

MUSICA

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"Smaro Gregoriadou, Reinventing guitar, Vol. 2"

REVIEW

After being distinguished in her previous, excellent CD with works by Bach and other composers performed in unusual instruments (built on the basis of the aesthetic conception derived from the master Yorgos Kertsopoulos), Smaro Gregoriadou now offers a new and interesting route, interpreting harpsichord masterpieces transcribed for two different instruments: Five Scarlatti Sonatas, Prelude, Fugue and Allegro BWV 998 and Toccata BWV 914 in E minor by Bach, Air and Variations "The harmonious blacksmith" and the Chaconne in G Major by Handel. Performances with surprising vitality, technical mastery, stylistic relevance. The Scarlatti sonatas are distinct for a nice "airiness" of phrasing and a relevant dynamic range, while the complex Bach compositions are interpreted with a relentless tempo conduct and with an uncommon clarity in the interpretation of the most intricate contrapuntal passages (just listen to the present two Fugues, BWV 998 and the final section of the Toccata BWV 914). Bach is undoubtedly strict and severe, but not lacking of momentum and luminosity, as demonstrated in the enthralling in all respects approach of the finale Allegro in the triptych BWV 998. Equally compelling interpretations are the handelian pieces, with particular attention to the great Chaconne in G major, translated with enviable fluency, and variety of dynamic shadings and agogic solutions. Similarly excellent results are yielded also in the famous Air and Variations, rendered with clarity and irresistible liveliness (albeit with some sharpness in the phrasing). As in the previous disk, the sound is often rather metallic (particularly in the upper register), but in this CD this is less noticeable, thanks to a far broader range of colors. And the recording, with its depth and naturalness, recreates all of them. Rich booklet notes (but in English only) are included into the actual CD, and also a final reference track, both signed by the soloist.

Claudio Bolzan

INTERVIEW

Eight questions to Smaro Gregoriadou

1) In your last two CDs you use some very unusual instruments: could you please describe us their characteristics and potentialities?

Apart from the standard classical guitar I play several multi-course instruments, like the **double-course pedal guitar** or the **triple/double/single-course pedal guitar**. These demanding instruments have impressively wide sonorities and ranges, as well as timbres particularly well suited to the Renaissance and Baroque styles. The player engages two or three strings for every note heard, like in mandolin. These are tuned either unison, octaves or double octaves, thus referring to the tuning tradition of early guitars, harpsichord or lute. Especially the triple-double-single course guitar combines three historical guitar types (triple-course *chitarra battente*, *double-course baroque guitar* and *single-string guitar*) into one. I also use a **single-stringed high-tuned guitar** with scalloped frets. This has a distinctively clear and well-articulated sound and a scalloped fingerboard that requires a firm left-hand technique. Its movable back

pedal alters the air cavity during playing. All guitars possess a right-forearm pedal, which modifies at will the volume, sustain, sonority and attack of the sound. All guitars are of Kertsopoulos' construction.

2) Do they give you significant benefits -- compared to traditional guitars -- when you play Baroque music, as in this last cd?

Our modern guitar sounds radically different from all early plucked instruments that had double courses of gut or metal strings, a wide range of tunings, and a remarkable diversity in timbre. So its "mellow" timbre quality, mainly due to its nylon trebles, 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! With my instruments I obtain an easier access to the objective criteria involved in the interpretation of the baroque works, thus reviving as much as possible the aesthetic experience of all different historical forms of early guitar and related instruments: this is the essence of the word "reinventing" that constitutes the core of my effort. The extraordinary sound potential of these guitars is admittedly far removed from the standard instrument, but much closer to the intentions of the composers, as far as tunings, timbre, phrasing, articulation, voicing.

3) In the booklet you often refer to Mr Kertsopoulos: can you explain more about his Aesthetics?

Kertsopoulos Aesthetics (named after its inventor guitarist, guitar/string maker, researcher George Kertsopoulos) is an internationally acclaimed platform of original inventions in guitar and string construction that stands as a basis of my work. It involves a series of pioneering achievements aiming to connect the contemporary guitarist with obsolete forms and stringing traditions of the guitar: innumerable combinations of historical tunings, working tensions and timbres, doubling and trebling selections, acoustic applications for enhancing sustain and sonority, novel acoustic devices like right-hand pedal or the rectangular guitar shape. It is a major contribution to the classical guitar world, unique in its originality and inventiveness.

4) This Aesthetics works with every repertoire, or it suits better to some particular kind of music?

Its contribution extends not only to the revival of older performance practices, but also to a tremendous expansion of the contemporary guitar's sound limits. Particularly the new trebles' material, *metallylon* combines nylon's tenderness with wire's brilliance, largeness and sustain. It offers a lot against modern guitar's weaknesses, particularly the imbalance in the shift from 3rd to 4th string and the dullness of nylon trebles. It is also ideal for Barrios or Villa-Lobos, who were themselves using metal strings.

5) Do you also play "traditional" guitar repertoire, with or without orchestra? I mean, composers like Giuliani, Sor, Rodrigo...

I have extensively played this repertoire in concerts and always consider it as my daily bread. And since everybody has played this music, and in certain cases it has been misunderstood or ill-served, it is always very challenging to give Sor or Rodrigo a view

afresh. This fantastic and well-digested music exhibits the real musician's interpretive forces at their very best, I believe.

6) You are also a composer. Which composers are closer to your sensitivity and musical upbringing?

I feel very close to the baroque musical ideal and especially Bach, Purcell and Scarlatti. I am also particularly inspired by the folklore element of Bartok and Skalkotas; Mussorgsky's melodic directness; the mathematical structures of Schonberg and Xenakis; the physical dynamism of Messiaen, Debussy and Crumb's musical scale; the micro polyphonic form of Ligeti, Stravinsky and Varèse; and Reich's minimalism. As for guitar music, I respect immensely composers who have ingeniously explored the folk element, José, Ponce, Tansmann, Bogdanovic...

7) How deep are your links with Greek culture and music? How important are they in your compositions?

They are definitive, maternal. I have particularly studied the musical essence and structure of the ancient Greek Drama, which -few people know- was a purely musical form. There the fabric of music (poetic meter, rhythm, melody) together with movement and meaning form a tightly woven entity. So significant portions of Sophocles' or Euripides' plays cannot be fully realized on stage unless the complete musical form conceived by the poets --also excellent musicians-- is incorporated. I have thus discovered and explored a universe of musical laws, principles and structures that still help me especially in composing stage or vocal music. Another firm root for me is Greek song, either in its sacred religious form or in its pure folk expression. It teaches me the importance of crucial artistic principles, *abstraction*, *spontaneity*.

8) Tell me about your next CD and concert projects; do you have any musical "dream"?

My new CD with baroque transcriptions has just been released by Delos. So now I am fully engaged to an intense artistic activity relating to this release, starting from a series of concerts and master classes in Athens. I really wish to communicate to the best of my capabilities the overall interpretive perspective that I call "reinventing guitar". What I personally experience --and surely many specialists worldwide-- is a need for a redefinition of the classical guitar's sound and technique, in order to approach in a novel creative way the old repertoire and provide historically convincing interpretations. Our dearest "standard" guitar cannot however incorporate all the extraordinary forms and sounds that have been a vital part of the instrument's historical evolution. These deserve a *restructuring* through new perspectives, ideas and visions, new dreams! So honestly, as performer and composer I wouldn't ask for much more than being able to develop undisturbed this radical idea of *reinvention* in the course of time!

Nicola Catto