

ZAGREB GUITAR TRIO

Put three virtuoso guitarists together. Not any three virtuosos, but three who happen to be friends. Two of them studied with the third, who can also turn his hand to the double-bass, which he plays with equal proficiency. Thus the Zagreb Guitar Trio began with two considerable advantages: they had a flexibility rare in guitar ensembles; and they knew one another's playing intimately.

The Trio (Darko Petrinjak, Istvan Römer, Goran Listes) built shrewdly on those advantages, soon acquiring a solid and wide-ranging repertoire and the ability to work on it without having to spend valuable time on turning three soloists into a precision ensemble — they were that from the beginning.

We met in London. The Trio had just given an outstanding concert at the Artworkers Guild's handsome premises in Queen's Square. The event had been arranged by Robert Spencer, who had taught Darko Petrinjak the lute at the Royal Academy of Music. Robert was himself a remarkable musician: a guitarist, a lutenist, a founder member of the Julian Bream Ensemble, a collector, a lecturer who could discourse brilliantly about Dowland while playing the illustrations himself, above all an enthusiast whose very presence made you glad to be working in and for music.

I felt the same about the Zagreb Guitar Trio. Their technical brilliance, their perfect timing, their total togetherness combine to give them complete freedom to make music, which they do with a unique combination of zest and musical penetration.



Photo by Jens Peter Bark

The Zagreb Guitar Trio met at the Zagreb Music Academy, where Istvan Römer and Goran Listes were students in Darko Petrinjak's class.

'We enjoy each other's company very much,' said Darko Petrinjak, 'so the guitar trio came as a consequence of that, instead of the other way around. There would be no point in changing members.'

There is no leader. When a new work comes up, they draw lots to settle the division of labor — quite literally, out of a hat. It is an Italian carabinieri's hat, with three corners. It ensures that no one member of the ensemble regularly gets an unfairly rewarding part to

play, or, conversely, is landed with excessively boring parts. Not that accompanying parts are necessarily boring; but the Trio believe that typecasting is something to be avoided.

It helps that requintos and basses are not used in the Zagreb Guitar Trio. Three standard guitars are more than good enough — although Darko Petrinjak, a double-bass player of virtuosity, has found a number of works for that instrument and two guitars that provide additional interest and variety.

Each of the three members of the Trio is a soloist in his own right. They teamed up in 1984. It would have

been earlier, but Istvan Römer had health problems; first a tumor on a finger, and later a problem with eyesight, both necessitating surgery. The tumor was a worry, with possible amputation looming up. 'Is music so important for you, my boy?' the surgeon asked. Istvan began to think in terms of the trumpet, needing only three fingers on one hand, but fortunately things turned out well and he was soon fully restored to his maximum ability — and a pretty good ability that is, as various competition successes prove. Three months after the operation, he won first prize at Mettmann. Later, both eyes had to be operated on in order to save his sight. It was a depressing time, but it had the advantage, he says cheerfully, of keeping him out of the army.

Solo playing takes up most of their time. Darko Petrinjak, born in 1954, is a lutenist as well as a guitarist and double-bass player. He took his post-graduate studies in guitar under Hector Quine at the Royal Academy of Music, and lute under Robert Spencer. At the RAM he was awarded the Julian Bream Prize and recital diplomas (the highest award for a performer) for both guitar and lute. For three years he taught guitar at the Birmingham School of Music, and since 1981 he has been Professor of Guitar at the Zagreb Music Academy. He played in the London/Zagreb Consort with Robert Spencer, and also plays chamber music with double-bass. He has shared concerts with the violinist Yfrah Neaman. His third solo record was issued around the time of our meeting, with music by Biberian, Blake Watkins, Koshkin and Barrios. He composes, too, and has written or arranged about a hundred compositions for guitar trio, two guitars and double-bass, guitar and voice, guitar and violin, guitar and cello, and solo guitar. His recordings include solos, duets with a mezzo-soprano, a duo with cello, and of course those with the Zagreb Guitar Trio.

Goran Listes, born 1961, is married to an Italian and lives in Rome. As well as studying at Zagreb with Petrinjak, he studied at the Academy of Music in Graz, Austria, where his teacher was Marga Bäuml. His competition successes include first prize at the 19th Yugoslav Competition of Music Artists and at the 15th International Jeunesses Musicales Competition, in Zagreb and Belgrade respectively. His solo activities have taken him to Cuba, Spain, Greece, Bulgaria, Austria, Belgium, Poland, West Germany and the USA. In 1989 he won the Fernando Sor International Competition in Rome. He devotes a lot of his time to composing, and his compositions include a Passa-

caglia and Fugue, which has been performed by the Hand/Dupré Duo. He has issued a solo recital record on the Jugoton label, of music by Scarlatti, Bach, Josipovic, Koshkin and Barrios. He is an active soloist, like the other members of the Trio, and also duets with soprano Mirjana Bohanec and with cellist Ksenija Jankovic.

