

18TH KOBLENZ INTERNATIONAL GUITAR FESTIVAL & ACADEMY 2010

by THÉRÈSE WASSILY SABA

THE KOBLENZ International Guitar Festival & Academy has undoubtedly grown into one of the top international guitar festivals in the world. There, in the very intimate and picturesque setting of Koblenz, one could hear many of the finest guitarists of our time in concert and masterclass, in an atmosphere that is unpretentious and friendly. Added to these very musically inspiring experiences, is the pleasure of strolling through Koblenz's cobblestoned streets and squares, filled with welcoming cafes and restaurants, and sitting for a chat with these artists.

The 18th Koblenz International Guitar Festival & Academy was held from 17–24 May 2010 in Koblenz, Germany situated in the Rhine Valley on the banks of two rivers, the Rhine and the Mosel. There were many outstanding performances at this year's festival, starting with Pavel Steidl, who played on a 1926 Simplicio guitar. The sound of the instrument easily filled the hall and the melodic lines in the slow movement of Castelnuovo-Tedesco's *Sonata Omaggio a Boccherini, Op. 77* were particularly beautiful. The Bach *Chaconne* was another epic musical



PHOTOS: THÉRÈSE WASSILY SABA

From right: Manuel Barrueco, Angel Romero, Georg Schmitz, David Russell, María Jesus Russell, Lucio Matarazzo, Robert Brightmore, Michael Lewin, Denis Azabagic.

journey under his hands. The wit and humour he extracts from Carlo Domeniconi's *Hommage à Jimi Hendrix* seemed to be unsurpassable, but then he played an encore of his *Lambda Für Elise*; words are insufficient to describe the many levels and aspects of one's musical being that he taps into simultaneously but it is an absolute joy to hear him perform.

Lorenzo Micheli has dedicated himself to promoting the works of Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco. He is an engaging player who attracts you to listen from his very first notes; his extreme sensitivity as a player and his high-level of musicianship leaves a deep impression on you. I particularly enjoyed the *Tarantella, Op. 87b* and the *Sonata, Op. 77* with their lightly dancing scale passages and attractive tone quality. As a contrast he played the early 20th-century piece *Variationen über Schuberts 'Wiegenlied'* by Ferdinand Rebay.

Angel Romero gave a recital with his wife the soprano Nefretiri Romero which featured selections from *Mi Jardín Solitario* by Lorenzo Palomo, a setting of poems by Angel's father, Celedonio Romero. At times the music had a stark, Andalusian flavour to match the text, but the voice of Nefretiri filled the hall with a rich, round texture, which was even more attractive in the *Canciones Antiguas* by Federico García Lorca. Angel Romero played his own distinctive accompaniment to these songs; he explained later that his ideas were inspired by his dear friend, the Spanish guitarist Narciso Yepes.

Marcin Dylla is one of the top young players that we have today, although I always enjoy his playing, his concert at Koblenz was one of the most impressive I have ever heard him play. Ponce's *Sonata Romantica* was full of beauty and he brought out the Schubertian aspects well. He gave an exciting performance of *Tres Piezas* and then the *Tres*



The French guitarist, Florian Larousse, who won First Prize in the Koblenz International Guitar Competition 'Hubert Käppel' in 2009.

Piezas Españolas by Joaquín Rodrigo; it was all so full of musical expression. Despite his excellent international reputation one can see that Marcin Dylla still strives to give his audience the very best performance that he can and in Koblenz he did!

David Russell played his very beautiful arrangements of works by Couperin with exquisite ornamentation and equally pleasing works by Bach: his arrangements of the *Sinfonia* from *Cantata 156* and *Suite BWV 1034*. Here we could hear a true master of the instrument performing in the phrasing of the individual lines. Every note seemed to have profound meaning and importance. That same level of masterly performance came also in the recital by Manuel Barrueco, whose musicianship was as illuminating as always. José Ardévol's *Sonata* was a remarkable piece with refreshingly distinctive harmonic ideas. The *Tristón* from Piazzolla's *Cinco Piezas* was played so tenderly that one was grateful to be saved from tears by the final movement, *Compadre*; the roaring cries of appreciation from the audience at the end of the Piazzolla also helped to get one's feet back onto the ground.

Goran Krivokapic is also a refined guitarist, playing with a secure but understated interpretation, which draws you in. He played three contrasting Sonatas by C.P.E Bach, Haydn and José, all with an admirable musical depth. Denis Azabagic's recital was technically comfortable but somehow emotionally removed. He played his own excellent arrangement of Bach *Partita BWV 1013*, originally for solo flute, as well as *La Catedral* by Barrios and *El Decameron Negro* by Brouwer.

