

INTERVIEW

**Smaro Gregoriadou: Class of '85 Town Hall Series
HOBART BAROQUE FESTIVAL – AUSTRALIA**

1. Can you describe your relationship with Yorgos Kertsopoulos, who builds your instruments?

Distinguished guitar soloist, composer and builder Yorgos Kertsopoulos is the inventor of *Kertsopoulos Aesthetics*. It is a platform of pioneering achievements in guitar and string construction, aiming to revive obsolete forms, sound traditions and historical tunings of the guitar, while expanding the advanced instrument building standards of today by new devices and applications, new string materials and tuning configurations.

Kertsopoulos' innovations have inspired me tremendously. I have tried most, continuously experimenting and meticulously checking the impact of every new idea on my sound and technique. After many years, I managed to crystallize my own interpretive perspective as a natural continuation, which I have called *Reinventing guitar*. My purpose is to project on an international scale the need for a re-definition of the classical guitar's sound and technique and a re-evaluation of guitar transcriptions. Kertsopoulos Aesthetics stands as a scientific and technological basis in this project. From there are drawn all of the instruments as well as the stringing, trebling and tuning options that I use in my concerts and recordings.

2. In what ways do these instruments differ from others you have used in the past?

Kertsopoulos' instruments follow by-and-large the traditional constructional logic, instrumental design and overall proportions of the standard instrument, as established in the mid 19th century by the notable Spanish builder Antonio de Torres. But they are further equipped with various features, additions and components of Kertsopoulos Aesthetics' constructional platform, all of which affect considerably sound, technique and interpretation.

First of all, apart from the standard nylon trebles, these instruments use newly developed string materials (mainly metalonylon and thread) with a full palette of interesting novel timbres that cooperate perfectly with the characteristic mellow sound of today's nylon. Moreover, they achieve a considerable expansion and variety in tuning range and register by means of a versatile all-frets stringing methodology. This is particularly useful for early music interpretation. By selecting from a whole variety of newly available string diameters and working tensions, we can play up to an octave higher than ordinary, which is around the violin's range! Or, we can apply several tuning settings of double or triple courses on our standard instruments, approaching early traditions of lute, harpsichord, mandolin, or guitar.

Additionally, Kertsopoulos' structural interventions in construction have delivered diverse acoustic applications for further enhancing sonority, tone-colour, sustain and volume in the instrument. They include right-hand or back pedal mechanisms, scalloped fingerboards, and unconventional resonators, such as the multi-timbre rectangular guitar, the minimal guitar with carton or plastic resonators, and the air-pedal guitar.

3. Do these instruments 'expire' (like tennis rackets) or will they last a long time?

History has shown that every expiration bears definitely its own revival deep inside its core! This is life, evolution, human restlessness! In Bach's case, humanity experienced a tremendously triumphal return of a totally "expired" genius. Similarly, every instrument may potentially expire. The Baroque lute disappeared violently, after centuries of prestigious predominance in Europe, only to reappear as late as in the 20th century. The same with harpsichord. As for guitar, it has equally undergone exhausting modifications in form and sound, and has "expired" many times until its final standardization. Every new radical change, the last being the introduction of nylon strings by Segovia and string maker Augustine in 1948, was inevitably pushing into oblivion all previous long-standing traditions associated with guitar: high tuning ranges, catgut or wire strings, double-course stringing patterns.

Today, after so many years, classical guitarists have the opportunity to enjoy a faithful recreation of many long-abandoned areas of guitar's fascinating sonority. This actually bridges somehow the enormous distance that modern guitar retains from historical performance practices and sound idioms of the past. Will that last or expire? Time will show. These innovations have to prove their health and value, and equally the guitar world their tolerance towards tendencies that step outside the established style. So, I am not really afraid of expiration. And I certainly prefer it from stagnation! But judging from the people's response so far, I feel very optimistic.

4. In what ways do these instruments produce a Baroque sound?

I am not really sure how any modern instrument could possibly produce an authentic Baroque sound! To my mind, we cannot sound entirely "baroque" today, just as Geminiani, Tartini or Leopold Mozart could not sound exactly like Corelli, but rather like some compatible renewal of Corelli! Or, as Leonhardt put it, "You can't be both authentic and convincing!". Here a "reinventing" perspective is needed, that is, historically informed, realistic interpretations rooted in the mother sonorities!

So, for example, the instrument in which Bach composed his *Lute Suites* possessed 13 or 14 courses of double strings tuned mainly in octaves, while its tone colour was determined by the bright timbre of gut, which was at that time the predominating string material. Harpsichords could also have multiple choirs of metal strings. To approach as accurately as possible this kind of sound I use several a multi-course instrument, like the **double-course pedal guitar** (Video 1) or the **triple/double/single-course pedal guitar** (Picture 1), with the appropriate string combinations, tuning schemes and timbres, true to the form, propensities and style of the original works.

