

**Roots of Modern Minstrelsy: Islam**

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**Ben Verdery**

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# BEN VERDERY

Interviewed by JULIA CROWE



Benjamin Verdery: 'This is the golden age of the guitar'..

2006 IS turning out to be a celebratory year for guitarist/composer Benjamin Verdery. A newly-minted fifty years old, he has also reached the milestone of teaching twenty years at Yale University, and he has been appointed to the position of 'Guitar Curator,' at the 92nd Street Y and will be responsible for its future guitar concerts and masterclasses. In addition, he has completed scoring a guitar duo work entitled *Peace, Love & Guitars* for both classical and electric guitar, to be performed by John Williams and John Etheridge. Verdery has released a new solo CD, *Start Now* (Mushkatweek Records) with another solo CD release to follow this year, entitled *Branches*. He is also looking forward to his eighth annual guitar class on the island of Maui, Hawaii and to an early 2007 release of an album with Andy Summers, *First You Build a Cloud*. It's no wonder Verdery describes himself as 'triaging' his way through any given day.

Les Édition Doberman-Yppan has published Verdery's *11 Etudes*, recorded his colourful *Start*

*Now* album, with plans to issue sheet music of other works from this collection later this year. *Start Now* contains some whimsical pieces, such as *Fix the Funk* for baja guitar, along with re-recordings of Verdery's older works, *Prelude and Wedding Dance* and *Capitola*. This album was also Verdery's first time working with producer Adam Abeshouse, who is well known for his work with David Starobin and the Juilliard String Quartet.

'Working with Adam on *Start Now* was great', Verdery says. I went into the studio thinking, "I wrote this music - so I think I know how it goes." What he did was listen to a phrase and conceive an idea that would augment my original concept. I've never had such a hands-on producer, except for *Soepa*, where all the composers offered specific input. *Start Now* was a more involved process and a learning experience for me. I find it very necessary to have someone who understands music following the score while recording - someone who is sympathetic to your artistic

soul and not trying to win you over with an idea.'

Verdery's solo album *Branches* will feature his recordings of Bach's fourth cello suite, the *Chaconne*, Strauss' *Blue Danube Waltz*, Mozart's *Adagio K. 540* and three Hendrix arrangements of *Easy Rider*, *Little Wing*, *Purple Haze* concluding with the traditional spiritual, *Amazing Grace*.

'My inspiration for arranging the Hendrix and Prince songs came from a remark someone had made to me years ago at Paco Peña's International Guitar Festival in Córdoba,' Verdery says. They had asked, "Why don't you play the music you grew up with?" Here I was in Córdoba seeing how strongly these people react to their native music. It is in their blood and bones, the way Jimi's music is in mine. Why shouldn't I arrange his music for the classical guitar? In my mind there is no denying what an immense talent someone like Prince is, never mind Hendrix.

'My process for arranging anything is to immerse myself in the piece. I approach arranging in a collage-like way, using bits and pieces as needed. Of course I consider first what the structure will be. Essentially, I am creating something new because there are lyrics and I need to decide what I will write in their place. I try to maintain the harmonic language of the song and will often quote motives from other songs of the composer. For example, *Purple Haze* has four different quotes from other Hendrix tunes: *Manic Depression*, *Voodoo Child*, *Hey Joe* and *The Wind Cries Mary*.'

For his transcription of Mozart's *Adagio K. 540*, Verdery consulted with John Williams and with pianist and Mozart scholar Robert Levin for advice on how best to adapt the work for classical guitar.

'The Mozart went through a few incarnations. Though cumbersome in some parts, I found it was all playable in D minor, which sounds even sadder than the original key of B minor. I went back and forth from thinning it in passages to playing all the bass lines as best I could. Robert Levin gave me one of the most inspirational lessons of my life. He told me it would sound better in certain passages if I didn't use the left hand at all. And then he went on to demonstrate several passages from different concertos where there was no left-hand accompaniment, very similar to the passages in the *Adagio*. He helped me rework the piece into a guitar piece, reiterating what I had heard so many times from John Williams; that is the importance of making it sound guitaristic and of course maintaining the integrity and essence of the work.

'Later I played the piece for John and we discussed many of these same issues. I admire John's transcriptions, in that he trusts the skeletal element of a work and how it will sound on the guitar. For example, a certain line may be 'playable' in thirds but in the greater architec-

ture of the phrase, it turns out not to be as effective as the simple bare line.'

Verdery became inspired to arrange Strauss' *Blue Danube Waltz* for guitar after discovering a version written by Vadha Olcott Bickford, who had started the Los Angeles Guitar Society in 1923 and had an early Martin guitar model manufactured in her name.

