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October 2007

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SONIA MICHELSON

Interviewed by JULIA CROWE

SONIA MICHELSON, the author of *New Dimensions in Classical Guitar for Children* and *Young Beginner's First Repertoire for Classic Guitar* (Mel Bay), has devoted fifty years to teaching guitar. She started her career in Los Angeles before moving to Penn State University. She then established her own Michelson Classic Guitar Studio on Mozart Street in Chicago. Upon returning to Los Angeles in 1988, she re-established her guitar studio for nearly two decades and has now moved to the village of Ofra in Israel, where she continues to teach guitar and write, aged 79. Her forthcoming memoir, *Home at Last: My First Year in Israel* (Mazo Publishers) will be released this autumn.

Michelson studied classical guitar with composer-teacher Richard Pick at the Chicago School of Music from 1969-1973, and flamenco study with Julio de los Reyes and Bruce Becker. She also pursued musicology studies with pianist Edna Gurevitz in addition to studies on the Kodaly method of music education with Livia Ayal in the early 1980s. Her first book, *Easy Classic Guitar Solos* was published by Hansen Publishers in 1977 and later re-issued by Mel Bay in 1991, the same year as *New Dimensions in Classical Guitar for Children*.

She had also served a decade as President of The Chicago Guitar Society, starting off in 1977 as Vice-President. 'When John Mavreas left Chicago to return to Greece, I stepped up to become editor of the newly established newsletter as well, *Chicago Guitar*, and inaugurated the "Evaluated Recitals," which I believe are still sponsored by the society. In other professional areas I acted as Special Consultant for the American String Teachers Association, Guitar Division and the Graded Lists Committee in 1981.'

Michelson had first become interested in the guitar in the 1950s. 'I don't remember exactly how old I was, possibly my early twenties, but I do remember hearing Julian Bream and Segovia on the radio and being very impressed. I had never heard the classical guitar played before and I found the music inspiring.

'I decided I would go to a music store in downtown Los Angeles and buy a guitar. I had no idea what I was doing. I did not know any musicians, other than my composer cousin Lawrence Moss, or anyone else who might have been able to give me some advice. I just looked in the Yellow pages, found a big Los Angeles music store and called to find out if they carried any guitars.'

'Unfortunately I had no idea what kind of guitar to buy so when they handed me a heavy F-hole guitar, I bought it and asked about lessons. On the spot, I was ushered into a small studio



PHOTOS: ELINAH MICHAELI

Student Yifat Berholz with Sonia Michelson.

practice room where a young college student demonstrated how to play bar chords. Yes, bar chords! He wrote down diagrams of the movable progression of F, G, Am chords and showed me how to play them. Of course, I was all fingers and didn't have a clue about how to make a bar chord, let alone how to make a decent sound from even one note on the guitar.

'My first week of practice was a miserable experience. My fingers were sore from trying to play on steel strings and I became very discouraged. The second and third lessons were a repeat of the first one. I realized that if this was what guitar playing was all about, it was not for me.

'My luck changed when I mentioned to my good friend Rachelle Leonard that I had bought a guitar and was having a miserable time of it. She informed me that her husband, Gene, taught folk guitar at the local community centre. Gene proposed that if I could round up ten people who would be interested in learning to play folk guitar he would come out to my home once a week and give us lessons in my living room. And he advised me to trade the F-hole guitar for a nylon string acoustic guitar.

'I did just that. I traded in my F-hole guitar for a fine Martin acoustic guitar with nylon strings. Then started calling everyone I knew in Southern California about the possibility of

taking folk guitar lessons in my Pasadena home with Gene Leonard as instructor. Before long, I had the necessary ten students and Gene started our folk guitar class in my living room. It was so exciting to discover that playing the guitar was not as difficult as I had been led to believe. Gene was an excellent and enthusiastic teacher - and I've been with the guitar every since.

I had started teaching folk guitar myself later on at Penn State, PA in 1957 when we moved there from Los Angeles. In addition to using the folk material that Gene had given me, I sent away to New York for folk guitar and finger picking books, (Happy Traum, Jerry Snyder, Ronnie Lee, et al) and Pete Seeger records. In this way I taught myself more songs and more advanced techniques. My students progressed well and I enjoyed the teaching experience and passing on to others what I knew.

