

# MURIEL ANDERSON

Interviewed by JULIA CROWE



PHOTOS: RUSTY RUSSELL

*Muriel Anderson.*

THE FINGERSTYLE guitarist Muriel Anderson has the distinction of having studied with both Chet Atkins and Christopher Parkening, as well as being the only woman to win the National Guitar Picking Championship. She is an inquisitive collector of diverse cultural and musical styles, which inspire many of her compositions for solo guitar, other instruments and for orchestras. To escape the merciless glare of the summer sun refracting from New York's sidewalk, we found a seat at a small Italian restaurant across the street from Luthier Music Corporation for this interview.

'When I first traveled to Italy for a concert, I told everyone I was going to eat my way through the country with complete abandon,' Muriel told me, ordering a small salad. 'Then I came home and thought: what's this? It felt like awful padding. I stepped onto the scale and discovered I'd gained just over two kilos.' Anderson is a slight woman with penetrating

blue eyes, who speaks with thoughtful deliberation and a gentle sense of humour. 'Aren't you going to order anything?' she asks.

Anderson grew up in Downers Grove, Illinois. As a child, she frequently listened to an album she had received from her parents one Christmas, *Doc Watson Live in Nashville*. Watson's lightening fast, folksy bluegrass style inspired her to pluck a family friend's barely playable nylon string guitar from the dustbin. This instrument was soon swapped for a Guild steel string. On graduating from high school, she went to study classical guitar at DePaul University in Chicago. Initially, she had discounted this idea, dismissing nylon strings after the experience of that first instrument rescued from the rubbish, a guitar 'with no tone and the strings kind of flapped.' But during a summer trip to Spain, she swapped her Guild steel string for a nylon-string guitar, and revelation struck when she returned to the US

and heard Christopher Parkening performing *Capricho Arabe* on a radio programme.

'I thought to myself: How can anything be so beautiful? I was just spellbound,' Anderson remembered, adding: 'I started listening to other pieces and [recordings by] Segovia. In college, I discovered the richness of the classical guitar and learned just how much you can shape the emotion, tone and phrasing. It was a new and exciting world for me.'

'When I started listening to Christopher Parkening and studying at his masterclasses in Bozeman, Montana, it opened up a whole new world in terms of focusing on the phrasing, tone quality and volume of every note. It was nothing like fingerstyle guitar. The discovery opened up my ears to get different sounds, such as the sound of the Japanese *koto*. There is no limit to the techniques we can use. Other fingerstyle guitarists often call me a classical guitarist while classical guitarists will call me a fingerstyle guitarist.'

'Fingerstyle is playing without a flatpick. It has moved beyond the tradition and has become music without boundaries now. Fingerstyle guitar first evolved with players like Mose Reager, Merle Travis and Chet Atkins and uses an alternating bass with the thumb while the fingers play the melody on the treble strings. The thumb plays a separate bass line so there are two distinct sounds.'

'Fingerstyle has evolved so that players today have developed different ways of playing. What we are seeing now is the real renaissance of fingerstyle guitar. Among the current touring artists, each player has a distinctively different way of approaching the instrument.'

Anderson's latest CD release, *New Classics for Guitar and Cello*, features many of her original compositions in performance with cellist Julie Adams. The pieces on this album are fresh and inspired, with the guitar intertwining melodically between the soaring and soothing tones of the cello. Two tracks, in particular, stand out: *Minstrel's Courtyard*, a lively and mesmerizing, rhythmical dance in the Renaissance style, and *Parisian Waltz*, which evokes the street sounds delivered in a gently humorous dialogue between the guitar and cello. The album includes two of Anderson's arrangements - Tárrega's *Estudio Brillante* and *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* - for guitar and cello. Mel Bay will be publishing a score of all the compositions on this CD in early 2005, with the music also transcribed for viola.

When asked to describe her inspiration for writing the pieces on this recording, Anderson said: 'My composing is grounded in traditional music, inspired by Bach and Mozart and the Impressionists. It's also steeped in international folk music. I've always had melodies going through my head since I was young. I was teaching a workshop in South Carolina

when a hurricane passed, and I heard in my head a beautiful low sound of a melody together with arpeggios on the guitar. I thought the sound of a cello would work to express that low register of the melody.' This piece would become the track entitled, *Calm Before the Storm*.

