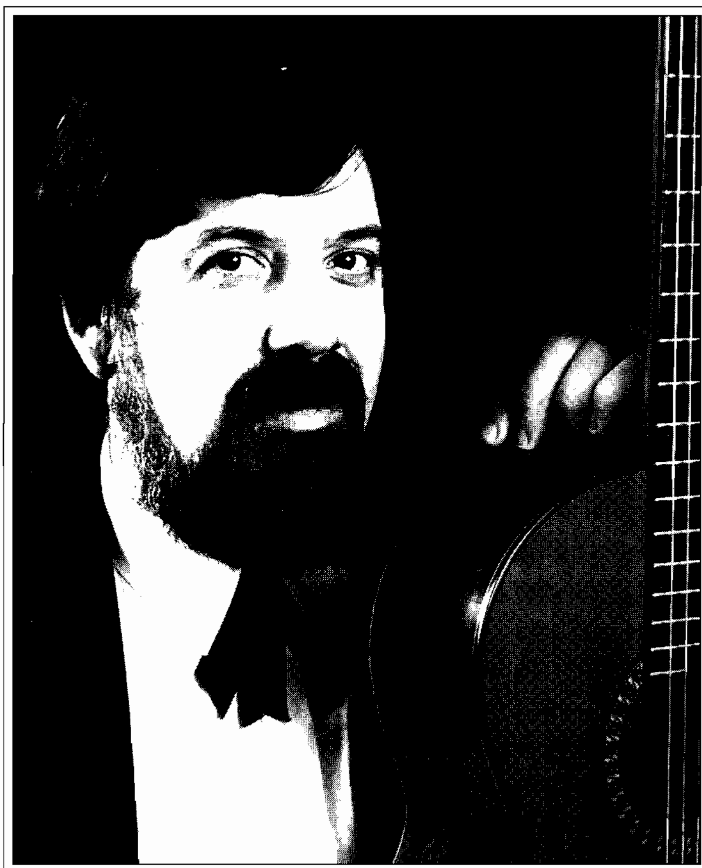
OSCAR GHIGLIA

Born in Livorno, Italy, in 1938, Oscar Ghiglia nearly became a painter. But the guitar took precedence, and he enrolled at Santa Cecilia Conservatory in Rome. Masterclasses with Segovia in Siena followed, and his professional debut was made in the Spoleto Festival, where so many young musicians have begun successful careers. Segovia invited him to be his assistant at the University of California, and since then he has been in continuous demand, both as a performer and as a teacher.

In late middle age, Oscar Ghiglia has become perhaps more of a teacher than a player, but when he plays you are aware of a supreme sense of style. The accretion of decades has brought an understanding of music that few people under 50 can appreciate.

As rich in anecdote and humor as he is in music, Oscar Ghiglia is excellent company. His powerful but benign authority makes him welcome at innumerable guitar competitions, and it was at one of these — the first Philippos Nakas Guitar Competition, in Athens — that we met for this interview.

Oscar Ghiglia: My father, who was an artist, had been taught guitar first by his father and then by a very famous Roman actor from the time of Fascism, Ettore Petrolini. He was a comic actor who played the guitar. They had a friend in common from Sardinia, a well-known musician called Gabriel, who had found all these ethnic musics in the island. He and my grandfather had met while my grandfather was there as a tourist, painting — he was also a painter. He happened to be adopted by some brigands there; they apparently didn't think he was a dangerous fellow, for they kept him in their place for as long as he would, and he settled there and painted as much as he wanted. That's how he met Gabriel, who was a very nice guitarist who could play in the tradition of the Sardinian people. My father learned through this combination of people. I always heard him singing songs and playing. Whereas my mother, a pianist, would lead me in quite a different direction. But I didn't particularly care for the piano; I thought it was too loud, for one thing, or too square, or too black, or too white — anyway, something too much. My father used to play the piano, very badly: I probably followed his example, and my mother shooed me away from it.



Courtesy Classical Guitar Magazine

During the War, we were in Rome, my older brother and I; there were German raids, and Allied raids against the Germans, and the bombs would fall all around our home, but fortunately none of them hit where we were staying. During the time when the alarm was on, when the sirens rang all over the city, my mother would sit at the piano and play, and we would sing Schubert's Lieder. It made us forget the danger. Then, when they were very close and we heard the first bombs fall, we all ran down into the shelter. Music was always something connected with some impending doom.

