

Letter from New York

By JULIA CROWE

PAUL GALBRAITH performed an hour-long concert at Lincoln Center's Walter Reade Theatre as part of its 'Great Performers season' featuring Galbraith's transcriptions of Haydn, Schumann, Hindemith and Bach, written for the unique 8-string Brahms guitar made for him by the late guitar maker David Rubio. The guitar is played upright like a cello and bears a long endpin, which is positioned on top of a resonator box. So, in essence, the guitar has its own footstool and its player does not.

The concert programme consisted of Haydn's *Keyboard Sonata in F Major (trans. G) Hob. XVI:29*, originally written for harpsichord followed by Schumann's delicately lyrical *Arabeske, Op. 18*, Hindemith's *Harp Sonata (1939)* and Bach's *Cello Suite No. 6 in D major, BWV 1012*, concluding with a warm and refreshing contrast with his encore of Albéniz's *Granados*. This concert marks one stop along Galbraith's seven-city US tour with the release of his new CD/DVD, *Paul Galbraith Performs Mozart, Bach & Britten*.

For this column, Galbraith took the time to explain that his idea for the Brahms guitar came independently of any idea of posture. 'They're two separate things, i.e., the guitar and the posture. Or rather, they can be separated. The fact that the guitar's fanned-fret design fits my vertical posture so well is really a very lucky bonus. So, my posture came along well before the arrival of the 8-string project ten years later. I developed this new approach to guitar posture for musical reasons as I'd come to feel that movement is inextricably linked to sound, sound quality, phrasing and shaping lines. So it seemed only logical to want to free the right arm from sitting and anchoring on the side of the guitar—to have as much freedom in my right arm as my left. And once I'd discovered a comfortable way to do it, my back also thanked me!'

When asked how much of the guitar's sound is conveyed through the resonance box, Galbraith explains, 'Most of the sound does still emanate from the guitar itself. The resonance box I use helps give added focus and depth and sweetness in the case of the guitar's challenging high-A first string. I say challenging because having a high-A string is asking a lot of a guitar. We have a shorter string length, which helps. But to have an integrated sound quality, you have to use a reasonably thick string, which puts it quite close to breaking strain. Still, the sound quality results are steadily improving, especially as the string quality has recently improved noticeably.'

The endpin sits on the resonance box as much as for stability as for sound. I had derived the whole endpin and resonance box idea from cellists,



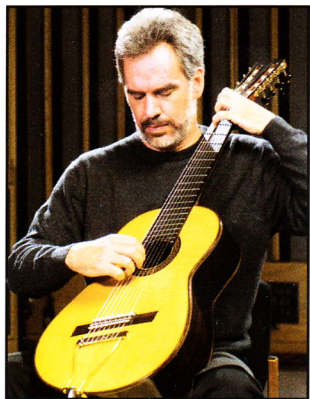
Paul Galbraith.

who use the exact same basic set-up. Cellists have less of a problem with stability, as a cello happens to be heavier than your typical guitar, and so sits more readily when plugged into a convenient spot on the floor. The guitar easily flies up in your face when you shift back up towards the nut, unless it is firmly anchored!

Galbraith explains how the sound quality for him, as a player, differs from holding the guitar in the traditional manner: 'I've noticed some guitar makers have started using sound ports on the side of the guitar, either side of the heel, principally so that the player can get more immediate feedback during performance. With the guitar tilted up, partially toward me, I get a pretty full sound, very close I'd say to what a listener might receive standing right in front of the guitar. The whole trajectory is different of course: with me the sound travels upward, practically, rather than horizontally outward and that makes a difference to how the sound behaves in a room or hall.'

Galbraith makes playing the guitar in this manner appear effortless but this belies the care he puts into facing the challenges of transcription for the 8-string guitar. 'One huge challenge I had

faced on several levels for arranging was the Mozart *Sonata*, as you might imagine. Mozart is notoriously difficult to interpret for starters. Not for nothing is Schnabel's famous phrase, 'Children avoid Mozart because of the great quantity of notes while adults avoid him because of the great quality of them.'



'Then, added to that, there's the notorious difficulty of playing Mozart on guitar. I'd avoided him myself, preferring to play Haydn whose music is no less great or profound and yet far more guitar-friendly on the whole in transcription. But I came across this Haydnesque Mozart *Sonata* – one that

behaves itself to the extent of not tearing up and down the keyboard and thereby putting itself beyond the guitar's possibilities. And it is wonderful to play a mature Mozart sonata.

I tend to take on one programme or project at a time. Some transcriptions end up being successful 'keepers' while others are inevitably less so, and these I put aside, naturally. It's always difficult to gauge how successful a transcription will be until I air it in front of an audience or microphone. Right now I'm touring with the Hindemith *Harp Sonata*, among other pieces, and this has turned out to be a definite 'keeper!' I mention this piece because this had been a particularly challenging project, taking a major 20th Century work for harpists and reworking it for guitar. I hope I didn't ruffle too many harpists' feathers!

Mind you, they do owe us one ever since they boldly adopted 'our' *Aranjuez* concerto...'

Galbraith's new CD features the Mozart *Sonata K.280 in F* (trans. A), followed by a scintillating and nuanced performance of Britten's *Nocturnal after John Dowland, Op. 70*, and Bach's *Cello Suite No. 4 BWV 1010 in E flat* (trans. C). Galbraith includes encores on his CD of Albéniz's *Bajo la Palmera*, Ravel's whimsical *Le jardin féerique from Ma mère L'Oye* and Bach's *Chorale Organ Prelude on 'Ich Ruf' zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ.* It is recommended listening not just for being an 8-stringed guitar performed with a cello-like stance, with its own impressive footstool—but because Galbraith happens to be a first-rate transcriber and a sensitive, expressive performer.

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