

LETTER FROM NEW YORK

By JULIA CROWE



PHOTOS: JULIA CROWE

Fulton Ferry landing: the car commercial shoot in progress beside the entrance to the Bargemusic venue.

THE magnificent harbour view of the city from the Fulton Ferry waterfront landing beneath the Brooklyn Bridge is a particularly famous one, often used for magazine print ads and author photos, so it came as no surprise to see a model shivering in a peach chiffon gown with a plunging neckline as she posed in the cold beside a sleek sportscar for a late night photo shoot. Not too far away a brass plaque embedded in a stone marks the spot where George Washington evacuated his Revolutionary War troops after losing the Battle of Long Island. Also not too far away is the address where poet Walt Whitman set up his

print shop and set the type for his *Leaves of Grass*.

Here we have another famous concert institution: Bargemusic. Founded in 1977 by violinist Olga Bloom, this floating concert hall features roughly 220 chamber music concerts annually aboard a moored 100-foot long steel barge which was first built in 1899 and spent the earlier part of its life traversing the harbour, delivering sacks of coffee for the Erie Lackawanna railroad. Bloom and her family carefully renovated the barge to enhance its acoustics with maritime scrap-yard supplies of mahogany stripping and cherry wood benches acquired from the retired, original Staten Island ferry known as The American Legion. For the past thirty years now the barge has cultivated a dedicated, loyal turnout for its traditional, classical chamber music concerts.

This particular evening featured the virtuoso Italian mandolinist Carlo Aonzo of Savona, Italy, who happens to be a Mel Bay recording artist, in concert with Rene Izquierdo, the distinguished professor of Milwaukee's guitar department at the University of Wisconsin. Together, they performed a programme entitled *Emozioni*, featuring the works of Paganini, Calace, Ravanieri, Giudice, Piazzolla, Beaser, Start, Kioulaphides and Nagaoka.

The audience was informed that the Calace *Mazurka, Op. 141* is usually performed on two mandolins and one guitar, but this evening, the



Guitarists Elina Chekan, Rene Izquierdo and mandolinist Carlo Aonzo in performance.

pieces would be performed instead with two guitars and one mandolin. For this piece, guitarist Elina Chekan, who directs the Pre-College division at UW Milwaukee, added to the feast of strings where the guitar provided rhythm and the mandolin laced the melody. While the first half of the programme featured works entirely by Italian composers, the second half moved into more contemporary terrain with Piazzolla's *Histoire du Tango*, Beaser's *Mountain Songs*, E. Start's *Pale Cliffs*, Kioulaphides *Canzona*, which had been specifically written for Aonzo and then K. Nagaoka's *Kaze*. Overheard in the audience were remarks of how unexpectedly spectacular the pairing of Izquierdo's guitar playing and Aonzo's mandolin playing were for their range and musicality on each instrument.

A note at the bottom of Bargemusic's programme warns that the venue floats upon changing tides 'so be careful.' Passing tankers and tugboats within the bay also create occasional large wakes which send the barge lurching in a circular swoop and bob so everyone also gets a taste of good water-based rodeo which I can only compare to taking the ferry from Holyhead, Wales to Dún Laoghaire. Aonzo, who admitted that he happens to pilot fireboats back home, performed as calmly as a flea astride a galloping dog while Izquierdo, no stranger to the water himself as he used to fish back home in his native Cuba - displayed virtuosic stamina and unflappability to an astounded audience for getting through the programme in brilliant musical form in spite of looking a distinct shade of sea-induced green.

In spite of this challenge, their performance had demonstrated an unforgettable versatility, sensitivity and sublime musicianship. Izquierdo is performing this month at the New England Conservatory's Guitar Festival, curated by Eliot Fisk. And Carlo Aonzo happens to be holding his popular 3-day long mandolin workshops in New York this month. (For more details, see his website at: www.aonzo.com.)

Another recent notable concert was the Los Angeles Guitar Quartet, in their third incarnation with new guitarist Matthew Greif replacing Andrew York, performing material from their forthcoming autumn-release CD with Brazilian singer Luciana Souza at Zankel Hall. The programme featured a crowd pleasing selection of works by Souza's godfather, Hermeto Pascoal, followed by works of Paulo Bellinati, Antonio Carlos Jobim, Manuel de Falla, Heitor Villa-Lobos, Baden Powell, Luciana Souza, Osvaldo Golijov, Luiz Gonzaga, Humberto Teixeira, Djavan and Marco Pereira.



The new Los Angeles Guitar Quartet performing at Zankel Hall with singer Luciana Souza.

Each member of the quartet played a duet during the course of the evening with three-time Grammy nominee jazz singer Luciana Souza, who has a winning style of presentation with her casual and amiable manner when introducing each piece. Unsurprisingly, this also characterizes the ease and the smooth quality of her singing. I couldn't help thinking that, performed by anyone else of considerably lesser skill and finesse on guitar, some elements of this programme could have devolved into dreaded Sunday brunch jazz territory. Without question, the LAGQ has another hit on their hands. And I mean that as a compliment of what it takes, in terms of arranging and playing talent, to elevate the familiar into the exceptional. Golijov's *Lúa descolorida* was one of the outstanding pieces of the evening.

Greif's playing also meshes in well. He demonstrated his arranging talents with the Jobim piece, *Triste*. If I have one bit of constructive criticism though, it would be the microphone situation: he could have piped up a bit louder on stage when discussing the piece (to be heard over the candy wrapper rustler sitting in the row behind) in addition to slowing down his speech. Again, this could have been a sound tech issue because at one point the mix had jumped up in volume moments later during the Jobim.

As a postscript, you know something vaguely alarming is occurring on a large environmental scale (ranking right up there with the mysterious news of the global honeybee population dying off) when your Carnegie Hall programme booklet is bookended by green absinthe fairy moth logos advertising for the sleeping pills 'Lunesta', with a print ad showing a woman in blissful slumber wearing not one but two satin eye masks. What's the world coming to if a classical music audience can't soothe itself to sleep?