

LETTER FROM NEW YORK

via Paris

By JULIA CROWE

THIS MONTH'S 'Letter from New York' happens to be via Paris, meriting a nod and through-the-looking-glass style homage to Janet Flanner, the former University of Chicago student who started writing a monthly column in October of 1925, 'Letter from Paris,' which covered the local social, cultural and political scene for a fledgling magazine called *The New Yorker*. My quest was to capture the current picture of classical guitar in this town. (Flanner did not play the guitar but she did cover an extraordinary number of cultural events by the artists and musicians of her day, and composer Ned Rorem had written his *Letters from Paris* in 1966, inspired by her droll writing.)

Imagine this visit punctuated by a swift walk underground in Le Metro to switch trains at Concorde, where a busker on French horn performs 'All My Loving' by The Beatles followed by an uncannily perfect rendition of 'Ave Maria,' refracting sonorously along the tunnels until the train pulls in. His heartfelt playing in the midst of indifferent crowds almost makes me miss my rag-tag busking days here. If I have any regret, it's that I do not have enough time to see what changes have transpired in the Chinatown district of the 19e, where I lived one summer, some time ago, pre-Euro. The Latin Quarter, thanks to the Sorbonne's student population, feels very much like New York's Greenwich Village - teetering between memories of historical radicalism and present-day shopping mall commerce. And everywhere along the streets, it is easy to find classical music concert posters slapped up. Many of these concerts appear to be at local churches.

Guitarist Catherine Liolios, who lives in Monmartre, confirms this by telling me that while the churches do not have organized recitals, musicians can rent the church for approximately 500-600 Euros per evening. However, the biggest issue is that the audience turnout is so small for this kind of a concert, she tells me, that it is often a financial risk.

'In the 1950s, a man called Robert Vidal was very active with two musical programmes on the national Musical Radio Broadcast,' she says. 'France Musique was the one for classical guitar and the second programme was for Flamenco. Following that he created the famous guitar competition, "Concours International de Guitar de Radio France" and this thrived until 1996, when Vidal retired with nobody else picking up and continuing his activities. In 2004 the famous French Guitarist Tanya Chagnot with some friends created an association called "Vous avez dit Guitar?". She created a new guitar festival



PHOTOS: JULIA CROWE

Catherine Liolios.

which takes place the third week of November in a small concert hall, Salle Cortot. During the four days of this festival, one can listen to two hour-long recitals given by different kinds of guitarists, such as classical, flamenco, baroque guitar, etc. Mr. Gerard Verba is another person who organizes a concert series at the Theatre du Lucernaire.

'I would mention some other events: In nearby Antony there is a nice three to four day long guitar festival each year in the spring. And I would like to mention the efforts of Jacques Mizrahi, who organizes guitar recitals from time to time. One of his most recent recitals was with Roland Dyens.

'In France, guitar is taught in conservatories at different levels. The elementary one is the Conservatoire Municipal and after that, for those who wish to become professional players, they must enter a Conservatoire National de Region. There is one in Paris, with two guitarists teaching, Ramon de Herrera and Pedro Ibanez. When a guitarist would like to pursue studies at a higher level, he can try entering the competition at the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique, which is very difficult to enter as they have so many guitarists presenting for the entrance competition, all competing for no more five or six available spots! The two teachers at

the Conservatoire national Supérieur de Musique are Olivier Chassain and Roland Dyens. After three or four years training here, students face a final competition and are awarded by a diploma.

Aside from this, there are also two famous private schools - The Schola Cantorum, lead by the well known guitarist Wladimir Mikulka, and then there is the Ecole Normale de Musique, headed by the famous Alberto Ponce. These two private schools are very reputable and its teachers attract many foreign guitarists.

'At the end of the 80s and very beginning of the 90s famous guitarists such as Andres Segovia, Julian Bream, John Williams, Narcisco Yepes, Angel Romero and Lagoya performed in the most famous Concert halls such as, Theatre des Champs Elysees, Salle Pleyel, Theatre du Chatelet and Salle Gaveau. These places seat up to 2,500 people but now for some mysterious reason for which nobody knows the answer, the guitar audience is often between 300 and 400.

Ms. Liolios, whose family is originally from Greece, started her musical studies at the age of eight at the National Conservatory of Boulogne-Billancourt, near Paris. 'I chose the guitar because of the strings and because it was very cheap! But I became immediately fascinated by guitar music. When I saw my first concert, performed by students, it became clear to me immediately that I wanted to be on stage doing the same! I have never changed from this moment and now I feel that I *need* to live the music on stage with the public. My early musical revelations came in the form of a vinyl record of Julian Bream I'd bought with my father in a supermarket, which quickly grew to include many other records of John Williams, Segovia, Yepes, Lagoya. And at school, I discovered Ravel, Schubert and Berlioz.'

