

VLADIMIR MIKULKA

I first met Vladimir Mikulka in 1981 when he was the special guest artist at the Cannington Summer School. Like everyone else present, I was amazed by his brilliant array of technical skills allied to a most refined musicality. Of particular interest was his inclusion in the program of Nikita Koshkin's The Prince's Toys, a remarkable piece demanding virtuosity from the performer. Since then Mikulka has introduced several other excellent items from Eastern Europe, with the name of Štěpán Rak outstanding as a composer of vital and expressive works. On subsequent visits to this country he has also demonstrated his familiarity with traditional compositions; that old favorite, the Bach Chaconne, is still a wonderful test of a guitarist's technique and musicianship, and Mikulka's 1983 rendering was a model of clarity and beauty. He has established himself as one of the very finest players in the world today, with an awesome control over his prodigious gifts, yet unlike some others he does not feel the need to be constantly alone with his guitar; he becomes very much involved in the society around him, and is sensitive to the motivations and needs of other people. He enjoys company, and revels in animated conversation.

Earlier this year (1984) I visited Vladimir Mikulka in Paris, and there was certainly much discussion. Topics ranged far and wide, and during their course I found myself wondering just what it was that provided the foundation for this virtuoso performer's artistry, over and beyond mere juxtaposition of remarkable dexterity and fine concern for sound and phrasing. What lay behind this?

'I wondered the same thing in listening to Segovia or Bream, for example; it seemed almost mystical. But now that I am performing myself I can see that it's much simpler than when I did not see behind the curtain, so to speak. I would say that, as in many professions, much of it is concerned with a sense of responsibility. This is to myself as an artist. You must be very honest with yourself, search through yourself for your true ideas about what's happening around us in the world, and your opinions about these things. Because this is what music is for, a language — as in any art — through which you express your ideas about the world. It's obvious, if there's no world there's no art; and art exists as a philosophy of being. If there was a definite answer as to why we are here, if it were mathematically or logically possible to explain, then there would be no art. Art touches hearts in a strange and unexplained way, almost a little irrationally. It expresses people's desires for something better, for the realization of dreams and wishes.'

It has already become apparent that any curtain that Vladimir had lifted was an individual one. Highly individual talents have obviously unique ways of being arrived at; one could hardly expect the same route for all, and would certainly not wish it.

Vladimir agreed. 'It is sometimes said that everything can be achieved through work, work, work; far more of this than talent. But you cannot make art without talent. You get inspired, you react in certain situations without knowing why. Personally speaking, I am very happy that I found the guitar, that I discovered my

talent. Was this chance? If you are a fatalist you will not think so. But, chance or not, it is lucky, almost like winning at the lottery. But then — what are you going to do with your prize, what will you make with your talent? We must learn how to handle it. You must, of course, have a musical talent in your head which you can indulge, and then the physical talent for the realization of expression; ideally one must contain both to an ideal degree. Maybe you have the ideas but your fingers may be, well, disadvantaged. Again, in other musicians you feel that someone really does possess talent and yet does not work equally to it.

'Connected with this, as far as I'm concerned, is what music has become for me in the last decade or so. When I won the Paris competition at 19 I didn't have the same conscious pleasure I do now; it was more a game with tunes. I was not conscious of messages then, although I may have been delivering them unconsciously. It was not that I wanted to play particularly fast, or anything of that sort — I never actually cared about this for itself — I just wanted to play as near to perfection as I could. I was young and all of a sudden there were many important professional engagements as a result of my success, so I wanted to try to best assemble my talents for the public. Now I am much more aware of what I am doing, I try to go to the primary existence of the music. It has become a necessity as much as food, something which belongs absolutely to life and which I can never forget because it expresses completely my feelings.'



Courtesy Classical Guitar Magazine

What Vladimir had said about responsibility was now apparent. It occurred to me that many other musicians would also like to sincerely convey their thoughts about life but for some reason can't manage it; what did he think?

'Yes, it may not work. It's a skill of developing and clearing your thoughts and then directing them so that they are communicable with as many people as possible. It's difficult to formulate yourself, to search for the most precise and exact definition of your feelings. And if you can't achieve this you can't have true clarity of idea about the piece you're playing and will probably perform it in a way different from that which you would wish, and also different from what the composer would wish. You must serve both so clearly and in unity.'

Two composers Vladimir Mikulka has served well and very clearly indeed are Štěpán Rak and Nikita Koshkin; they are now his personal friends, but I wondered what he felt when he first met them and their music.