[VIDEO 1: Scarlatti Sonata K198/L22 interpreted on a double-course guitar](#)

PICTURE 1: Triple/Double/Single-course guitar (detail)



In the particular case of transcribing harpsichord works, timbre is a very important issue. Unlike all genuine branches of the guitar's family that were high-pitched and had brilliant timbres of gut or metal strings, modern classical guitar, with its tenor to bass disposition, cannot produce the distinctive, brilliant, penetrating, metallic tone-colour and very sharp attack of the harpsichord whatsoever. So, I use instead a **high-tuned scalloped pedal guitar** that is focused to project the nobility and delicacy of the high frequencies. Its extra-clear, brilliant, dry and distinct coloration and articulation are particularly relevant to harpsichord. It is tuned five semitones higher than ordinary and has scalloped frets (Picture 2, Video 2).

[VIDEO 2: Handel Air Variations "Harmonious Blacksmith" interpreted on a high-tuned scalloped guitar](#)

PICTURE 2: High-tuned scalloped guitar (detail)



Furthermore, the "mellow", "round", and warm quality of nylon trebles, amazingly though it may suit to more recent guitar repertory, refines baroque music in a wrong direction, I believe, in the same way that modern piano does rather smooth its rough edges, despite the masterly interpretations such as Horowitz's in Scarlatti! Therefore, by just substituting the nylon trebles with metallonylon ones, baroque transcriptions sound much more compatible to the work's aesthetic origin, as defined by each composer. Metallonylon combines nylon's tenderness with wire's brilliance, largeness and sustain. It thus offers a lot against modern guitar's weaknesses, particularly the imbalance in the shift from 3rd to 4th string and the relative dullness of nylon trebles compared to gut or wire. It is incidentally ideal for Barrios or Villa-Lobos, who were themselves using metal strings.

I've seen that these interesting interventions in range, tone-colour, and stringing or trebling configurations, project more efficiently all crucial parameters of baroque interpretation: articulation, phrasing, dynamics, ornamentation, voice distinction, contrapuntal structuring, etc. At Hobart Baroque I will play with two such guitars, presenting my synthetic concept of the Scarlatti sonata, the Bach toccata, and the Handelian variation form!

5. Can you describe your favourite elements in each of Handel, Bach and Scarlatti?

I am particularly inspired by Bach's profound mysticism, in which the artistic conception of the Passion of Christ is not a visible or historical one; it is contemplative and invisible because the drama is inward. Bach delivered his insightful philosophical view by an unparalleled technique of composition, so masterfully austere and thorough! What fascinates me most is the strict architecture, mathematical structures and severe musical principles of his complex multi-linear thought,

even when the medium was reduced to a single unaccompanied string instrument; also, the ways he recreated older historical forms, like the passacaglia and chaconne.

Handel is another world. In his oratorios, it is not so much the religious significance of the Old Testament that is glorified, rather human ideals: warm, plausible, and comprehensible. I adore the melodic directness and physical dynamism of his music, his so well grounded euphony, his deeply breathing lines. Among Handel's immense interpretive challenges is for me a distinct undercurrent of haughtiness and pride always present between his lines: it is extremely difficult to achieve on the guitar!

As for Scarlatti, I particularly respect his innovative and markedly individual language; one characterized by his perfect handling of the art of modulation and multifarious rhythmic explorations; by a wealth of thematic invention, orchestral devices and instrumental allusions; and, above all, by an intentional abandonment of the stylized courtly dances of the baroque suite and the French-style influences of his time. I admire his disciplined expressiveness in combining classical tradition with Spanish or Italian folk-style. And certainly his extreme inventiveness and sense of variety, hidden behind a seemingly obsessive exploration of one single genre: sonata!

6. Are there any particular pieces of music you'd like to hear played on your guitars?

I would really like to hear many more faithful, compatible, intelligent transcriptions of Da Milano, Weiss, Bach, Purcell, Scarlatti, Handel, Frescobaldi, etc. Many such transcriptions were faced in an idiosyncratic, often arbitrary way in the past decades, and as I tried to explain, this deserves to be restored according to our modern ideals and means: thorough knowledge and documentation of historical data, sources and urtext scores, perfect acquaintance with performance practices of several instruments and periods, and above all, a fine taste and judgment to combine them all.

Moreover, new original works are really worth to be written for these guitars, in conjunction with well-served arrangements by remarkable composers who never wrote for the guitar: Brahms, Bartok, Ravel, Debussy, Russian composers, etc. This would challenge us, guitarists, to border on the technical, interpretive and sonic limits of our instrument, and, much more important, would broaden tremendously our admittedly poor in compositional resources original repertory. Guitar needs desperately this kind of feedback, I strongly believe that!

