

LETTER FROM NEW YORK

By JULIA CROWE

SOMETIMES, ON rare occasions, entropy will happen. And by this, I mean showing up to a concert after it has already started. This was the case for Michael Nicolella's concert at this year's New York Guitar Festival. While cursing internally at the sum of factors that had cumulatively inched me toward lateness, I assumed an awkward half-crouch outside The Monkey's black-painted steel door - thick as a bank vault safe - with my ear up against the mail slot, all the while praying no one would fling open this door too swiftly.

It occurred to me that being late was, in this particular case, not a bad thing after all because, instead of becoming visually sidelined by someone's technique and performing style, this moment was entirely about indulging in the sheer joy of listening. And hearing the masterfully clean and expressive strains of Nicolella's arrangement of *Bach's Cello Suite No. 1*, I understood what Alice-in-Wonderland must have felt like, peering through the keyhole from the wrong end of the White Rabbit's garden - 'curiouser and curiouser.' Mercifully, the door did open slowly.

Nicolella performed Hans Werner Henze's *Drei Tentos* followed by Astor Piazzolla's *Primavera Portena* on a Ruck guitar before seamlessly switching musical personalities faster and more convincingly than anyone in *One Flew Over a Cuckoo's Nest* to an ivory Fender Stratocaster with a dark rosewood fretboard. The second half of the programme featured Reich's *Electric Counterpoint* in three movements and Jacob ter Veldhuis' arresting, rocked-out *GRAB IT!* (aptly described by Paul Fowles in this year's February review of Nicolella's superb CD, *Shard*.) The piece, written for electric guitar and tape, is woven around vocal samplings of lines culled from the 1978 Arnold Shapiro documentary, *Scared Straight!*, where young juvenile delinquents are exposed to a glimpse of the harsh realities of prison life and lectures by its inmates.

The electric guitar lines capture the cadence and fills between the sampled vocal lines (not for the faint-hearted) which adds a percussive, rap quality to the guitar sound. The result is a truly innovative work, possibly the electric guitar's equivalent to Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody* for its escalating grandeur and unexpected turns. For his finale, Nicolella performed his own arrangement of Hendrix' *Little Wing*.



Michael Nicolella.

When asked how he copes with his transition between classical and electric guitar with such rare ease, Nicolella replies, 'I began playing electric guitar as a child and continued through my teens. After undergraduate school at Berklee, I decided to just focus on classical guitar and did not play any electric guitar for about ten years.'

In 1997 John Fitz Rogers, an excellent composer and former classmate of mine at Yale, expressed interest in writing a piece for me. John doesn't play guitar but he was interested in writing a piece for solo electric guitar. At about this time, I was considering returning to the electric guitar, not in a jazz context, but with the idea of approaching it anew from a classical perspective. He wrote a brilliant solo electric piece for me entitled *Push*. The piece is technically very difficult. As a result it drew me back into the world of the electric guitar, and really helped jump start my idea of performing on both the classical guitar and electric guitar.

I view the classical and electric guitar as two very different instruments. I guess the nearest parallel would be the way in which Julian Bream approached the lute and the guitar. By playing both, I can explore different repertoire and have a wider palette. 'I think the electric guitar has great potential in classical music' especially as an ensemble instrument. I also must admit that I think the electric guitar's immense popular appeal makes it an ideal vehicle for introducing contemporary

classical music to listeners who might not be otherwise inclined to give it a chance. But as much as I enjoy playing electric guitar I still think of myself first and foremost as a classical guitarist.'

Nicolella studied jazz guitar, classical guitar and composition at Berklee; classical guitar and composition with Ben Verdery at Yale, and classical guitar with Oscar Ghiglia at the Accademia Chigiana in Siena, Italy.

He explains that the Jacob ter Veldhuis piece, *GRAB IT!* was originally written for tenor sax and boombox. 'A while back, when I was performing a piece called *Hout* by Louis Andriessen for electric guitar, saxophone, marimba and piano with faculty members of the University of South Carolina, the saxophonist Connie Frigo told me she had performed *GRAB IT!* and had subsequently commissioned a piece from Jacob ter Veldhuis. I loved *GRAB IT!* and immediately heard its potential for electric guitar and made an arrangement.

On the Reich piece, Nicolella says, 'Steve Reich is one of the world's most renowned living composers and *Electric Counterpoint* is, hands down, one of the best known classical piece written for electric guitar. In 1992, when I was teaching at the Wisconsin Conservatory and Lawrence University directly out of graduate school, I had my students perform it live for guitar ensemble. A few years later I made my own tape and performed it live many times. I then recorded it anew for my most recent CD, *Shard*.'

Nicolella has recently finished composing a new concerto for electric guitar and orchestra and is in the middle of arranging and recording the entire cycle of Bach cello suites. He is also currently planning his next CD of contemporary music to follow in the footsteps of his previous releases, *Push* and *Shard* (both on the Gale label). When not touring, he returns to his home in Seattle and teaches the next generation of Nicolella guitarists, namely his five year-old daughter Teresa.

'Teresa is playing a half-size guitar which I had bought her for Christmas. Her brother, who just turned three, is anxious to get started too. I've been having her play little *pima* arpeggio songs with changing pitches on the E string with the D, G and B open. I have also been having her play single note melodies of songs which she knows aurally, like *London Bridges*. She sings and recites the pitches, while playing, but has not actually started reading.'

I should have mentioned in my March column that David Leisner, co-chair at the Manhattan School of Music, was responsible for coordinating the Pepe Romero masterclass. It was his immense regret not to be able to attend because of a debilitating back spasm. Also, David Spelman should have been credited for the Pepe Romero masterclass photo.

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