

Letter from New York

By JULIA CROWE

DR. PETER ARGONDIZZA lectured to students in the High Performance Forum series at the 2012 New York Guitar Seminar at Mannes on *Living and Playing in the Material World: Facing the Challenges of Freelance Gigs*. A native New Yorker who received his Doctorate of Musical Arts from Yale University, Dr. Argondizza established the annual Big Guitar Weekend festival and he teaches a number of courses at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, ranging from guitar to music history course and orchestration. He also teaches a variety of courses at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, (now renamed The Royal Conservatoire of Scotland)—guitar; lute; ensemble performances; music history; dissertation supervision and compositional techniques, such as harmony, counterpoint and orchestration. He also teaches privately and at a specialist music school called The Douglas Academy, near Glasgow.

His lecture focused on many considerations and scenarios that a conservatory-trained guitar soloist might face as a working freelance musician, based on his firsthand experiences performing with many large ensembles and orchestras, including the BBC. He offered tips on repertoire, preparation, equipment, score/part study, with the intent of passing along professional and practical advice to help prepare inexperienced classical guitarists to succeed in obtaining performance opportunities.

During his youth, when living in New York, Dr. Argondizza used to read *Guitar Player Magazine* for Tommy Tedesco's column about his work as a session player in Los Angeles. 'Tedesco mentioned playing the banjo and even more exotic instruments, like the Greek *bazouki*, in addition to the guitar. Tedesco felt that if you are familiar with the guitar fretboard and are a good sight reader, you could then figure out the guitar tuning easily on those instruments,' Dr. Argondizza says. 'I subconsciously put these tricks into my memory bank, never really planning to act on them.'

When Dr. Argondizza's wife, a cellist, landed a permanent full time job in London and then with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra, they moved to the U.K., where he contacted orchestras for freelance work in addition to establishing himself as a guitar teacher. 'I saw that the BBC was going to be doing a production of the ballet, *Agon*, by Stravinsky and I remembered studying this piece as a music student and learning that it had a mandolin part in it so I thought I would call the BBC and see if they needed someone to play mandolin just for this piece,' Dr. Argondizza says.

The BBC asked to review his curriculum vitae



Peter Argondizza.

and, because he had just completed his doctorate and had credentials as a performer, they invited him to audition. Dr. Argondizza points out that joining the musician's union is a necessity because the BBC often broadcasts a performance once, offering a contract to union musicians with the option for musicians to be paid a little extra to 'buy out' royalties one might receive for future subsequent broadcasts, or else accept less pay with the hope of receiving future royalties for subsequent broadcasts. 'It is unlikely that there will be numerous broadcasts so most musicians go with the first option, to be paid more.'

Dr. Argondizza learned that the best freelance musicians are those who are motivated to solve problems whenever they arise on the job. 'As a freelancer, you're not a member of the orchestra but you are required to be as good as the rest of them. You have to be able to fit into that situation yet you are still an outsider. You are stepping into a family, where everybody knows each other. You're also in a situation where a lot more attention might be put on you more than any other member of the orchestra because you are playing the different part. I think you do have to be lucky, up to a certain point and be able to make good first impressions. You have to be able to perform perfectly. I think it is a matter of being able to make connections with people and teachers and send your curriculum vitae out there. Hopefully there will be that understudy moment where the regular musician cannot make it and you land the opportunity to step in.'

One situation that Dr. Argondizza had to solve had been a performance where he was asked by the composer to play music an octave lower than the 6th string, which was impossible. 'It was embarrassing because the composer was the one who made this request. I fiddled with the amplifier and made a deep bass sound and he seemed to be satisfied with that. It was embarrassing for everybody yet I had to find a way to fix it.' In another situation, he was asked to serve as a replacement for the musician who had originally been hired for the performance but who could not play on that date. In the U.K., the term for this is 'deputising' and in the U.S. it is called 'subbing' for the word 'substitution.'

Dr. Argondizza was asked to deputise for a musician for a performance with the Scottish Opera. 'I told him I would fill in as long as it was accepted that I was the main performer rather than 'filling in' and my reason for this request was because a few years back I had been in a situation where the hired person could not attend the gigs but he had appeared at most rehearsals leading up to the production. At the very last minute, I found myself facing a substantial score during dress rehearsal and the piece was written in bad key signatures for the guitar,' Dr. Argondizza says. 'I got through it all right but realised I did not know where onstage I was going to be sitting or what the moves of the dancers were going to be. The first few performances as a result felt quite tense so I learned from experience to be more demanding about the amount of rehearsal needed. I ask to sit in on at least two dress rehearsals and have a chance to meet with the technicians and learn where I would be positioned in the orchestral pit.

'Even if you accept the assignment and something goes wrong—you are going to be blamed for whatever goes wrong if you are unprepared. If you cannot see the singer and conductor in order to be able to see the cues, they're going to say you should never have taken the job in the first place. They agreed to this and I learned an important lesson about being assertive. Often they don't really know what they want and they want you to come up with solutions.'

Dr. Argondizza points out that the biggest difficulty most guitarists will face is knowing exactly when to come in during an ensemble piece, how to work with a conductor, how to count empty bars and how to follow cues. He has observed that the best freelance guitarists are often those who have trained on an orchestral instrument as well, such as the clarinet and violin. 'Musicians with this kind of training have learned cues to be prepared to jump in. The experience I've had is, either you're working at a very amateur level or else you get catapulted right into the professional levels. There is no subtle grade or graduating to another level,' Dr. Argondizza says. 'Nobody ever taught me how to play the pieces I was hired to play. I had to say yes, give it a try and teach myself how



Peter Argondizza.

to play it. I think it might be useful if guitarists study a class at school where they learn how to deal with the tricky business of learning music quickly. Also, pieces that have either guitar or mandolin in them are going to be perhaps 1 out of 100 productions so either you will be very lucky or you will not land the position at all.

For resources on improving one's freelance skills, Dr. Argondizza recommends, K.J. Andrade's *Single String Scale Technique and the Classic Guitar*; B.E. Arnold's *Contemporary Rhythms* (Muse Eek Publishing); L. Baione's *Berklee Practice Method Guitar: Get Your Band Together* (Berklee Press); T. Bruner's *Sight Reading for the Contemporary Guitarist* (Mel Bay Publications); M. Ihde's *Country Guitar Styles and Rock Guitar Styles* (Berklee Press); W. Leavitt's *Advanced Reading Studies for Guitar, Classical Studies for Pick-Style Guitar and Melodic Rhythms for Guitar* (Berklee Press); W.G. Leavitt's *Reading Studies for Guitar* (Berklee Press); J. Thomas' *Voice Leading for Guitar: Moving Through the Changes* (Berklee Press) and the Berklee Press series by W. Leavitt, L. Baione and C.H. Chapman, *A Modern Method for Guitar*.

'Musical experience is invaluable. I had played and recorded pieces by Giuliani for my Masters degree and doctorate but I do not think I truly understood the music until I had the chance to play in the *Barber of Seville* and listen to Rossini and rehearse Rossini daily before I understood that classical Italian romantic style. That was even better than the money to receive that priceless education. Any musical experience is something to be learned from. Playing with a large group forces you to listen, to hear, to fit in to cooperate and to draw upon all the skills learned as a music student—and to make a living at it.' Dr. Argondizza gave a solo concert of Bach's *Chaconne*, Berio's *Sequenza* as well as works by Albeniz and Villa-Lobos at St. Pancras Church in London last month and will be performing the same repertoire at St. Giles Church in Edinburgh, September 9, 2012.