'Things all began with this strange and interesting personality Štěpán Rak. There was a playing room for guitarists in the Prague Conservatory, where we both studied. Rak was sitting there most of the time and

producing the craziest sounds on the guitar I ever heard, compositions or ideas which came at times to his mind. This stuff was supposed, by all my guitar colleagues, to be unplayable; nobody ever dared to try some of his techniques, or even ask him for some of his pieces. For myself, I loved to hear him but thought, as did the others, that his music was so highly personal that perhaps no-one else would ever play it. Nevertheless, one day I asked him for the score of one of his pieces (*Andante and Toccata*) and proceeded to learn it. *Toccata* is not the easiest of his pieces, but I probably managed well, as I could immediately see how it functions. If I spoke about "craziest sounds" before, I meant an unusual dynamic scale, different tremolo rasgueados, many different techniques, and a striking expressiveness which he could produce on the instrument — although the sound was not always the most clear and polished, it was emotional. Here was a composer-guitarist with a fascinating and varied approach to the guitar. Every time when playing he has some different ideas, so that he cannot keep the same fingering but keeps moving to adventurous areas. Later I understood that this continuing process is important for him, the constant performing of a piece which is thus in the process of birth — and therefore the correcting and balancing of its form. Incidentally, this way of approaching the final shape of a guitar composition by constant performing and balancing all elements is unfortunately very rare in the case of contemporary composers. There are not many at this level and if there were I think it would be only for the sake of communication of their works with the public.'

Did Vladimir think that he had developed his technique in the sense of broadening it by playing so much of Rak's music?

'Certainly, because each piece has a strong sense for instrumental playing and a strong individuality. I eventually premiered 22 of his compositions, either on records or on the stage. Naturally I had to work much to get my fingers around all those peculiar inventions in his music, but I love it.'

And what of Koshkin, and *The Prince's Toys* in particular?

'Well, that's a bag full of tricks and anecdotes. But good ones. It is good humor; I saw it immediately when I met Koshkin in Moscow. We became friends in two seconds and I invited him to visit me in Prague. Later he told me that he liked the previous concerts I had given in the USSR when he did not know me so

well, and that he did not have the courage to come backstage. How sorry I was that he did not like the concerts a little less!

‘After I had learnt some works of his, the next thing was that he recomposed for me the skeleton of *The Prince’s Toys*, enlarging it and adding ideas and movements. After spending time studying and learning it to get it in my fingers, I premiered it.’

Vladimir Mikulka’s recording of this work on BIS, together with works by Rak, impressed several reviewers — including myself, tremendously — to the extent where it might be regarded as a milestone in the history of the guitar.

‘Well, if this were to be so, then I would only be happy. You see, it is so much more difficult to present the music of unknown composers when you are working on getting your own name known. The promoter will say “Mr Mikulka, what are you going to play in the program?”, and I will say “Bach, Giuliani, Rak...”. “Who is Rak? Could you play some Albéniz?”

‘You understand? The guitar is in constant trouble with repertory. As I said before, you must first like something very much. If you do, then it is your luck, your lottery ticket. When I started playing guitar at 13, I loved it so much that I could not do anything else and in time I learnt a big part of the classical guitar repertoire. That was my chance. As my musical education evolved I had some difficult times when comparing Giuliani with Mozart, or Weiss (though for lute) with Bach. And I still have. Of course, it is easily possible to disregard a big part of the guitar repertory and find many bad points about it. But why use those negative points? The repertory simply belongs to the history of guitar culture, and guitar culture belongs to musical culture. The guitar has its discreet, direct, internal, and personal charm, and if you do not want to see its values it is a pity. Besides, everything becomes history, but today we make new pages of it and that is exciting — we have a chance.’

We spoke for a while about instruments, their various individual qualities and points of comparison, and I asked Vladimir what guitar he used. Now that he was performing *The Prince’s Toys* so regularly, I wondered if one instrument more than another seemed especially suited to the various percussive and other effects going through its body, sometimes seeming quite violent.

‘Well, indeed, the fact that I now permanently include in my programs music with such effects also influences the choice of instrument. I was playing a Fleta for some time and, though a beautiful instrument, it appeared that the front table, with its style of French polish, was too fragile for this music — also some other parts of the instrument. So I returned to my beautiful and oldest Kohno model 20. I realized that Kohno is a pioneer of modern instruments with regard to many important characteristics of the guitar — tone quality and clarity, increased dynamic, and so on; and, for me at this stage — very important — the firm construction of the body, which resists well the expressive needs of the music I play, and is not oversensitive for travelling.

‘You may say, how can this be a really personal instrument when seeming to be all this? Perhaps it might be a bit lacking the personality of guitars such as Romanillos, but does that necessarily mean that you cannot express yourself personally on it? I even think that the guitar with too much personality can sometimes negatively influence your own personality. So nowadays, although I always try to find something good, I think the fact that one does a good job on some piece of wood is more important than the contrary.’

In Paris I had the opportunity of seeing and playing several ‘pieces of wood’ when we paid a visit to La Guitarrería in Rue d’Edimbourg, a centre for guitarists run by Isabel Gomez from Spain. Stylishly arranged, the premises not only boast some fine instruments for sale - Bernabe, Corbellari and Kappeler, Hopf, Fischer, Ramírez, Contreras were all there — but also act as a focal point for many players both living in Paris and also just passing through. Apparently Angel Romero had visited quite recently, and Roberto Aussel had called in only the previous day. Vladimir made every instrument sound good and gave especial pleasure to Isabel when trying her favorite Pappalardo guitar. He showed me some new things by Rak and I was struck by some visually peculiar fingerings he used, either dictated by necessity or chosen by him for a particular reason. It was something I mentioned to him later.

