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# RICARDO COBO

Interviewed by JULIA CROWE

RICARDO COBO describes his present hometown in Las Vegas as a competitive environment, yet he finds that the challenge, along with the climate, suits him. If you take a look at Cobo's overall career trajectory, it's clear that he has never been shy about laying down a solid foundation while maintaining the intent to carve out his own path.

'The guitar scene in Cali was small,' he says. 'It was small then and still is now, so I decided to study in the United States. The Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore was my first choice because I wanted to study with a recognized teacher like Aaron Shearer, whom I eventually followed to the North Carolina School of the Arts in Winston-Salem. I had an F-1 visa at the time which allowed me to remain in the US as a student. After I finished my graduate and Doctoral work with Bruce Holzman I was awarded an "Extraordinary ability" Visa which enabled me to work and perform freely.'

Cobo began his studies at the Antonio María Valencia Conservatory in Colombia when he was 13 years old and recalls taking a class from Abel Carlevaro in Bogotá.

'As a young teenager I was really taken by Carlevaro. He turned musical study into a science with an approach that said if you did the sum 'a + b' then you would get 'c'. I was fascinated with how he had organized teaching into a graded method. At that age, I wasn't focused on sound quality or emotion but rather on learning basic technique and he gave me much hope. What Carlevaro offered was a reasonable alternative to the prevalent notion at the time, which was, you'd better play like Segovia or else you're screwed. He created a method to help musicians become competent without injury.

'Later when I studied with Aaron Shearer, I learned to develop sound, musical ideas, and a solid technique based on proven principles. The objective here was flawless phrasing, even temperament, legato playing and consistency. These two teaching styles complimented each other.'

Cobo eventually moved to a brownstone apartment shared by four other musicians in the Hell's Kitchen district of New York, where he lived for ten years while entering and winning several major competitions in Europe: the San Juan, the Tárrega, the GFA and the Alirio Díaz Competition in Venezuela, to name a few. During this time he also worked as a studio musician in New York throughout the '90s at the Essay and Angel labels doing jazz and jingle work.

'I've found that work in New York tends to be won more by word-of-mouth and heavy lobbying.'



Ricardo Cobo.

Cobo explains. 'While Vegas is straight-up and commercial—it's about your 'look' and what you can do on the spot, live and in the studio.'

Cobo recorded an album of *Leo Brouwer's Guitar Concertos, Concierto Elegiaco and Concerto de Toronto* for the Essay label, followed by *Leo Brouwer, Guitar Music, Vol. 1* (Naxos).

'I was fascinated by Brouwer's work as a teenager, absolutely taken by it. I learned nearly everything he had published and eventually met him as an adult in Caracas while competing in the Díaz competition in 1990. We became fast friends. For any one to deny his importance as a composer for the guitar, I would say is absurd. His music was idiomatically groundbreaking and innovative, but it sounds traditional compared to what you hear today.'

Determined 'not to wind up in the Heifitz cookie cutter mold or classical music mothball box,' Cobo worked at the Shakespeare Festival in Utah, performed at several private parties in Las Vegas and decided to leave New York altogether.

'My decision to move to Las Vegas was based on the wish to get away from the crazy purist attitude inside classical music and the perception of the guitar. Las Vegas is relatively new to the classical guitar, and because entrenched perceptions of the instrument do not exist there, I knew I could build a lot of interest for guitar. Initially, what really pushed me to move was the endless beauty of places like Zion, Bryce, Escalante and Red Rock. Being in touch with

these magical places has changed my quality of life,' Cobo says emphatically.

If it took a few East Coast card sharps to turn a railyard worker's gambling ditch into a multi-million dollar glittering gaming paradise, smack in the middle of a desert, Cobo is clearly intent on applying his own business savvy here to increase the profile of the guitar. You won't find him replacing Roy Horn at the Mirage club any time soon, or fending off nearly extinct white tigers and snow leopards with the broad side of his guitar; however you will find him playing corporate gigs in-between running numerous recording studio projects.

'All the industry conventions pass through Las Vegas. You name it: automobile, electronics, hotels, the adult film industry... For example, I played a Spanish program for executives of La Quinta Inns.'

If you're curious to know what program he played at the adult film industry convention, Cobo's quick response is, 'Tangos.'

'Bill Gates had Sting come to his house and paid him £500,000 to play three songs. You see this in Vegas all the time. If the opportunity is there for me, I take it and the best part is that I get to introduce my music to an appreciative audience and have them walk away thinking about the guitar in a new light. I play a wide variety of gigs in town and classical music is not a priority. It's the level of awareness that I'm determined to raise,' he says.