Before I was a teenager I never thought of playing the guitar. I was a painter, as my father was. Painting kind of took me away from people. I was already solitary, and I needed the company of others. Painting was something you did by yourself. I loved to be by myself, but then I figured that I could do the same thing with the guitar. It was an easy step when I quit the painting; there was no harm, no pain, no sorrow, no regret.

Do you still paint?

Sometimes. But I stayed at the same level as when I was about 13, when I picked up the guitar. I entered the Conservatory of Rome when I was 16. I played and sang songs for a couple of years, after which my

mother thought that was enough playing around and that I needed a solid classical education in music. That year the Conservatoire of Santa Cecilia, the first conservatoire in Italy, had opened a guitar class. You could not get a diploma for many years; it was just a certificate, it wasn't valid, it wasn't worth anything. But it was very good, because I studied all the repertoire, especially the didactic repertoire, all the etudes.

Not all became guitarists. The class was made up of 16 at the beginning, and only about ten stayed. And only about five remained in the guitar world. Some stayed in music, and one became a conductor, Gianluigi Gelmetti. He and I entered in the same year; he was eight years old and I was 16. He was very little: a prodigy. He decided after his diploma that he wanted to continue with composition and conducting. He came to Siena as a guitarist, but he also followed Celibidache's classes.

1957 was the first year I went to Siena, but Segovia was absent that year, having an eye operation. He came the following year, and the year after, when Alirio Diaz was holding the class. Alirio was a very good teacher who opened a lot of doors, especially concerning tone, sound. They would never tell us how to do any one thing, you know. It was just take it or leave it; it was there, a display of certain things. If you were able to get them, they were yours for the taking. But the problem was that sometimes it was very difficult to do this. How do shape your nails? — 'Well, not too much this way, not too much that way.' How do you hold your guitar? — 'Not too much this way, not too much that way.' How do you touch the string? — 'Not too much this way, not too much that way.'

Segovia taught by example?
Yes. Alirio also; he would mention sometimes that his left hand had been a problem which he had resolved, whereas the right hand had been quite natural. So we were all looking at his right hand — but it was a hand of a different kind. His right hand is not like mine. So I tried to copy his right hand in front of a mirror, trying to put it in the same position — and I couldn't! There was no way I could move my thumb as he moved his. South Americans, especially Colombians and Venezuelans, have a hand made in such a way, with fingers that go into that position naturally.

Nobody else was able to do it like that. Whereas it was much easier for me to imitate Segovia's position of the right hand. I also have large hands, although my fingers are not as fat or as long as Segovia's. Segovia had very long fingers. His thumb extended to such a length that he hid it when he was in front of a lady. He put his thumbs inside his cuffs. He was somehow modest. People used to look for his thumb when he was playing. They couldn't see it. It never came out, like John Williams's.

Segovia always took care to keep his nails out of the way when he shook hands. And such a soft hand he had! Cool and soft. You never had the impression that he would perspire or that he would squeeze anything in his hands.

Alirio was more influential the first year, because I fell in love with his sound. The following year Segovia was there and Alirio was there, so there were those two poles. Segovia was teaching Alirio every day, so when Alirio played you could hear him at his best. He played Sor's Sonata opus 25, the Allegro: when the chords came, they sounded like an orchestra. Incredible, the huge amount of sound. Beautiful. And so strong and rhythmic. It took me the whole year afterwards to try and figure out that sound.

I came back the next year with a great sound. Alirio was sitting next to Segovia, and Segovia heard me play. I played a short piece with that great fat sound I was so proud of, and Segovia, instead of saying 'Bravo! Beautiful!', turned towards Alirio and said: 'I don't understand why they try to get such a useless amount of sound' — and he played the same thing with the tiniest sound I've ever heard. Why? All that work— 'useless'! I had spent hours and hours at it.

Segovia thought I was a nightmare for him. I had long hair and a beard that had started to crop. During the night he would see an image that he wouldn't recognize, a black mask or something, somebody who would take his head off his neck and keep it in his hands. And then he would realize that it was me, in his dreams. I never really liked this. I was a pupil, and he never told me. Other people kept telling me these stories. He made fun of me because I made faces, you know, grimaces, when I performed Bach. I played this Gavotte by Bach and I made such grimaces that he imitated me. I felt so humiliated. He said, 'Look, you're holding the guitar like a lightning conductor. Don't hold your guitar like that!'. So I tied a bottle of water at the end of the guitar to pull it down, so that it wouldn't go up like that. It took some time to get used to that position. It was very uncomfortable. I had to learn to bend my whole back Now, finally, I can hold

it any way I want. I don't like to hold it too high because then it's like an archlute. I sometimes look at a cellist, and there's quite an uncomfortable bend in the elbow there where they hit the low strings.