Then we moved to Chicago three years later, and once again I started teaching folk guitar: a class at the Jewish Community Center for Young Mothers and a folk guitar class for Young Blind students in East Rogers Park. We even printed out many of the folk songs in a Braille book. At this time, I began to wonder if there wasn't something more to music than just playing I-IV-V chords. I had learned just enough basic classical guitar to whet my appetite for more serious music study from my time with John Marlowe, an engineering student in my Penn State class, who later went on to inaugurate one of the first guitar departments in the States in Washington D.C. That was when I started studying with Richard Pick.'

What is unique about Michelson's career is that she has been a pioneer in terms of establishing a set of graded instruction books within the United States geared specifically toward teaching young children classical guitar.

'When I first became interested in teaching classical guitar,' she says, 'I found no methods for teaching children. Musical file cabinets at the local music stores were replete with beginning method books for violin, flute, cello, piano instruction. But where were the beginners' classical guitar books for children? So I decided to create my own method, based on Suzuki and Kodaly principles.'

New Dimensions in Classical Guitar for Children has been in print since 1991 and is a method book used worldwide by guitar teachers of younger aged children. The book, which took her four years to write, introduces basic musical concepts for young children in five structured levels, using games which reinforce listening techniques, rhythm concepts and basic music theory.

Her method encourages students to develop hearing and motor skills before learning to sight read, in order to establish a firm musical foundation. Rhythm games include alternating hand clapping and knee-slapping whilst singing a song and rolling a ball back and forth to an even

rhythm while singing a melody. She also encourages early rhythm reading by laying out sticks for quarter notes and parallel sticks joined by a horizontal stick across the top to represent eighth notes - so essentially they look like notes without noteheads. Young students are encouraged to clap and sing these rhythms and then create new rhythms in any configuration they like. The method also includes several ear training games which build upon learning John Curwen's melodic hand signals as basic solfege, using the moveable Do system. She takes care to isolate and develop proper technique in both hands with similarly tailored games and exercises before the child progresses into playing fretted notes.

Michelson recommends using a half-sized guitar and a capo, along with a regular guitar footstool for children under the age of six, in addition to maintaining 30 minute lesson sessions for young children. When teaching children, she finds that parent involvement plays a key factor in a student's success, not only in terms of encouraging regular practice but as listeners. She also reminds us that sensitivity is key to teaching young children in addition to patience. And it never hurts to reward the smallest accomplishment with praise.

Michelson points out, 'Teaching classical guitar to children has always been a challenge. If the lessons are not stimulating and the child becomes bored, then the game is up. The child quits. So *New Dimensions* includes not only ideas about technique but also includes many games and activities. I've always felt that if the young child is having fun, then she will learn to play the guitar easily and will want to practice at home.'

When asked if she has observed any particular trends, developments or changes with children learning guitar since she first started teaching, Michelson says, 'Children are children: yesterday, today and tomorrow. My focus is to keep the child interested and keep the pace of lessons lively. I've always tried to stimulate my student's imaginations. Whether it has been the pre-computer age or the present digital age with the fast pace of today's living, I've felt that addressing each child as a unique individual has been the key to successful teaching.'

Her *Young Beginner's First Repertoire for Guitar*, also published by Mel Bay, features a 48-page collection of diverse solo guitar pieces written by Sor, Carcassi, Stepan Rak, Carulli, Giuliani, Michelson, Reginald Smith Brindle, Aguado, Bach, Montreuil, Calvi, Krieger, Logy, Catalayud, Bach and arrangements by John Hoffman.

Michelson says, 'I felt the need for some early repertoire pieces that would fill two primary needs of the students - firstly, some attractive pieces that would be easy to play, interesting and yet both musically and technically important and secondly, to introduce my students to some modern contemporary compositions. My aim with *Young Beginner's First Repertoire for Classic*



Sonia Michelson with Cherut Michaeli and (the boy) Ido Michaeli.

Guitar was to bridge the gap between Charles Duncan's first book and Frederic Noad's *Solo Guitar Playing Vol 1*.

'Compiling the book was not an easy task. I had to write to every contemporary publisher for permission to use copyrighted pieces. Of course I did not have to get permissions to use my own pieces which appeared in *Easy Classic Guitar Solos for Children* (Mel Bay) or those by Sor, Carulli, Carcassi, Giuliani, Calvi, Bach, Logy and Aguado, as these are now in the public domain.

