

# EVANGELOS AND LIZA



Courtesy Classical Guitar Magazine

The original title of this article was 'Greek Meets Greek'. It was borrowed, with acknowledgments, from John Duarte, who used it to subtitle his *Greek Suite*, written for Evangelos and Liza in 1968. Nathaniel Lee's original line, some three hundred years earlier, began 'When Greeks joined Greeks', and went on: 'then was the tug of war!'

Nothing could be less warlike and more harmonious than the partnership formed in 1963 by Evangelos Assimakopoulos and Liza Zoe. After graduating from the National Conservatoire of Athens (each taking First Prize with honors), they were soloists for a time — 'competitors', says Evangelos — but found a duo partnership more to their taste. They married in 1965, went to study in France with Presti and Lagoya and also in Spain with Andrés Segovia. Segovia said 'I felt entire satisfaction and enjoyment. They have rhythm, good taste, emotion, technique and vital dedication to music'. He encouraged composers such as Castelnuovo-Tedesco to write for them.

Since their arrival on the international music scene in 1967, Evangelos and Liza have toured extensively in Europe and North America. At first they were known as the Athenian Guitar Duo, but American impresario Sol Hurok persuaded them to adopt the form they now use. It's certainly more personal, but the original name

had a nice classical ring to it.

We talked first about the wide range of music available for two guitars, and what worked best for the combination.

'And what kind of music,' said Evangelos. 'There is no limit. You can make transcriptions from baroque music, from Bach, from Vivaldi — you can arrange for two guitars what you are unable to arrange for one, what Bach wrote for instruments other than the lute, for example, such as the harpsichord and violin, and so on. Then there is Spanish music. But original works, unfortunately, are very few.'

'Except in contemporary music,' said Liza. Many composers were writing for two guitars now. Castelnuovo-Tedesco had written a concerto for two guitars, Rodrigo had written the *Madrigal Concerto*. Pierre Petit had written for two guitars, and Pierre Jouvin had dedicated pieces to the Duo. And John Duarte had written his *Greek Suite* for them in 1968.

'Before this Jack Duarte had written several pieces for Presti and Lagoya,' said Evangelos. 'Unfortunately, Ida Presti died, and some of those pieces were not played. He wrote *Sans Cesse* (Op. 34, 1967) for them, but they never played it. So Jack sent it to us and said: "You can play it now". And of course we played it. It's a nice piece, very nice.'

The repertoire was improving all the time, and with a number of other duos now performing, the field was beginning to be enriched. Evangelos and Liza had done their share of enriching; among the original compositions they played were a number of arrangements of works written for the piano, by Albéniz and Granados, for instance, that they feel are certainly a better fit with two guitars than with one, and possibly even better than with the piano. But what did they find was the most popular with their audience?

'It depends on where you play,' said Evangelos. 'And the standard of the audience. If you play in London the audience is demanding — very demanding. They like to hear all kinds of music, even contemporary music. But in smaller cities they like mostly Spanish pieces or other pieces that are easy to assimilate. In the bigger cities, like New York, Paris and London, people like to hear suites by Bach, and contemporary music.'

Did that mean that they chose their programs according to where they were playing? Evangelos said that sometimes they played their London program in a small town, but Liza put it firmly in an artistic context: 'First of all we create a program that we feel is good.' After that, it would be modified if necessary, according to circumstances. But sometimes they simply got tired of one program and wanted to play something else. Evangelos said: 'Some years ago we were playing only baroque music. Three-quarters of our program was music from the Baroque. The following year we got tired of baroque music and did classical and contemporary instead. This year we're playing Spanish music. We're coming back in November, and I think it's going to be different again.'

'Perhaps we'll play the concerto by Castelnuovo,' Liza added. It could have been a tantalizing hint, but it was not enlarged upon.

The Duo divide their time between touring and teaching, not wanting to spend too much time doing either the one or the other. They may decide in any one year to do a tour in Europe and another in the United States — about two months of giving concerts — after which they return to Athens to teach. For about three months every year they simply relax and practise — 'renewing the program', Evangelos called it. For four or five months they give lessons at the National Conservatoire in Athens, where they are both professors of guitar. There was a lot of interest in the guitar in Greece at present. And there were, said Evangelos, very many guitarists in Athens, professional and amateur, of a very high standard. Some of his own graduates were ready to give a recital at the Wigmore Hall.

This interest extended over Greece, to Thessalonika, Crete, Patras — all the big cities. And composers in Greece were beginning to write for two guitars: Dragatakis had written a three-part work and a concerto for the Duo, and Giorganakis and Haliasas were also becoming well known.

