental music. Instrumental music is not so well accepted in Brazil. This is changing, due to groups playing a distinct type of music called 'jazz brasileiro', which is the most important music played in Brazil nowadays. It's difficult to define, but it's a mixture of classical, jazz and Brazilian music. Nearly a complete different thing altogether. I think this music is going to be a great success.

Egberto Gismonti and Hermeto Pascual are famous in this genre, and both play with their ensemble in Europe, especially in France. Gismonti wrote several things for guitar, published by Max Eschig in Paris, but these pieces are more in the style of the post-Webern period. He doesn't play this music himself, nor does anybody else for that matter. They are great musicians and we include their other music in our programs. Hermeto Pascual is writing a suite for us at this moment.

The Brazilian music goes down very well with the audiences in your concerts. Shall we get a lot more of it in the future?

If we can get the music, yes. In guitar concerts, only Villa-Lobos is played. Maybe too much of it. As I told you, Brazilian composers like Nobre, Prado and Guarniere write European music. Guarniere could write very well for guitar but has only written a study for the instrument. Getting a program together of exclusively Brazilian music is a near impossibility, and you can imagine how the situation is for a duo.

What we do is to press composers like Pascual, Gismonti and Gnattali to write for us or make arrangements of their music. Typical Brazilian music took form at the beginning of this century. Ernesto Nazareth and Chiquinha Gonzaga were the most important exponents. They wrote in a style with a syncopated rhythm, which later became the basic rhythm of the samba and choros. At this time the word choro didn't yet exist. Nazareth called it, for instance, 'tango brasileiro'. Others called it 'corta jaca'. In the thirties, ensembles were playing in the streets of Rio to the beautiful girls on the balconies. Mostly sad and sentimental music like waltzes and polkas. The more

cheerful pieces were the ones with that particular syncopated rhythm. People called these players 'chorões' because people were crying when they listened to them. Choro comes from the Portuguese word 'choro', which means crying.

Turibio Santos has recorded a lot of Brazilian music. Music by Nazareth, João Pernambuco, Dilermando Reis, Nobre and Prado. People now are expecting a large part of Brazilian music in our programs. We enjoy playing it, so the solution is easy. The only trouble is getting the music now! Getting composers to write for us is our small contribution to enlarging the guitar repertoire.

You never play Bach. Why not?

I just don't like it for guitar. A lot of guitarists will disagree with me, but the phrasing you can do on keyboard is next to impossible to do on guitar. It doesn't do justice to his music. However, we do like playing French Baroque because it's more elegant and I know we can make a good job of it, despite what the musicologists might say of it. I can't say the same thing about Bach, so we never play it. On the subject of authenticity, I can only say that it is lost already by using a present-day guitar.

What do you think about the critics?

A very tender subject. In general they have been very favorable to us, although sometimes they see behind

our music more than we know ourselves. Like somebody who is explaining the deeper meaning in a painting while it is all new to the painter himself.

I try to avoid reading reviews as much as possible. I don't see the use of them. People should make up their own minds whether they like a concert or not. The most important thing for me in a concert, whether I'm playing or listening, is the communication between artist and audience. Sometimes it's there, sometimes not. You never know when it is going to happen because it's spontaneous. If the critic doesn't feel it at that moment, he couldn't care less whether the rest of the audience likes it or not. You can find bad things in the best performance, and he can say that a particular note is not played rightly or the phrasing is not executed well or it doesn't fit the style of the period. So, reviews — what for? Many times I've been to a concert about which I've had my own opinion. Later I read the review, and I start wondering whether I have attended the same concert as the reviewer. I might have enjoyed it immensely, but this person did not. The critic gives a one-man opinion, but there are a lot more people in the audience. Why is his opinion the most important?

Where do you see yourself in ten years' time?

Growing potatoes somewhere in the jungle of Brazil! Sometimes the hassle of travelling around the world is annoying me. I long for the quietness of the countryside.



But you keep on playing as a duo.

Oh yes, of course, as long as nothing bad happens to one of us. When our agent in the US contracted us he asked us whether we weren't afraid we would end up like the Presti-Lagoya Duo and the Abreu Brothers. He used to be their agent also. How on earth can I know what is going to happen tomorrow, let alone in ten years' time? I don't want to look into the future.

Ambitious?

Not at all. We've rolled from one thing into another without going after things. I enjoy what I'm doing with my brother. We depend a lot on each other and have a certain responsibility. We get along very well together although we are completely different persons. Suppressing our individuality a little is a small price to pay for being together all the time.

Each going your own way — would that be possible?

It would be very difficult for me to play solo. We've been playing together professionally for the last ten years and you get used to each other so much. The few times I've played solo didn't satisfy me at all.

Incredible things can happen when you've been together and been playing together for such a long time. I remember the days when things didn't work out so well, but now it doesn't matter what Odair is doing with his phrasing, ritardandos or dynamics because I feel it at the same time and in the same form. He never gets me into problems.

Who follows whom?

Nobody. We don't divide our parts in a way that one plays the melody and the other one does the accompaniment. We take turns, and the one who has the most important part leads.

People always think you are twins because you look so much alike.

That question is asked over and over again. Odair has a nice answer to it, and will say 'Yes, we are twins but I was born four years later'.

Several times I've been with you just before you give your concert. Worries or nervousness I haven't noticed at all. Even a photo session ten minutes before going up doesn't affect you both. What's the secret?

We enjoy playing guitar, so what's the worry? I must admit that before our Wigmore Hall debut we felt a bit uneasy. All those great musicians that have played there!

Your careers are going very well.

Especially in the last few years. We are getting more offers than we can handle. In 1986 we have tours in the US, England, Scandinavia, Australia, the Far East, back to the US, and again Europe. In between we still play in Brazil. Somewhere in 1986 we have to make a new record in the US, with Brazilian works only. Our lives are in complete chaos!

BO