Zoran Dukic's performance was so emotionally charged he seemed to double in physical stature on stage. He is a player of broad interpretational contrasts, from the ravishingly beautiful to the boldly ugly timbres, and his dynamic control in the crescendos and decrescendos was so pleasing. His performances of the *Fantasia Sonata* by Joan Manen and the *Fantasy* by Malcolm Arnold brought out aspects of those pieces that I had not experienced before. He gave the German première of Dusan Bogdanovic's *Fantasia* written in 2009 in homage to Maurice Ohana and dedicated to Zoran Dukic. Being an admirer of all three artists – Ohana,



Odair and Sergio Assad in concert.

Bogdanovic and Dukic – I wanted to hear the piece again...immediately!

Judicaël Perroy's command of technique and his concentrated interpretation has an intensity which is so distinctive and communicative. He is a powerful musician with strong ideas and he has a firm hold on the rhythmic drive of pieces; I really enjoyed his excellent performances of Ponce's *Theme and Variations on 'La Folia de España'* and the Bach *Partita*.

Sergio and Odair Assad performed as a duo and not only is their musicianship impressive but it is also their enjoyment of playing that makes the experience so special. Odair played some solos including the *Sonata del caminante*, which was written for him by Leo Brouwer. Odair is so at one with this piece that his whole body moves to its rhythm; it is almost like watching someone play the guitar on a moving train.

There were so many special concerts this year; I wish there was more space for me to give you more details; I felt very privileged to be there in Koblenz and if only I could have divided myself into two or three people, I would have been able to attend more things at the same time.

Throughout the week there were masterclasses given by David Russell, Manuel Barrueco, Sergio and Odair Assad, Konrad Ragossnig, Lorenzo Micheli, Hubert Käppel, Aniello Desiderio, Robert Brightmore, John Dearman and many other excellent players. What is most enjoyable in Koblenz is that you can sit and listen to the advice of these guitar masters in a relaxed and intimate atmosphere and they are all very dedicated to helping the students improve. One of the most special moments in the week for me was listening to Konrad Ragossnig give a masterclass to a young student on Bach's *Lute Suite in A minor*. One of the first recordings which I bought was of Konrad Ragossnig playing that suite on the lute. Since then I have heard many different performances of the work, but none has ever impressed me as much as Konrad Ragossnig's. In the masterclass Konrad Ragossnig also emphasised the importance of daily technique work; he compared it with the warm-up exercises of a ballet dancer. Naturally the technical level of the students was high, so David Russell reminded students that, although they are able to play their scales with 'machine-gun precision, they should try to maintain a



Manuel Barrueco giving a masterclass.



Odair Assad giving a masterclass.



David Russell giving a masterclass.



Agustín Leon Ara, Cecilia Rodrigo and Konrad Ragossnig.



Goran Krivocapic.



Relaxing in Koblenz.



Students of the Koblenz International Guitar Academy rehearsing with the Staatsorchester Rheinische Philharmonie, conducted by Francesco Angelico, before their final examination.



Angel Romero and Aniello Desiderio playing the Concierto Madrigal by Joaquin Rodrigo with the Staatsorchester Rheinische Philharmonie, conducted by Francesco Angelico, in the presence of Cecilia Rodrigo.



The winners of the Koblenz International Guitar Competition 'Hubert Käppel' 2010, from left: Brain Vance of D'Addario, Andras Csaki, Chia-Wei Lin, Rafael Aguirre, Konrad Ragossnig, Hubert Käppel, Angel Romero.

certain element of elegance as well. He elaborated that one should try to 'charm' the audience rather than 'impress' them. Manuel Barrueco tried to encourage students to use vibrato and then discussed the different nuances in the use of vibrato.

At the 'Friday Night for Guitar and Orchestra' concert in the historic Görreshaus in the heart of old Koblenz, the Italian guitarist Aniello Desiderio gave a vibrant performance of the Giuliani *Concerto in A minor, Op.30* with the Staatsorchester Rheinischer Philharmonie, conducted by Francesco Angelico. In the same programme Angel Romero performed the *Concierto de Aranjuez* by Joaquín Rodrigo, and then Rodrigo's *Concierto Madrigal* for two guitars with Aniello Desiderio. They gave an excellent performance and the atmosphere was equally compelling with a very full house including Cecilia Rodrigo and her husband, the violinist Agustín León Ara.