Prominent composers like Theodorakis and Hajdidakis had used the guitar in their compositions many times. But it was not easy to persuade composers in general to write for two guitars. As Evangelos said, 'A composer is not easily inspired unless he knows his work is going to be performed' — a remark of realism more than cynicism. 'So, since there are not many guitar duos in the world, composers tend to be a little bit careful. Because they want their work to be performed

not only by one artist or two, but internationally. But we try to get composers to write for us, because I think that the future lies in that direction.'

Unlike many other countries, Greece had no organization that could help with the commissioning of new work. This was a source of considerable disappointment to the Duo, who could not help noticing the support given to the artists of other countries. Evangelos mentioned the support the British Council in Athens had given the several English guitarists who had played there: Julian Bream, David Russell, Julian Byzantine and many others. Liza mentioned the Goethe Institute in Germany as another source of valuable support. However, in the 14 or 15 times the Duo had played in London, not once had anyone come from the Greek Embassy.

Such official indifference made their work harder, but at least they had the consolation of knowing that their success was entirely due to their own efforts. Nevertheless, they had some help, and from an influential quarter. 'The person who really helped us,' Evangelos said, 'was Andrés Segovia. We met him in 1967 at Santiago de Compostela, and again in '68 and '69. He was impressed by our playing, I think, and helped us to find agents. We shall never forget that.'

When they started playing, the classical guitar was practically unknown in Greece. There were a few of Segovia's 78rpm records around, but they were not easy to find. Occasionally Greek radio would play a Segovia record. Both Evangelos and Liza were excited when they heard the sound of the guitar.

Seeking tuition, they knocked at the door of a teacher, Dmitri Fampas. He happened to be the best teacher in Greece.

'It was a matter of luck', Liza said. 'We didn't know who was a good teacher and who was not.' They went to the Conservatoire and studied with Fampas who, they both agree, had a lot of knowledge and a lot of inspiration. Fampas had been a pupil of Segovia. Another Greek student of Segovia, one of his original six at Siena, was Miliareisis. Both he and Fampas brought Segovia's methods to Greece and began to teach. It helps to explain why the guitar was officially established in the National Conservatoire of Music as early as 1953, and why it has attained so high a standard.

Evangelos and Liza feel that the guitar is more popular

in the Mediterranean countries than in more northerly countries. They have yet to visit some Scandinavian countries, though they are aware of the rapidly growing interest in the guitar there. I asked them which were their favorite places to visit. Evangelos replied with great courtesy that London was the centre of the arts, and it was most important to play here, and they liked to be here. Paris, New York and all the other big cities in the United States — they enjoyed playing in all of them, but London was the most important. 'But,' said Liza, 'the most demanding audiences are in Athens.'

Athens receives a good share of visiting guitarists from abroad, recent performers including Roberto Aussel, Gabriel Estarellas, Martin Myslivecek, Oscar Ghiglia, David Russell and Manuel Barrueco. 'And there is going to be an international competition,' Liza said. 'You must mention that.'

This took place during the following November, in Athens. It is in fact the Callas Competition and has been in existence for several years, but this was the first time the guitar had been included. Why had the guitar suddenly found itself in what hitherto has been a voice and piano competition? 'Because', said Evangelos, 'everybody can see that the guitar has made so much progress. There are hundreds and thousands of guitarists everywhere'.

Basically, the Duo teach the methods of Pujol, Carcassi, Aguado, Coste and Giuliani, with of course the studies of Sor and Villa-Lobos. But, Evangelos emphasized, it was not the methods that made good pupils: 'Every player is a different personality, so we must solve his or her individual problems'. Duets are given to all pupils, because it helps so much with

keeping time and rhythm. As Liza put it, 'They can listen to one another, and that is very important'.

Playing as a duo imparts the sense that the music must be built, whereas a solo guitarist sometimes listens to a record and tries to imitate it. The duo form was thus useful for teaching players to think for themselves in the matter of interpretation.

It so happens that the latest recording to be issued by this experienced duo was of solo performances, Liza playing music by Weiss, and Evangelos music by Albéniz. Yet they seldom if ever play solos in their concerts. Liza laughed, and said 'We miss playing solos, so we thought it was a good idea to record some'.

'It was only to see what we could do,' Evangelos affirmed. He felt it might be dangerous to mix solos in with their duo performances on the platform, because people have come to accept them as a very fine duo. 'It could become something like a circus. We think it's more important for people to listen to the music.' It is an attitude with which all musicians and, it is to be hoped, most audiences would agree.

They make a record every year, under their contract with EMI. They play Ramirez guitars in all their duo work, matched as far as possible to give what Evangelos calls a 'total result'. Liza says they are very steady, very stable: 'You can travel anywhere with a Ramirez. No problem.' But the guitar she plays on her solo recording is by Paul Gypas, one of a number of very good Greek guitar makers now operating. In fact, the first prize in the guitar section of the Callas Competition will include a guitar by Gypas. And, the Duo add mischievously, the second prize will include a guitar by Ramirez.

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