Liolios studied with Jose-Maria Sierra at the National Conservatory of Boulogne-Billancourt and with Alberto Ponce in the Ecole Normale de Paris after taking first prize at the age of 16. Both Sierra and Ponce were students of Emilio Pujol. 'I decided to leave L'Ecole Normale de Paris just before finishing, as I'd wanted to change my way of playing,' Liolios says. 'I totally transformed my technique and researched my own way to play the music and the guitar by listening to recordings of Julian Bream, Segovia, Diaz and Eduardo Isaac.

'I won the First Prize of the Bath International Competition in 1994 and received considerable



Dominique Field.

encouragement from the great Israeli master Joseph Urshalmi in addition to encouragement from Vladimir Mikulka, Stepan Rak, David Starobin and Pavel Steidl. In 1997, I recorded my first CD of the second Sonata for violin by Bach, the six *Lieder* by Schubert/Mertz and the *Suite in Modo Polonico* by Tansman. Now I'm very happy to record for the label Mandala, with whom I have recorded two CDs. The first is of Spanish music by Albeniz, Torroba and Mompou. The second CD, which is very special to me, is a double CD of the complete 28 pieces of *Platero y Yo* by Castelnuovo-Tedesco about the poems written by the 1956 Nobel Prize winner, Juan-Ramon Jimenez. Some of these pieces are famous because Segovia had played them but each piece within the cycle is very deep, extremely poetic and full of emotion. This work could stand to be played more and see more exposure.'

For those reading this column in the U.S., there is a good chance you will be able to hear Ms. Liolios perform this music in autumn 2007 as part of the Boston Guitar Project.

Another Monmartre resident of guitar fame is the internationally-recognized luthier, Dominique Field, who studied classical guitar in the 70s with Ramon de Herrera but eventually became more fascinated by the aesthetics and construction of the instrument over its repertoire. His guitars, which are represented in the U.S. exclusively by Guitar Salon International, have been described as having the beauty of

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Hauser with the volume of a Dammann or a Smallman.

'I provide Guitar Salon International with one guitar a year,' Field says. 'Last August, I discovered that my waiting list had overpassed 16 years so I closed it and I am not currently accepting new orders. Among the more well-known players of my guitars, I would like to mention Wladimir Mikulka, Eduardo Isaac, Ivan Rijos, Adam Holzmann, Scott Tennant, Joseph Urshalmi, Catherine Liolios, Johan Fostier, Earl Klugh, Giampaolo Bandini, Yoram Zerbib, Eladio Scharron and Vicente Amigo.

'It took me months to build my first instrument and after that I built another one... I never stopped. Guitar making is a tradition in France. In the 19th Century, France was famous for the Romantic Guitar and in the 20th Century it was guitar makers Julian Gomez-Ramirez and Robert Bouchet who helped pass on the baton of tradition. In the 70s, my colleague Daniel Friederich gained international reputation. These makers helped me a lot when I started. I consider my style as very personal but aesthetically, very traditional. I started to have a very strong international reputation at the end of the 90s and was obliged, as I mentioned earlier, to close my waiting list.

'My production is voluntary and small, as I produce under ten guitars a year. I think my work is truly personal now, even though I was

influenced by some great makers of the past, such as Hermann Hauser, Robert Bouchet, Fleta - and strangely enough - by Rene-François Lacôte, the famous luthier of the 19th Century. I believe that this French school of guitar making has a strong future, as there are good young makers who are very talented and artistic. I am thinking especially of two young, talented luthiers under 30 years old: Jean-Noel Rohé, who is settled in Strasbourg and Vincent Dubés, who is settled in Nancy. I am confident in their talents. I also appreciate the work of two other French makers of my generation: Dominique Delarue and Michel Donadey.'

This column closes with one last crowd-dodging trot through Le Metro in order to make a connection at Concorde and stuff my pockets with a carnet's worth of hope for a return visit. Deep underground among the tunnels, I sense a mutual flicker of recognition - first at the underground florescent lighting glinting off the French horn busker's brass and then the look upon his face. Perhaps he discerns my misery at having to return to home to New York so soon. I suspect it's my weird winter headgear, though, with its thick furry black ear flaps. With a bemused smile, he finds his proper *emboucher* and launches into what is now an understandably perfect rendition of 'All My Loving' followed by 'Ave Maria,' refracting sonorously along the tunnels.