Cecilia Rodrigo also attended the public examinations with orchestra of the Koblenz International Guitar Academy Soloist Diploma, which has her father's work, the *Concierto de Aranjuez*, as an obligatory piece. The students: Evgeny Beleninov from Russia, Petar Culic from Croatia, Aysegul Koca from Turkey and Sandro Brancaccio from Italy, each performed this examination with the Staatsorchester Rheinischer Philharmonie, conducted by Francesco Angelico. Cecilia Rodrigo commented to me about this examination with a professional orchestra: 'I thought it was a real luxury for students who are finishing their guitar training. Not only are forced to deal with an immense work, but it also gives them the opportunity to work with an orchestra, which in this case is excellent and with a conductor who was giving them good advice.'

The Austrian guitarist and lutenist, Konrad Ragossnig was honoured with the Koblenz International Guitar Academy's Life Achievement Award 2010. The ceremony was held at the Historic Rathaussaal in Koblenz on Sunday 23 May 2010. Prof. Ingeborg Henzler, President of the University of Applied Science Koblenz, and Georg Schmitz, the Director of the Koblenz International Guitar Academy presented Konrad Ragossnig with the Award and with a bronze sculpture created by the German artist Heinz Kassung; it was derived from his original design of the festival logo. Speeches were given by Prof. Dr. Joachim Hofmann-Göttig, the Mayor of the city of Koblenz, Dr. Rainer Mohrs, Editorial Manager of Schott Mainz, Prof. Ingeborg Henzler, Koblenz, and the *laudatio* was given by the flautist, recorder player and composer Hans-Martin Linde, who worked in ensemble with Konrad Ragossnig for many, many years. Listening to these speeches one had a sense of the enormous contribution that Konrad Ragossnig has made to the guitar, the lute, to the music world and to the generations who follow him. This very moving ceremony was also attended by Konrad Ragossnig's family, including his son the harpsichordist Thomas Ragossnig, and Cecilia Rodrigo and Agustín León Ara.

During the ceremony Hubert Käppel gave emotionally charged performances of *Canticum* and *Tarantos* by



PHOTO: ROLAND SCHÄFER

Konrad Ragossnig, Festival Director Georg Schmitz and Prof. Ingeborg Henzler at the Life Achievement Award ceremony of the Koblenz International Guitar Academy.

Leo Brouwer. The duos for guitar and recorder with Wolfgang Dey included the colourful *Musica da Camera* and *Music for a Bird* by Hans-Martin Linde, which were even more special to listen to with the composer there in the audience, and on the very day of his 80th birthday. The ceremony was brought to a fitting close with Hubert Käppel and Wolfgang Dey playing Konrad Ragossnig's fine arrangement of *Lachrimae Pavan* by John Dowland.

There were a record number of participants in the competition this year and the level of the performances was very high. The international jury with Dale Kavanagh, Sonja Prunnbauer, Tadashi Sasaki, Alfred Eickholt, Ansgar Krause, Lucio Matarazzo, Günter M. Schillings, Robert Brightmore, Goran Krivokapic, Michael Lewin, Alexander S. Ramirez, Tobias Kassung, Russell Poyner, with the addition of Hubert Käppel and Agustín León Ara in the Final round, was headed by Uni.-Prof. Konrad Ragossnig. The winners of the Koblenz International Guitar Competition 'Hubert Käppel' 2010, were: First Prize: Rafael Aguirre (Spain); Second Prize: Andras Csàki (Hungary); and Third Prize: Chia-Wei Lin (Taiwan). The First Prize includes a concert in the Weill

Recital Hall of Carnegie Hall, New York, sponsored by D'Addario & Company and the D'Addario Music Foundation, including 1000 US dollars, flight and hotel expenses, and a year's supply of D'Addario strings; 3000 euros from Sparkasse Koblenz; 10 concerts in Germany; and production of a CD with KSG EXAUDIO.

I asked Rafael Aguirre Miñarro about his debut in New York as the First Prize winner of the Koblenz International Guitar Competition 'Hubert Käppel' 2010, which would be in October 2010, 'I am very excited about the debut in New York and I want to do my best so that people enjoy in this concert. It will certainly be a privilege and an honour to step on that stage.' Rafael continued, 'the competition of Koblenz has been a huge event and of a magnitude never seen before, at least in my case. I was never in a competition with so many participants, which scared me a little at first.'



Konrad Ragossnig receives the Koblenz Guitar Academy's Life Achievement Award.

Any competition is difficult for me, even if there are only seven participants because I want to do my best and I want to play exactly how I understand the music at this time of my life specifically.'