'You can get sustain with the cello which compliments the percussive warmth of the guitar,' Anderson said. 'The cellist Julie Adams has a beautiful, innate sense of phrasing. I have also composed pieces for viola, as the viola's register fits beautifully with the guitar.'

When Anderson began listening to cello transcriptions, she was inspired to find a way to create a lower register of strings for the guitar. After recording *New Classics for Guitar and Cello*, it occurred to her that a harp guitar might provide a solution, so she went to a concert by Michael Hedges. Hedges, who died in 1997 in a road accident, is known best as a Grammy-nominated, innovative composer for the guitar whose main influences were 20th century compositions.

'When I got there, the audience was mostly kids with green hair and nose rings. I felt terribly out of place,' she said. 'I saw another older couple who looked just as out of place, so I sat next to them. I found out they were there for the same reason, to see this guitar. I also learned this man's grandfather had invented the harp guitar and he was writing a book on them, called *Guitars and Mandolins in America*.

'Hedges invited me over to his house and hired me to record the music for this book. The bass strings, which are steel, can be tuned to the low end of whatever key you happen to be playing. Most harp guitars are too big to be carried by aeroplane, so I had a smaller, *requinto*-sized, travel harp guitar custom made with extra bass strings made of nylon, half-step tuners and an elbow mute for my arm so I can mute the bass strings. Luthier Jeff Elliott helped with the design and Michael Doolan built it. It's a fabulous, one-of-a-kind instrument.' Anderson's harp guitar can be heard on her *Journey Through Time* CD.

Of her performing and composing, Anderson said: 'In my concerts, I am moving more into eclectic styles and rediscovering songwriting. I'll often play in concert something I have written only days ago. However, as a composer I am writing more in the classical style. That is where I am inspired right now. I am drawn to great melodies and I love orchestrating for different instruments. What I hope to do is bring in some new repertoire for the classical guitar that is both respectable and melodic.'

'I'd like guitarists to feel that when they play one of my compositions in a concert programme alongside pieces by the historic great composers, they are taking a fresh step sideways in the genre and giving their listeners

something valuable and emotional.'

Anderson cites composer and guitarist Jorge Morel as a personal source of inspiration. 'He wrote *A Dance for Muriel* and I love this piece. It's a great addition to the repertoire and I really aspire to learn from him as a composer.'

She strongly encourages guitarists to perform in ensembles, not only for the joy that comes with the social interaction but because: 'There is also something that happens when performing in a duo that is special when you are both feeling the music at the same time. Sometimes there is a moment in the music that is so much more than the sum of its parts that both musicians seem to lift off the ground a couple inches.'

'For the most part, it's fairly obvious what approach will be the most musical way of playing. If there are two ways that appear to be equally musical for us to try, Julie and I will try both. We're in it for the joy of playing.'

Anderson teaches an annual summer workshop in North Carolina that helps students focus on learning to grasp and express the essence of a piece with their playing. She said: 'Getting to the heart of music is driven by listening. When you listen, try to hear what it is about the music that you find intriguing or special. Also listen closely to the timing; do you push ahead of the beat or pull at the back of it? Find different ways to imitate that sound and then play and experiment with those sounds. There are so many different, creative ways of listening. I continuously have my ears reopened.'

For classical guitarists wishing to venture into new territory, she recommends exploring international folk music for the diversity of new sounds and interesting rhythms that can be applied to the guitar.

She said: 'My piece in 13/8 time, *A Bakers Dozen*, is inspired by Bulgarian music and my limited-release CD, *A Journey Through Time*, has each piece in a different time signature with the track number corresponding to the time signature. My advice is to be careful about adapting pop music on the guitar so you don't lose the quality that made the piece great in the first place.'

'Ask yourself first what it is that makes that music fascinating - whether it is the placement of the beat, the inflections of the vocal, the weird sounds - and try to capture that on the



Muriel Anderson.

guitar. For instance, if you simply play the notes of a Beatles song on a classical guitar, it can easily lose its feel. Another approach would be to make up a theme and variations. Or try to orchestrate music the way Bach, Vivaldi or Villa-Lobos would. Go a step beyond what you first imagined. With a good sense of humor, this style of arranging can be fun.'