And finally, ensemble staff. The creation of the guitar quartet, with guitars tuned in soprano, alto, tenor and bass ranges similar to the strings or winds, stands as a cornerstone of Kertsopoulos' system! A whole variety of beautiful chamber music works can be thus impressively projected. And, as I have experienced many times, the lovely way with which these astonishing guitars match with large ensembles and orchestras, offers countless new sound perspectives that more and more interpreters, composers, and music enthusiasts, will hopefully explore worldwide!

Smaro Gregoriadou

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The year 1685 witnessed the birth of three of the greatest composers of the Baroque era: Handel, Bach and Scarlatti. *Class of '85* pays homage to these figures in a series of recitals at the Hobart Town Hall which also showcase the latest innovations in the New Baroque.

On April 4, Greek guitar virtuoso, Smaro Gregoriadou introduces her unique interpretation of the Baroque to Tasmania. A pioneer of Baroque revision, Gregoriadou presents her technical and sonic interventions in stringing, trebling and tuning, which she calls 'reinventing guitar'.

'My purpose is to project on an international scale the need for a redefinition of the classical guitar's sound and technique and a re-evaluation of guitar transcriptions,' Gregoriadou says.

Her collaboration with fellow composer and instrument-builder, Yorgos Kertsopoulos, has expanded the range and register of classical guitar with the use of metanylon strings, an all-frets stringing methodology, new pedal mechanisms, scalloped fingerboards and unconventional resonators.

'By selecting from a whole variety of newly available string diameters and working tensions, we can play up to an octave higher than ordinary, which is around the violin's range!' Gregoriadou enthuses.

‘Or we can apply several tuning settings of double or triple courses on our standard instruments, approaching early traditions of lute, harpsichord, mandolin or guitar.’

Gregoriadou’s uncompromising approach to her art stems from her belief that the experimental forms of the original 1685 composers do not constrain but rather enable contemporary musicians.

‘You can’t be both authentic and convincing,’ Gregoriadou says, quoting Gustav Leonhardt. To this end, she updates the Bach harpsichord with both the double-course pedal guitar and the high-tuned scalloped pedal guitar.

‘At Hobart Baroque I will play with two such guitars, presenting my synthetic concept of the Scarlatti sonata, the Bach toccata, and the Handelian variation form,’ Gregoriadou reveals.

Reflecting on the masters of 1685, Gregoriadou nominates Bach’s ‘profound mysticism’ as a key component of his legacy. ‘The artistic conception of the “Passion of Christ” is not a visible or historical one; it is contemplative and invisible because the drama is inward,’ she observes.

‘Handel is another world,’ she states. ‘It is not so much the religious significance of the Old Testament that is glorified, rather human ideals: warm, plausible, and comprehensible.’

As for Scarlatti - the Italian author of 555 sonatas - Gregoriadou names the ‘perfect handling of the art of modulation and multifarious rhythmic explorations and a wealth of thematic invention, orchestral devices and instrumental allusions’ as defining features of his oeuvre.

The genius that Gregoriadou identifies in Bach, Handel and Scarlatti reflects the challenge presented to each of the Town Hall musicians in their reinterpretations of the masters.

The series begins on March 31 when Hobart Baroque Music Director, Dr Erin Helyard teams up with Donald Nicholson of Melbourne chamber ensemble, Latitude 37, to form the Duelling Harpsichords. The pair will play similar popular repertoires very quickly in succession, in a manner similar to the great composers of the 18th century.

‘There’s quite a big culture of competition in the eighteenth century,’ Helyard explains. At different times, Mozart, Beethoven and Bach all face-off against ambitious newcomers to the delight of audiences.

‘I think it’s that very playful sense of competitiveness that speaks to everyone,’ he says. ‘It’s going to be hilarious.’

April 1 welcomes Latitude 37 back to Hobart Baroque following their sell-out event in 2013. The trio’s success at the inaugural festival was part of the inspiration behind growing the Town Hall events from one concert in 2013 to the 10 on offer in 2014.

The midweek event on April 2 is reserved for Timo-Veikko ‘Tipi’ Valve, the Finnish cellist, soloist, chamber musician and orchestral leader who embarked on his career at age six. Also a performer at Hobart Baroque 2013, Tipi returns with his original 1725 instrument which critics have described as achieving a ‘stunningly beautiful’ tone.

On April 3, Dr Helyard, leads the Ensemble HB through a program designed to both soothe and unsettle. With key soloists from the Orchestra of the Antipodes, Helyard presents one well-known work and one lesser-known work of each of the Festival’s muses.

‘We’re saying to audiences: come and hear something you know - and then hear something you don’t know,’ he says.

For the Baroque audience, an element of surprise was always part of the deal. ‘They were basically there to have fun, primarily to talk, drink, to have sex – to do all these things that we think of as modern,’ Helyard says. The Class of ’14 has been warned.

Class of ‘85