Comparing the music scene in Las Vegas to downloading music on the Internet, Cobo adds, 'People want fast, easy access and loud music right now. Classical music represents the antithesis of this. Guitar is still the cool, Latin and exotic instrument you hear at smaller gatherings. Listening to guitar on your iPod is an even more intimate affair. Regardless of where you play, quality is something you have to maintain yourself - it's something you learn from having worked on the East Coast.'

Cobo's unique approach landed him a lucrative opportunity to make a children's music CD, *Guitar Lullaby* (Ellipses Arts), which was first marketed through the Gaiam/Harmony mail order catalogs, purveyors of new age spiritual and environmentally-sound products. The album quickly won a slew of awards from the American Library Association to Parents' Choice Awards to a mention from *Gramophone* magazine for being one of the finest new classical recordings.

'When Ellipsis Arts approached me about doing this project, I initially had some trepidation. They asked me to create an album with various songs and traditional lullabies. They put a lot more care into the production than any other recording project I've worked on, providing an acoustician and a music therapist who specialized in children. It was an elaborate process and turned into a best-selling album.'

It is with little surprise that *Guitar Lullaby* includes Sergio Assad's *Morning's Rag* from his Children's Cradle Suite, Leo Brouwer's *Berceuse, Um Amor de Valsa* by Paulo Bellinati and *Sunday Morning Overcast* by Andrew York, among other pieces, proving that Cobo is determined to inject intelligence into a commercial format.

'I love the stage but in a different way than most. I do not want to spend thirty years playing perfect concerts of museum music for other guitarists in perfect halls. I want to write, arrange and record original music with other amazing musicians and perform in a variety of venues including the web. It's my belief the classical music environment has to change or else it's going to be pushed into an even smaller slot than it is already.

'I caught a clip of jazz trumpeter Wynton Marsalis on the television programme, *The Charlie Rose Show*, where he said, 'Music is people.' Music is the echo of the poetry of the struggle people go through every day. Classical music can be done well in many unusual settings if it is presented properly and allows you to reinvent yourself. Today, pop culture is winning. Mediocrity and spin captures the spotlight. I am not sure what the answer to this conundrum is, but one of my goals is to remedy this by repackaging and re-recording traditional music.'

Cobo is currently focusing on performing works by younger Cuban, Venezuelan, Caribbean, Colombian composers such as, Eduardo Martín, Harold Gramatges, El Indio Figueredo, Gentil Montaña, Alejandro Wills, Juan Vicente Torrealba, and Rafael Olmos. Some are original pieces for guitar, but with composers like Figueredo, Wills, and Torrealba, Cobo has transcribed from folk harp. He is also looking into transcribing works for guitar from unique and historical 18th and 19th-century Colombian piano pieces.

He is currently recording a variety of music and preparing three albums for release next year (label information will be forthcoming.) One album is of Cuban music for guitar and percussion with upright bass and includes some Brouwer arrangements that Cobo says have never been previously performed.

'The second album is of traditional repertoire, my father's favourite music: the kind of pieces you play at your first recital, like Barrios, Villa-Lobos. I plan to release it before Father's Day.'

His third album will consist of ensemble music with the guitar, saxophone, violin and flute and will include Cobo's own arrangements and original tunes with the tango and bandoleon on some tracks.

These days Cobo is teaching privately and offers short consultations, which is as much as his busy recording schedule will allow. When asked about how he developed his dynamic, powerhouse playing style, he says, 'I'm not a

weak personality. I'm intense and present. I cannot help but be whom I am - it's genetic and in my soul. I have to connect with something greater than my guitar.

'It becomes a real drag to play perfect concerts and by that I mean perfect notes. That was a 70s aspiration - to play perfectly all the time. The real goal is to connect and share and communicate a joyful version of life, to bring awareness and elevation. So for this reason, I am not into academic playing. Sometimes people become 'professional' students, which means they're great at copying music. Great artists do their own thing and put out something special.

'Aaron Shearer taught me how to control my playing and achieve a standard that would allow me to perform at a high level consistently. From Bruce, I learned how to do something special with the music and connect it to the beauty of living. My whole life I've wanted to be on stage and convey the joy of playing. I get a good deal of satisfaction from not hiding behind the guitar, while at the same time not letting ego and vanity get in way.'

In the middle of this interview Cobo had to answer the door to sign for a delivery from Colombia. Between the sounds of wrapping paper tearing away, I hear him exclaim, 'This is so good—my mother just sent me one of my uncle's paintings.'

'My uncle was a wonderful painter who studied architecture during WWII. I grew up seeing his paintings around the house and the images never left me. They were just emblazoned on my mind. Having spent precious time with him as a kid, I learned I had a talent for painting. When he died, he left his work in the family. My mother has just airtailed me this large painting from Colombia. It's of a bullfighter fighting in the ring. I love to paint and studied graphic design myself, along with computer graphics. Painting and playing complement each other in profound ways.'