Anderson is also known for her *All Star Guitar Night* concerts, which occur twice a year and features performances with world-class guitarists to help raise money for a non-profit-making venture she has founded, the Music for Life Alliance. She stages one concert in January at the NAMM show (the annual International Music Products trade show in Anaheim, California) and then another concert in Nashville, Tennessee during the summer. This year marks her twelfth season of *All Star Guitar Night* concerts.

'I've held smaller shows like this during the year at the Old Town School of Music in Chicago and Fermi in Batavia, Illinois. The idea is for the group of guitarists playing music both solo and together and enjoying

each other's company. Half the fun is in playing music backstage. Last summer, we played to a full house at the Ryman Auditorium with Peter Frampton, Duane Eddie, Adrian Belew, Pierre Bensusan, Led Kaapana, Frank Vignola, Jerry Donahue, Pete Huttlinger, Seymour Duncan and James Burton among our performers. The event helps the Music for Life Alliance, a national organisation that I've helped to set up to donate musical instruments to schoolchildren who can't afford them. Right now, my living room is filled with boxes of guitars waiting to be delivered to schools in Nashville schools.'

For further information on obtaining ticket information to upcoming concerts, DVDs or a video of previous *All Star Guitar Nights*, please log onto [www.murielanderson.com](http://www.murielanderson.com).

## DISCOGRAPHY

### CDs

*Uncut Gems* (with Phil Keaggy, limited release) CGD8PKMA (CGD Music 2003)  
*New Classics for Guitar and Cello VLT15173* (Valley Ent. Music, 2003)  
*Journey Through Time* (limited release) CGD2002 (CGD Music, 2002)  
*Music for Life* (limited release) CGD2000 (CGD Music, 2000)  
*Theme For Two Friends* CGD99 (CGD Music 1999)  
*Heartstrings* (Japan) Nippon Crown 1998 (out of print)  
*Guitar Muse* (Japan) Nippon Crown 1998(out of print)  
*Christmas in Nashville* (Japan) Nippon Crown 1998 (out of print)  
*A Little Christmas Gift* CGDXMAS (CGD Music 1995)  
*Le Duet* RR9502 (Rarefied Records 1995)  
*Hometown Live* CGD300 (CGD Music 1993)  
*Arioso from Paris* CGD200 (CGD Music 1991)  
*Heartstrings* CGD168 (CGD Music 1989)

### Compilation CDs

*Guitar Fingerstyle II* CD Narada 2001  
*Guitar Fingerstyle* CD Narada 1997

### DVDs

*One Camera One Concert* DVD Snapshot Music, 2004  
*Muriel Anderson's All Star Guitar Night 10th Anniversary* Mel Bay, 2004  
*Muriel Anderson's All Star Guitar Night 2000* Homespun 2002

### Videos

*Great Guitar Lessons* Homespun compilation 2001  
*Techniques & Arrangements of Muriel Anderson* Homespun 1997  
*Muriel Anderson's All Star Guitar Night* Homespun 1996  
*Building Guitar Arrangements Video* CGD Music 1994

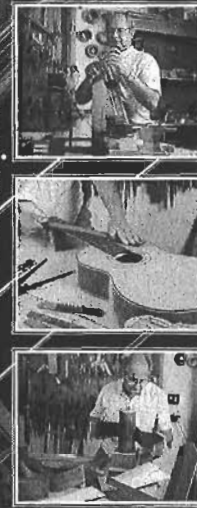
### BOOKS

*Selected Works Zen-On* 2000  
*Hometown Live Songbook Zen-On* 2000  
*All Scales in All Positions* Hal Leonard 2000  
*All Chords in All Positions* Hal Leonard 1996  
*Building Guitar Arrangements Book/CD* Hal Leonard 1994  
*Muriel Anderson Hometown Live* Mel Bay 1998 version out of print  
*Chord Constellations* Creative Concepts 1990 out of print

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