The Spanish violinist Agustín León Ara, the husband of Cecilia Rodrigo, was part of the jury for the Finals of the competition and was pleased with: 'the warm welcome and a great organization. The contestants had a high level. The programme was attractive because it left a lot of freedom for the contestants. The jury was composed of personalities of international guitar and I felt comfortable and very honoured to be among them.'

The lecture series included a very interesting discussion about stage fright which was moderated by Günter Forsteneichner and was followed by an equally informative lecture entitled 'How to Stay Healthy as a Concert Guitarist' given by Prof. Dr Michael Schmitz. Hubert Käppel gave a lecture on the *Technique of the Modern Concert Guitar*, covering his extensive and exhaustive exercises from his soon-to-be-published tome of the same title; it will be an invaluable book for all guitarists. Tina van den Berg and Tobias Kassung each gave lectures on the practical aspects of being a concert guitarist. Dr. Andreas Michel Andino gave a lecture and demonstration about the parallels between the art of performing magic and that of being a classical guitarist, which was both informative and entertaining. He did teach us a few card tricks too and reminded us that: 'The illusion is always in the mind.'

Each year on the Sunday before the start of the Koblenz International Guitar Festival & Academy, they have held a golf tournament at Jakobsberg Golf Course to raise money for the 'NGO David y María Russell' charity, which builds water wells in Africa. This year David and Maria Russell were able to officially thank them for the water pump, which was built in Turkana, Kenya, with the money collected in last year's tournament. The French guitarist, Florian Larousse, who won First Prize in the Koblenz International Guitar Competition 'Hubert Käppel' in 2009, began his recital in the chapel of the monastery in Jakobsberg with a guitar with extra bass strings on it for his excellent performance of two *Fantasies* by John Dowland. The treble strings were very clear and were not overpowered by the extra basses. The sound was beautiful and so was his interpretation. To our great surprise, before playing some Regondi, he removed



David and Maria Russell at Jakobsberg Golf Course, where the Koblenz Guitar Stars Charity Golf Tournament was held. The poster shows the water pump that was built in Turkana, Kenya, with the money collected in last year's tournament.



PHOTO: GODEHARD JURASCHEK

(From left) The Koblenz Mayor Prof. Dr. Joachim Hofmann-Göttig, Galerie Handwerk CEO Alexander Baden, the Head of the German Masters Guild for Musical Instrument Makers Siegfried Thielemann, Galerie Handwerk President Werner Wittlich and Georg Schmitz.

the extra bass strings, and suddenly the guitar was just a regular 6-stringed guitar. This extraordinary guitar with the harp string attached was built by the French luthier Hugo Cuvilliez. The Mike Reinhardt Trio, with Mike, Moro and Sascha, all members of Django Reinhardt's family, were at the golf course in the evening with other members of his family, to amaze us with his fast and stylish gypsy swing playing. Later in the week the Joscho Stephan Quartett gave a performance at the jazz venue Café Hahn with Mike Reinhardt as their special guest guitarist.

There were many guitar makers exhibiting their instruments, including Michael Wichmann, Georg and Robert Gose, Gert Petersen, Antonius Müller, Armin and Mario Gropp. Michael Macmeekan had his Chanterelle publications there, which are always full of exciting new editions. Other special visitors at the festival were Brain Vance of D'Addario, who was there to discuss the wide range of strings that they have as well as the innovative guitar products, such as super-sensitive humidifiers in their Planet Waves.

As well as the exhibitor's stands in the Görreshaus, there was also an exhibition of guitars at the Galerie Handwerk, a gallery for craftsman, designers and artists. On 12 May 2010 at the opening of the exhibition, entitled *Der Ton macht die Musik – Meistergitarren für Meistergitarristen* (13–24 May 2010), the German guitar maker Michael Wichmann, from Hamburg gave a talk on the process of guitar making and the possibilities for the future, and Florian Larousse gave a short recital. Prof. Dr. Joachim Hofmann-Göttig, the Mayor of Koblenz, and the Galerie Handwerk President Werner Wittlich also spoke at the official opening of the exhibition, which was attended by the Galerie Handwerk CEO Alexander Baden, and the piano and harpsichord maker Siegfried Thielemann, who heads the German Masters Guilds Association for Musical Instrument Makers. The first and second rounds of the Koblenz International Guitar Competition 'Hubert Käppel' were held in this exhibition space at the Galerie Handwerk.

The 19th Koblenz International Guitar Festival & Academy will be held from 6 to 13 June 2011, at the same time as the Bundesgartenschau – the National Garden Show 2011 – in Koblenz.

www.koblenzguitarfestival.de