The third and youngest member of the Trio is Istvan Römer — like Goran Listes, a Hungarian name. He was born in 1962. Also like Listes, he studied both at Zagreb with Petrinjak and at the Academy of Music in Graz with Marga Bäuml. After graduating from both institutions with high honors, he obtained a number of competition successes, among which were Mettmann (first prize), Palma (first prize), Vina del Mar, Chile (first prize), Maria Callas, Greece (second prize), and Gargnano (third prize). He plays in a duo with the cellist Walter Despalj, and they have issued a recording of duets. He has also made a solo recording of music by Bach, Papandopulo, Granados and Bogdanovic.

It is clear that the activities of the Zagreb Trio take up only a part of the professional careers of its members, although a very important one. But when they are working as a trio, it is the most enjoyable time for them. 'Company makes another spirit', was the way Goran Listes put it. 'We exchange things' — and more things than music. It was a sharing that went beyond professional commitment.

Darko said their playing came naturally. 'So we don't talk about it very much. Maybe with very modern pieces, then we have to do a little bit of talking, just to find the right way to approach the piece. But the standard repertoire just comes off very naturally, with very little to be talked about.'

It was different when they started; then they had to spend quite a lot of time, as all ensembles do. Now they know one another's playing well enough to be able to anticipate.

For repertoire, they necessarily use a lot of transcriptions. 'But every now and then an original work pops up,' said Darko. 'For example, Chanterelle Editions have issued the works of Zani de Ferranti, which contain a Polonaise for three guitars.' Then they had a piece by Gagnani — 'very standard, but we still enjoy playing it very much. We have a Diabelli piece, which we've slightly rearranged so that the interesting part is shared between us. It is a great experience to have new



Courtesy Classical Guitar Magazine

pieces — either discovering them or asking people to write them. In that sense we've been very lucky. We've got three pieces from Nikita Koshkin, written for us, which are really very good. One piece by John Duarte (*Little Suite op.95*, recorded by the Trio on Jugoton LSY 68105), a number of pieces by Yugoslav composers.'

The Duarte piece was much liked. 'A very successful piece,' said Goran Listes. 'Whenever we play it, everybody enjoys it.' Including, he added, other composers.

Darko Petrinjak plays the double-bass as proficiently as he plays the guitar. That means that he plays it very well indeed. He praised his teacher in Yugoslavia, Josip Novosel, who taught him so much. 'It's a very interesting combination. We've asked people like Brouwer, Sérgio Assad and Ernesto Cordero to write pieces for this combination.'

Goran pointed out that another aspect of the double-bass was that in conjunction with the two guitars the Trio could tackle a number of baroque works by Bach, Handel and others: virtually anything for two violins and continuo could be arranged for bass and two guitars.

Here is a tip for guitarists seeking to improve their technique, courtesy of the Zagreb Guitar Trio: go to

some piano masterclasses. The movements of a pianist's hand have some similarities to a guitarist's. And of course the piano shares with the guitar the problem of and how to get it. Then, too, as Darko Petrinjak pointed out, there were problems common to the violin and the guitar — accents, for instance. 'Sometimes they have to play a lot of notes on one bow, but only one on the next bow — one that mustn't be any louder. This is what guitarists very often do, put accents on wrong notes because of some technical reason such as a change of position.'

So many things to learn, we all agreed. But would a sensible guitarist learn them from a pianist or a violinist, in the light of what had just been said? It would depend on who it was, said Istvan Römer, adding — with a certain humor — that perhaps you could even learn something from a guitarist.

At the time this interview took place, Yugoslavia was still united, at least nominally. Comparatively little was known about its contemporary guitar composers, and the Zagreb Guitar Trio were able to suggest a few names that would be worth further investigation. Darko Petrinjak was particularly helpful here, with an impressive list. For instance, there is the Sarajevo composer Vojislav Ivanovic, a profile of whom appeared in CG in August 1988. His enchanting *Café No.6* was published in the same issue, one of a set of six subsequently published by Chanterelle of Heidelberg.

Then there is Boris Papandopulo, Yugoslavian despite his Greek name, who was born in 1906; he composed a concerto with string orchestra, a trio-sonata for two guitars and double-bass, and three Yugoslavian dances for solo guitar, published by Gerig Verlag of Cologne and recorded by Istvan Römer.

The works of Dusan Bogdanovic are gradually becoming known. His works include *Blues and Variations*, two *Sonatas*, *Lento and Toccata*, and *Introduction, Passacaglia and Fugue of the Golden Flower*. (*Since this article was published in 1990, Bogdanovic's name has come to the fore. His numerous works, often with a element of jazz, are performed widely and receive high acclaim.*).

Miroslav Miletic has written a sonata for violin and guitar, a consort trio for three guitars, a concerto with orchestra, and a suite for solo guitar. Other names to look out for are Marko Ruzdjak, Silvio Foretic and Andelko Klobucar.

The recordings of the Zagreb Guitar Trio are, it need scarcely be said, very good. There is however an electric quality about their live performances, an atmosphere that induces alertness and receptivity in their audiences. It is very difficult to recapture this quality in a recording, and that single fact is probably the strongest argument there is in favor of live performance.

Musicians sometimes strive after a kind of uniform perfection that will pass muster not only in the recording studio but also on the concert platform. I formed the impression that these three men from Yugoslavia would never succumb to that particular temptation. Their concerts are characterized by a blend of excitement and enjoyment, and the result is a life-enhancing exhilaration for the audience.

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