'However, I did have to write to publishers for permission to use compositions by Reginald Smith Brindle (Schott & Co Ltd London), Stepán Rak (Panton Ltd, Praha), Gerard Montreuil (Les Editions Doberman-Yppan) and Bartolome Calatayud (UME Spain) and the arrangements by John Hoffman (Theodore Presser Company) and Kreidler Guitar Method, (Schott & Co Ltd, London). It took over three years of persistent correspondence to obtain these sought-after permissions. An amusing tid-bit: when I had started writing to the publisher of Stepán Rak's music, the address was still Prague, Czechoslovakia. By the time I finally received permission to use his pieces, the country had become the Czech Republic.

'I felt that one beginner's repertoire book was enough for the time being though I have considered creating and issuing my own graded series. In fact I have already done so and use it in my own private teaching. Maybe one day I'll have it published so other teachers can benefit from my experience and success in teaching beginners.'

At one point of her career, Michelson had been a part of the 'new' graded list committee within the U.S. during the 1980s, comparable to the graded structure currently used as a standard in Europe. The committee was a revision of one circulated originally in the 1970s by Dr. Roy Petschauer of Washington State University. I believe there were about four or five of us on committee, including Chairman Peter Danner, who also served as the editor of *Soundboard* for many years.

The Graded Lists were to be published in order to help out those teaching at the college and con-

servatory level. In those years, there were very few guitar departments anywhere and we were beginning to establish pedagogy programmes. The Pre-College Curriculum Committee grew out of the idea that teaching children is important. I had organised that committee with Doug Smith (who is currently Vice President at McNally Smith College of Music in Minnesota) and Peg Mistak joining me in this effort. I spent a lot of time and effort on both national committees and some of our efforts, I believe, were published by George Dauphinais in Springfield, Illinois but these lists were not widely distributed or publicized.

At 77, Michelson decided to make one final move, this time from her hometown of Los Angeles to the small village of Ofra in Israel, in order to live closer to her children and grandchildren. As the oldest student in her Ulpan class (a government-sponsored programme for new immigrants to learn Hebrew,) she was the first to pass the oral part of official government language test for new citizens. She immediately resumed teaching guitar while completing her memoir, *Home at Last*, which details the first year of her experiences and transition into an entirely new way of life.

'I started teaching in late October last year, after the High Holidays were over. Everything closes up here in Israel for those three weeks so there was no sense in starting to teach before those holidays. And then, of course, I was starting everyone off as beginners... from my 7 year old student, David, to the 9-12 year old set, to teenagers and adults. The starting line was the same for everyone. No one had ever studied music before and no one had ever played the guitar. The music vocabulary in Hebrew was something I had to ferret out for myself. I finally decided that the important thing was to find pieces that would interest each student and to have them learn certain English words that pertained to the music I was teaching e.g. this is a "quarter note," now please repeat.'

Michelson's wish was to import her tradition from Los Angeles of holding an annual guitar recital. 'Everyone here [in Ofra, Israel] is familiar with what they have heard folk singers play - that is, many chords for religious as well as secular

songs,' she says. 'So I faced the challenge of choosing pieces that would both use classical technique and catch their attention.

I no sooner got things going in October than it was Chanukah vacation at the end of December. Then we revved up again until the holiday of Purim in March, followed a few weeks later with the big holiday of Passover in April. That was eight days of holiday.

I knew that after April there would be more major holidays: Lag B'Omer, Shavuot and a few minor occasions that would keep students attention away from practicing. Again, another challenge - how on earth would I get everyone ready for a recital July 1st? I decided to plan the programme for early April. Then I assigned pieces to each student. We started rehearsing the pieces at every lesson in May and June.'

Michelson's efforts saw the village of Ofra's first ever classical guitar recital at its new Hersh Auditorium this past summer, featuring fourteen performers ranging from age 7 through to adult. The pieces her students performed included Israeli folk songs, lullabies and works by Carlos Jobim, The Beatles, Luis Bonfá, Led Zeppelin, The Doors, Frederic Noad, Tielman Susato, George Gershwin, Leonhard Von Call and Michelson's own compositions.

'With my little David, I had a cooperative Mum who was willing to be the home teacher for my *New Dimensions in Classical Guitar*. With the others, I

used Charles Duncan's book, *A Modern Approach to Classical Guitar* and his *Pop Classics*, in addition to other sheet music. My mother-daughter duo progressed so rapidly that I soon had us playing the *Menuett and Trio* from Leonhard von Call's *Trio in C Major, op. 26*. (The mother is the high school math teacher here in Ofra.) The von Call piece is at level early intermediate but they enjoyed the challenge. They were the last ones on the programme and everyone was impressed with their musicality.

'As someone said later, "Now that was really music they were playing".'

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