'I've always lamented not knowing Bickford. I'm told she was an extraordinary guitarist and eccentric, who passed away in 1980 at the age of 85. I had stumbled across her method book through John Stropes and I love a recording of it by Carlos Kleiber and the Vienna Philharmonic. I didn't always get the famous second beat right but I also did not want to mess with it. It requires a specialized type of playing. I did my own version, which just might upset certain people from Vienna. What might upset them worse was if they ever saw me dance a waltz.

'The *Chaconne* is next to impossible to discuss. Throughout my teaching career, students say it's their favorite piece but ask WHY would you record this piece that has been recorded by so many artists before? Why should I play *Asturias* or *Recuerdos* or even the mighty *Chaconne*, why bother?'

(During the course of conversation, it is suggested that the explanation for this might possibly fall under the same categorical reason of why some submit to the overwhelming compulsion to eat gingerbread at least once a year - whenever Christmas rolls around - whether they particularly enjoy gingerbread or not. 'I'm definitely not a fan of gingerbread. But I'm kind of liking that answer...' Verdery says.)

'Recording these pieces is very personal process. There are people out there who would really like to hear *your version*,' he explains. 'You're not necessarily making it a definitive new interpretation that is going to blow everyone out of the water. It is what it is. You study it thoroughly; you make your personal artistic decisions and play it. Besides, at the time you are playing it, at that particular concert, it could well be the only time this piece is being played in the universe. It could be a premier for that very moment.

'One thing that I find very interesting about writing music and making CDs is that it kind of goes against life's flow because life is changing all the time, moving all the time. So you make a CD, it feels as if it is supposed to be this permanent, perfect artistic statement. And I think that is why we become so frustrated when we listen to our CDs, even when we decide, that's it, I'm done. You're changing all the time but the CD isn't.

'So, getting back to recording, we have to remember we are changing beings. The ability to let go and move on is not always easy depending how much of our ego is invested in it. At any rate, I don't know what is constant.'

Change?

'Yeah, exactly.'

Verdery, who has been longtime friends with John Williams after first meeting at Paco Peña's International Guitar Festival in Córdoba over twenty years ago, has just completed an approximately nine minute long piece entitled *Peace Love & Guitars*, to be performed by Williams and jazz guitarist John Etheridge.

'I won't say too much about the piece as John has just received the score and I can't wait to hear what they do with it and if it actually works. It was SO much fun to write and, as always, a humbling experience. It's interesting to work with what you know as being the possibilities, strengths and limitations of the instrument.

'A point to emphasize with younger *Benjamin Verdery.*

guitarists is that the guitar is a great collaborative instrument. Playing with another person is enriching and the classical guitar can enter into any musical dialog and have something meaningful to add. I love how great the classical guitar sounds with steel string guitar. For this reason, playing with my dear friend Bill Coulter is terrific. I can't believe the variety of people I've been able to make music with, from accompanying Hermann Prey in Schubert's *Die Schöne Müllerin* to Andy Summers in *Bring On The Night*, all because of the guitar and its adaptability. You have no idea what's in store for you.'

*Bring on the Night* is one of the featured pieces on Verdery's pending 2007 CD release with Andy Summers, entitled *First You Build a Cloud*. As a duo, they have performed Ingram Marshall's specially-commissioned *Dark Florescence: Concerto for Classical and Electric Guitar* at Carnegie Hall, at Yale University and in Belfast, Ireland this past year.

'Getting Andy Summers and Ingram Marshall together was like arranging a play date for my children when they were young...I didn't know if they're going to get along. Andy knew of Ingram's music so when I had an idea about a concerto, I asked Ingram to join us. One of the things that broke the ice was Andy's suggestion that we improvise to give Ingram an idea of the sound of the two instruments.

'Because of that positive experience, Andy and I got together afterwards and spent four days simply improvising on different motives textures rhythms. It was exhilarating to do this because of the nature of improvisation and not knowing what the other person is going to play or what you are going to play. I must say I felt a great musical rapport with Andy even though I'm not an experienced improviser. That is a prime example where my 'mistakes' turned out mostly for the better!'

'We wound up getting around sixty percent of *First You Build a Cloud* recorded, with some of



the pieces being complete take improvisations. From there we co wrote a few pieces and actually did an arrangement of *Bring on the Night*, a great Police tune. That was particularly interesting considering Andy's relationship with the song. We also do a Bach *Sarabande*, where I play the *Sarabande* from the 6th cello suite with Andy playing ghost notes above my lines.

'This album promises to be a guitar feast with a variety of moods, textures and guitars. We both play a few different instruments, including a National Steel string guitar, a 12-string, a Taylor steel string, a classical guitar and then a variety of electric guitars and a ukulele. It was one the most unusual recordings I've done, very refreshing and thanks to Andy and our mate and engineer Dennis - just plain plucking' fun!'

Verdery is looking forward to a student concert celebrating his twenty years of teaching at Yale University and remains optimistic about the future of the guitar due to an increased number of players displaying technical adeptness at an early age and the inspiring instruction offered by a new generation of teachers.