‘If you want to play the guitar well you must not try to play it as a guitar. Technically, it has the big disadvantage when compared with the piano of not having a pedal. We must not think in apparently guitaristic fashion as far as fingering goes. For someone who wishes to express himself well through the instrument, it is necessary to make almost a masochistic search of

the guitar to be able to purify the thought absolutely; there may be some totally strange things on occasions but the sound must be clean. To play guitar unguitaristically requires the highest knowledge of the instrument. The first thing is the sound, the tone, for this is why we play. There must be no problem of articulation and we must research all the possibilities of fingering. Thus we think not of playing the guitar but of playing only a thing which is a medium — to think of it as a sound in a general. It is terribly difficult to play the guitar unguitaristically, so to speak, to achieve a free phrase which is breathing freely and calmly and is not cut here and there, offering the most perfect and liberated sound.'

Remembering Vladimir's very practical and direct teaching in his Cambridge masterclass the previous year, I asked him what aspect of technique might be most stressed when instructing a student.

'Economy and efficiency of fingering and hand movements must be taught to a guitarist right from the beginning. This applies to many special individual factors. I could give you an example: the thing in the left hand which I call "finger-preparation", or, if you like, "counterpoint-fingering", when each finger prepares itself to function while the others are still occupied. This applies in many ways; one could take as an instance an arpeggio in which (if musically appropriate) it can suitably economize the change of left-hand fingering from one difficult chord to another by replacing each finger from one chord to another in the order of tones in the second. This saves a lot of energy, is much more accurate, and the system can be applied to anything you do on the fingerboard in the left hand. We could call it "chaining"; chaining the functions of the fingers is like chaining the functions of phrases in a piece.'

Our conversation moved naturally on from a consideration of technical matters in themselves towards the goal for all this dedication; the public performance, and what it entails. One aspect which I thought interesting to touch upon was Vladimir's preparation for each concert. Unlike people in many other walks of life, international music artists are expected, rightly or wrongly, to be able to reproduce unfailingly their best performance on each occasion, an almost superhuman task; yet at each of the several concerts I have heard him Vladimir seems to have achieved just exactly this. There are surely times when all performers feel less inclined towards performing, although contracted to do so. How did he concentrate

to try to give of his best?

'Simply, I try to prepare myself well. Practice, eat, sleep, concentration, practice — of course, one must know in what way it is best to practice, it can apply to personal needs as well as other things connected with concentration. If you do not prepare yourself, you may fail once or perhaps twice, but if you should fail more it is not good for you as a professional. It is like any other occupation; if you open a bakery and are always late in making your bread you will lose customers. Once something becomes your profession and you earn your money by it, you start to risk your own skin, so you had better pay attention to each occasion. The amateur plays whenever he likes, whatever he likes, and however he manages. The amateur *can* prepare himself; the professional *has* to prepare himself.'

How he would prepare an individual concert item? To what extent would he consider the various component details as opposed to its overall length — perhaps the *Chaconne* of Bach, for example, which I had so enjoyed?

'I think that everything must be measured so carefully that the final result becomes very natural, appearing to be easy. This applies exactly to a small detail in



contrast with the whole thing. First I get inspired by a piece, so that I take it and play it through many times — just sightread it with all its accidental mistakes — to feel its instrumental character and its difficulty, to be able to measure its studying time before my next program. In this studying time I measure the weight of big sections and imagine the ideal performance. After that I start to work in detail; fingerings must function according to phrasing, color, dynamics, and overall expressiveness. It is a very complex apparatus of questions to be asked and decisions to be made. This is in fact the way you construct the piece, brick by brick, but having in mind, of course, the final design. This is for me always a very exciting stage of learning, developing the sections, observing how everything becomes real. The main question is: how well can you construct? This is the profession. If a musician has made an exciting construction that holds together, you will excuse mistakes in execution, supposing that they do not overshadow the construction itself.

‘Love for detail is a feminine element; feeling for construction, masculine. If you fall in love with a small section (although probably very attractive) and exaggerate it, make it transparent without measuring all the other surroundings of the piece, then the piece will fall apart. The two elements are absolutely necessary, and when they are made I slightly start to give preference in my performance to the masculine one. I thus have in mind the reason why I play the piece at all, while the work I spent on detail is still present and supports the form. If the detail is symbiotically related to the form in an ideal way and it is confirmed in execution, then everything is in order.

‘Unfortunately, we guitarists have less pleasure than other instrumentalists in constructing, and the reason is that we do not have many big, long works, for example in sonata form. Can you compare anything to a pianist who will play two Schubert Sonatas in one evening, one in the first half and another in the second? I would like at least once in my life to experience the excitement of constructing something such as Schubert or Beethoven. Sadly, it will probably never be possible. This is certainly one of the reasons why critics sometimes underestimate the guitar.’

CK