Anyway, it took a long time to learn how to hold the guitar and how to sit. I'm still learning. Then came Alexander Technique in the 60s and the 70s. I read a few chapters of Alexander's book, and it seemed to be a way to help towards this quest for the right approach to the guitar. Because it seemed that the greatest successes I've had were due to a lot of work, so that afterwards I felt it as a heavy load. Every time I saw John (Williams), it was such an inspiration because it seems it just came from heaven, you know; his nervous system had no heavy particles, just motion, action.

So, it was a very good experience when John came to Siena. For one thing, I thought that Eliot Fisk should have studied with him. But John didn't particularly like teaching at the time. I think he has probably changed his mind now. Once John told me that he had finally found a reason to teach, and that was to teach people to do what they want, not what they are expected to do. He felt that he been expected to do things for too many years. That's when he took up with Sky. It was a reaction.

All the same, he is very grateful to his father for putting him through that experience, of making him do what was expected of him and giving him a remarkable technique in the process.
Absolutely. And he was such a good psychologist, his father, because he never made John tired of what he was doing. Christopher Nupen told me that John had to sit and play for 20 minutes before he could go out to play. But in 20 minutes he had to do so much. He was given a whole list of pieces and he went through all of them. If he didn't do them in 20 minutes, he would have to stay as long as it took. It was a very nice strategy. John was very sharp, and probably did it in less than that time.

Would you say that, in a sense, John was also an influence on your own playing, in addition to Segovia and Alirio Diaz?
Everyone I've met has been an influence. John, Julian Bream — I'm sure that you cannot really rule out anyone. Even people I didn't like were an influence. For instance, as a guitarist and a student of Segovia and in the class of Segovia, we tended to dislike everything else. It's some kind of sectarianism that takes place — I hate that word, but somehow it takes place. So, when we heard all those beautiful *rubati* that Presti and Lagoya did, our blood would curdle. We would never do those things! They were absolutely forbidden. Yet when I went to visit Presti and Lagoya in their home, they were so nice and hospitable, and we had a big dinner together and we met their friends. Evangelos and Liza were there — I probably wouldn't have met them and become friends if it weren't for Presti and Lagoya. They had just recorded a new LP, and they played it for me. I really liked the piece that Rodrigo had written for them, *Tonadilla*. They told me they were giving a class the following week at the Schola Cantorum in Paris. I went to study there when I won the competition in Paris; it was among the prizes. I had decided to take a course with Jacques Chailley, the French musicologist who now teaches at the Sorbonne. He taught just a small group of students. He would sit there and speak about music and make us write music 'in the style of' after he spoke about it.

I asked Presti and Lagoya if I could just drop in during their class. I dropped in with my then wife, who was not a guitarist — she had a doctorate in urban geography — but we found out that we were both registered as players. She played 'God Save the King' on the guitar; it was all she did. We had big fights with Alexandre (Lagoya). He didn't like the fingering Segovia was doing, etcetera. I felt defensive, and I resisted. Ida Presti was very nice, because she tried to calm me down and she tried to see my point of view. However, I think I learned a lot from that week, even though it wasn't my cup of tea, so to speak. I learnt that, first of all, I was opinionated to the core, and that there were many things that I should have known that I didn't know. I found out that Segovia did allow things that were never put into words — but they knew how to put them into words. So it was another influence. Today I'm putting into words, for my pupils, what I think are the transcendental artistic grounds behind Segovia's so-called 'transgressions'.

The Aspen Festival must have been a considerable influence.
Aspen was very influential because of the very much alive ambience, chamber-music making, the concerts, the rehearsals, the people. It was started by Albert Schweitzer right after the war, actually as a cultural event that had nothing to do with music: it was a literary institute, and it had some music just to keep company there. Then the music part bloomed, and the rest stayed as it had been in the beginning. It's still

there, but the music is the main thing. The chamber music has always been very important. All the greatest quartets have played there.

So it was really instructive to discuss it with my students, to bring them along to hear Isaac Stern, to hear Itzhak Perlman, Pinchas Zukerman, all these up-and-coming musicians as well as the old ones, and to discuss the performances with them. Some were discouraged.

There was something of that at Siena too, wasn't there?
Yes, but not in such an open way. In Siena it was one-to-one; you went to a concert, but you didn't talk about it afterwards. Because, simply, you don't walk in the mountains for an hour and then walk back in the cottonwoods, talking. That's why you talked. In Siena you went out and had a pizza, and then you talked about different things.