'I love teaching at Yale. The students I've taught have been great teachers for me and many of them have gone on to find happiness as guitarists in America and in Europe. They've found a way to do great things for the arts all over the world. Quite a few have been well received in this magazine, I'm happy to say! I'm honoured to have a continued friendship with many of them.

'A similar situation has developed in our summer class in Hawaii. I say 'our class' because everyone who's been to the Maui class knows that without my wife, Rie, and now my two children, the class would be under palm trees with coconuts hitting us over the head and our guitars floating merrily out to sea.

'In these past twenty years, I have noticed the overall level of playing has skyrocketed and this

is due to better teaching. In this country, I have seen some astounding Suzuki teaching from, for example, Norma McNamara and David Madsen. Scott Cmiel, who teaches in the prep division at the San Francisco conservatory, is also a model teacher. And of course there are many I could name on the conservatory level.

I also agree with those who feel that this is the golden age of guitar. So many wonderful pieces have been written in the last forty years. It's been a thrill for me to work with digital delay and see how wonderful effects like that can be integrated with our instrument. In general, good amplification is much more available and helps create different chamber music opportunities.

I've found that people's understanding of Renaissance, Baroque and classical music is a lot more thorough these days, thanks to people like Nigel North and players like Tillman Hopstock and groups like Giardino Armonico and so many others. The current interest in period music and period instruments is very exciting because it allows students to think more carefully and openly about the art of interpretation."

Delving further into this discussion of musical interpretation, Verdery points out, "Some of the freedoms taken with rhythm, tempo and even notes that I've heard advanced students play have made me ponder what it really means to interpret a work. Because of the vast number of recordings available of certain works, there is a natural tendency to want to put one's stamp on a piece. So it is interesting for me to discuss where exactly the line is drawn between interpreting a phrase or recomposing a phrase. We always say there are many ways to interpret a work or a phrase. This is really put the test when your student does something radically distant from what you hear and does it convincingly! I find this energizing.

You could argue that there is so much available to people that I've noticed a certain kind of laziness in masterclasses. By this, I mean some students come to masterclasses and they'll just sit there and forget how exceptional it is to have this guitarist sitting in front of them teaching them who has far more experience than they do. They take it for granted - maybe because they go to a guitar festival every summer. Masterclasses can be an incredibly unique opportunity to learn, often when you're not playing. These students make the mistake of not treating everybody's lesson as their own. I am amazed at what I call 'masterclass burnout' in some people because, in my day (and I'm very, very old) you killed yourself to get to study with someone and to hear them perform."

Another alarming issue that Verdery has seen on the rise is physical injury stemming from misuse, stress and overpractise, for which he

has developed some helpful and practical advice: "I think the guitar was ultimately made for a certain type of body build and height, let's say 5'2" or 5'3" - and I'm just talking off the top of my head with that figure. I have a couple students who have really long arms and the guitar is difficult for them to play. They are wonderful players who have been greatly aided by this apparatus called 'The Guitarest.' ([www.guitarest.com](http://www.guitarest.com))

**"For me,  
Alexander Technique  
saved my life."**

"Some of us believe that eight hours of playing per day is better than four. I do not agree. I advocate more study and learning away from the instrument. In many cases guitarists are

more addicted and in love with the guitar than they are with music. The primary factors leading to injury are over-practise, misuse, stress, treating music as a competitive endeavor and the concept of CDs where everything has to be 'perfect'.

"All this has led to a fair amount of misery and quitting. Generally, I've noticed people becoming frustrated around the age of 35. I find that once you hit your 30s you have to deal with making a living possibly for a family and dealing with your own limitations. It comes down to knowing who you are and how you deal with your body changing. You can't play at 34 the way you used to at 24. At 50, forget it. People don't want to face that so they keep doing the same thing and then they get injuries.

"For me, Alexander Technique saved my life. I've always had tremendous issues of tension because I came to guitar relatively late, at age 18. And by nature, I'm extremely revved up and fidgety. I didn't even know how to read music at the time and at 19, I was playing for Leo Brouwer. I had played a lot of electric guitar so my left hand was more facile than my right, but I just went at it like a crazy person because that is what you do when you are possessed by the magic box. Luckily, I never had to stop playing because of injuries but I've had some very close calls. You don't want to take the fun out of playing but in general I urge people to get up every twenty minutes and stretch. Keep your shoulders wide, don't let your head sink into your upper body, avoid locking your neck toward the left hand and generally listen to your body. It's a great exercise to study what your whole body does in each shift or passage.

"I always like to say, your guitar is a dog that thinks it's a cat, meaning, don't shorten the distance between yourself and your instrument. You want the guitar to come to you not the other way around. I am excited by the articles in this magazine by Paul Sogaard, Ergonomics of the Guitar. They have been wonderful and long overdue. He says it all and far more coherently!"