Our conversation veers to the buzz surrounding Tom Humphrey's distinctive painted guitar, which Cobo played at the Mannes New York Guitar Seminar this past summer.

'Humphrey has always struck me for his remarkable vision and conviction about guitars. I own three of his Millenniums, which all have powerful sustain, focus and projected sound. With Tom, it's not about how accurately you play his guitar but what you do with the palette of sound and how you manage all the machinations of colour. You find that what turns you on in terms of complexity, colour and potential is what makes you say, "I can design a better musical line on this instrument".

'I find other popular makes of guitar to be very predictable, which is fine if that is what you want. But I enjoy responding to the parameters of the guitar and his are particularly elastic.'

Cobo happily divulges that he has recently married his girlfriend Julie in a ceremony where guests hiked up the scenic Zion Canyon in southern Utah. With backpacks in tow. A year ago, they had hiked up this same canyon on a seven to eight hour trek

and found themselves lost on a yellow plateau, surrounded by crevasses and two enormous walls, which he describes as being like the Grand Canyon, only a much smaller version.

'We made it down to the road in the pitch dark, terrified we'd be jumped by a cougar. We had one torch between us with a dwindling set of batteries,' he says. Apparently they had both vowed, unknown to each other at that moment, that if they managed to make it back to town alive, they would marry each other.

Since Cobo usually hikes with a Yamaha backpacker and often brings along scores of music that he is either arranging or learning, he probably had less to fear than he might have realized. Perhaps we should reconsider that earlier Roy Horn remark - that all it would take to allay any desert cougar would be a Las Vegas pro with a bullfighter's spirit and some serious lullaby chops, grounded in classical guitar.

[www.ricardocobo.com](http://www.ricardocobo.com)

### **Ricardo Cobo's Discography:**

2005- **Music For My Father** -Ricardo Cobo performs timeless music from his childhood. Works by Barrios, Villa-Lobos and Brouwer. Spring 2006. (Solo Guitar).

2003- **Guitar Music from Latin America** -Ricardo Cobo performs Latin standards by Villoldo, Salgan, Morel, Piazzolla, Reis and others. NAXOS 8.557329[DDD] 2003. (Solo Guitar).

1999 **Walking on the Water** -Ricardo Cobo plays new music by American composers Larry Cooperman, John Major and others. ESSAY/ALLEGRO. CD 1073. [DDD] C. 1999.

1998 **CAFE 1930** -Ricardo Cobo-Guitar, Marc Gould-Trumpet, Gordon Gottlieb-percussion. Jazz, Spanish and Latin orchestrations of Gismonti, Piazzolla, Lecuona, Granados and others. ANGEL/EMI. [DDD]C. 1998.

1993 **Tales for Guitar** -Ricardo Cobo plays groundbreaking solos by Piazzolla, Brouwer, Brotans, Dyens, and Koshkin.ESSAY/ALLEGRO. CD 1033. [DDD] C 1993.

Fall 1994 **The Guitar Concerti of Leo Brouwer** -World premiere recording of Concierto Elegiaco #3 and Concerto de Toronto. Ricardo Cobo performs on location in the Ukraine with the Pro Musica Kiev Orchestra. Richard Kapp, Cond. ESSAY/ALLEGRO. CD 1040. [DDD] C 1994.

Spring 1994 **Quiet Time/Guitar Lullaby**- Music for children and their parents at bedtime. Includes original music by S. Assad, F. Kleynjans, L. Brouwer, P. Bellinati, A. York and others. Relaxation Co. BPCD 7510. [DDD] 1994.

2000 **Papa's Lullaby**- Lullabies from around the world sung by fathers for their children. ELLIPSIS ARTS. [DDD] 2000. (Instrumental arr. And vocals).

2001 **Mediterranean Lullaby**- Lullabies from the Mediterranean ELLIPSIS ART'S. [DDD] 2001. (Original collection of solos and mixed instr./vocal).

Fall 1995- **The Complete Solo Guitar Works of Leo Brouwer** -Ricardo Cobo performs four volumes of the complete published and unpublished solo works of Leo Brouwer. NAXOS [DDD] 1995-1999. VOL. 1 (release 4-97).

Spring 1993 **Greatest Hits for String Quartet** -Ricardo Cobo is featured in selections from Bocherini to Schubert with members of the Philharmonia Virtuosi. ESSAY/ALLEGRO. CD 1036. [DDD] C 1993.

Fall 1993 **The Guitar Foundation of America** -Winners Circle 1982-1993. Featuring Selections of the GFA's most celebrated winners. GFA Recordings. [ADD] 1994.

1992-1996 **The Television Concerts** Nationally Televised Concerts by Brouwer and Rodrigo with the Orquesta Filarmónica de Bogotá and Orquesta Sinfónica de Colombia. Inravision Televisión Video. Copyright 1992.