I remember talking with a student who said that she didn't think she would ever be able to play the guitar in the way a violinist had just done. This was Stern, who had just performed a Mozart concerto, conducting and playing. And it was so beautiful. I told her, 'Why did you think in such a negative way? Did you like it?' 'Of course I liked it. But I know that I will never be able to do it and that I should stop'. And I said, 'But if you really liked it, then whatever you really liked in this playing, it's something that is already yours. It's in you. All you have to do is to take it out. But it's there. I'm sure that all the things you didn't notice in his playing, probably 95 per cent of the things he lives for you didn't notice, you don't even know they exist. But what you know, what you liked about his playing, is what is already in your pocket. So you can take it out and cash it!'

I had always been warned against outside influences. My father used to say 'You must not study with Segovia, because you will become a small Segovia. Stay by yourself, so that you'll be yourself.' I felt guilty when I went to study with Segovia. I felt guilty when I liked something that somebody else did, because I thought that it belonged to him. Then I realized that what I saw was not what he saw; it was what *I* saw. It was my own.

I try first to open my students' ears. Once somebody can hear, then his creativity is already under way. He's not trying to make a phrase the way he's been taught; he's trying to make a phrase the way he hears it. Of course he knows there are many laws he has to learn. But the hearing is his own. Sometimes in the examinations in Basel some teachers who have examined my students have told me that one common thing among my students is that they can hear. I thought that was the best compliment I could have.

You go to a lot of festivals and competitions. How do you feel about the level of playing in this competition (Philippos Nakos, Athens)? How do you feel about competitions generally?
I was very pleased with the reaction of a student of mine who was not admitted to the final, whereas my other two students were. She took it very well, but she knows that her work is still under development. She's discovering a second personality growing inside her.

Unfortunately, sometimes you see a player who is so much in love with his sound that he will not do anything else but follow that sound of his fingers on the strings, so everything will be pervaded by that. Whereas I try to teach students to be in love with the music, with the score, to look at the score like a magic ball and see all the truths coming out of it, coming directly through the mind, through the senses, rather than impose a certain shape of playing to the kind of sound, the kind of approach. The approach comes with the score. The score tells you what kind of approach to make.

Competitions are the most important things now for the young kids who need to get out, to play, to do things. They cannot undertake a career without winning competitions, because there's nothing else. Festivals with competitions! Competitions with festivals!

How far does your decision not to impose go? Aren't there times when you have to impose something better than what is there?
I take responsibility for what I'm doing. I will never touch a thing that I know is good; I care too much about the individual's personality. I think it is the main thing that he has. All I try to do is just open their eyes and their ears and to stop them from doing certain things that they do without really wishing to. If they think those things are good, they can always go back to them.

I'm now sharing students with Hoppy Smith (Hopkinson Smith, lutenist), when he's away, or when I'm away. It's very interesting. I took four of his students for one class, and he took four of mine. This

was last month. I don't know what he did to them. I'm going to see them when I go back to Basel.

I'm sure it's good for them. You know, you see these persons and they're quite different. Because the people who go to the Schola Cantorum to study old music are a special breed. They belong to a different time sphere. Those who play renaissance lute do not mingle with those who play baroque. They are quite different. When they go and hear Bach, they think it's Stravinsky. Such modern music — 'Oh, it's too much!' Those who are with medieval music, when they play the lute, they cut old combs to get the right pick — they import combs from Brazil.

The students I found were all people I had talked with in the cafeteria, South Americans mainly, and I liked them very much. One was baroque guitar, another was archlute, and another one was theorbo. Every time it was a different approach. I don't read tablature like they do, so I just listen and try to shape up various things, telling them what it is they're missing. Sometimes their attitude is more towards a certain idea of style regardless of what the score says.

It's a different approach. Not so much related to the instrument as to the style of playing. So I was saying 'Your sound is very sweet, it's very beautiful, it's very alive, it's perfect, but the piece you're playing is not that. This is a bourrée. A bourrée needs some more guts. You can't have sweetness so much when you play a bourrée. You have to have heavy feet, so to speak. A bourrée was made for stamping on the grapes, to make wine. If the music calls for that, you've got to indulge in that.' They said: 'What? With a baroque guitar?' Find a way! Do it! Maybe use a different stroke. Then it sounds different. They wouldn't go for that by themselves.

But there's no direct line back, so we can't really tell how they did it in the 19th century. We can only tell from the instrument. The instrument itself is already a proof that it existed. The score is another proof. And the fact that the players had five fingers. We put all this evidence together and something comes out that is very close to what might have been. The rest has to come from the culture and the imagination.

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