

contact

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bertram turetzky

interviewed

Last autumn the famous double bass player made his first tour of Europe. Leroy Cowie, himself a player of avant garde music for the bass, interviewed him while he was in London for a recital on October 14.

What prompted you to take up the bass?

It was basically my interest in jazz that set everything in motion. I had always wanted to play in a band. I was playing guitar at the time and they said if you want to play in the band you have to play the bass. So I bought a bass and I was playing in the band a few weeks later. I think I was playing very badly. I didn't know what I was doing and I didn't know the changes of the tunes when this began. And I think I had a very unorthodox technique. It was not an elegant pizzicato sound - it was almost a slap. But it had a lot of unfocused energy and I have been spending the rest of my life trying to focus all that energy - to make it do something that one can control and really use.

So your first influences were from jazz in fact, not from classical music. Have you ever been torn between the two cultures?

For while I was and when I began to see my friends and contemporaries being cut down by the jazz life, so to speak, it upset and frightened me. The whole social status and psychological problem of being a jazz musician and living in the jazz community were clearly not for me. So I decided that I had better do something different and get out while I could - and I did. I don't feel like an outsider. I'm not active in jazz any more and I doubt if I would have been a great contributor. I think I was a good participant - it was great fun and I have a lot of great memories in my heart and in my ear. I still hear some wonderful music that I was involved in but the life was not for me at all.

But it still seems unusual for a bassist to be prominent in the symphonic as well as the jazz field.

Yes, I am trying to think if there is anyone in the States who is prominent in both fields. Richard Davis does a lot of freelance playing in New York and his legitimate playing is very fine, but his forte is in the jazz-field. My teacher is David Walter - a symphonic player (he played with Toscanini in the NBC Symphony Orchestra) who has also played in the Johnnie Smith Quintet at the same time. I think that's probably the only person I can think of at the moment who does it. Eddie Gomez

was a Zimmermann student at the Juilliard School and was a fine legitimate bass player, but went into jazz instead of symphonic work - so I'll have to exclude him.

Most of your technical innovations seem to be oriental, for example quarter tones, glissando, pizzicato, sul ponticello, bowing glissandos. When you worked in the Greek band, just what were the instruments involved?

In the Greek band we always had a drummer, a bass, an accordion or piano. And a Greek band always has to have a bouzouki. The other instruments were violin and clarinet: the leader was really a violinist but he would play clarinet as well. So it was two lead and three rhythm instruments.

But it was the bouzouki which really influenced you from the point of view of your own development?

Absolutely. The bouzouki fascinated me.

Your pizzicato tremolando came directly out of this?

Yes. I heard the Indians and I heard the Armenians but the virtuosity of the bouzouki just knocked me out. It was just great.

You also visited an Indian band?

I did that several years ago, in fact. I heard them when I was on the East coast in 1970. I really heard Mr. Ral play for a good length of time, and I heard some Indians who have visited the University of California at San Diego and listened very carefully to see what I could learn. And I listened to recordings on the Nonesuch Explorers series on which there are some fine Indian musicians. I listen and see what there is to do on the bass.

One of the things you do is a tremolando with the right hand on one string and a melody with the left.

Well, that's a tambour/sitar doubling effect. I think that the point is that I and many other Americans are more interested in what is going on in the East than in looking to Mother Europe for a nod of acceptance. By Mother Europe I mean basically Germany, Italy and France - the nations with the monopoly of so many aspects of music for so many years. So many Americans still look to Europe for answers and guidance and I felt that just isn't the answer. It is not a question of disrespect - it's a question of a man having to find his own sound world in an aesthetic and artistic sense.

You said that Italians think that Verdi is better than Beethoven.

In fact it is not a joke. Many Italians will tell you with a straight face that there is not a work like Falstaff. But for me the question which is better, which is the greater work - that is a waste of time. Let's take Falstaff and Beethoven's Seventh Symphony - they are both great masterpieces and in my life I have room for both of them very nicely. It's nationalism and Americans are only just beginning to understand about that. You people are away ahead of us.

You said that a composer friend's suicide was the event which led you into solo playing, because you felt that the new works had to be performed.

Well, what happened was that the suicide of this young composer made me realise that one really had to deal with the music of our time. Now I was interested in having music written for me. Pieces had been written for me by the time of that suicide that really touched me. But when that happened I realised that this is something one has to deal with on a human level. One has to take care of the composers. Most of our friends are composers and what is exciting is that many of us started together. A guy like Donald Erb in the late 50s when we first met was, like all the rest of us, working at two or three jobs for a while - working in a church choir, teaching ear-training and harmony at the Institute in Cleveland, and knocking himself out to write pieces: worked very hard. Well, suddenly something starts to cook. By 1964 he had written a duo for Nancy and me for our New York debut. The Seventh Trumpet, a recent orchestral work by Donald Erb, has had at least 50 performances all over the world. That's a lot for a living composer, and it's exciting to see what's happening. And we've grown up with these people: I find also that if someone asks where did you learn what you know, I would say from composers. With the exception of Viodone Moss and David Walter who were very important in my development. I think I told you that Rostropovich pointed out that he learned everything he knows from Shostakovich, Prokofiev and Benjamin Britten - not from cello works, not from cellists. I have done the same thing. Of course I have more sources than Rostropovich. Probably he has more sources than he admits. But I admit the old music, ethnic music, Eastern music, jazz - just everything I hear is fascinating.

So it was an evolution of ideas over the years. But the death of the composer triggered it off. What was his name?

His name was Nicholas Capabianca.

How would you compare the reception of your music here with that of American audiences?

I have been playing new music since 1955, and the audience in Warsaw was probably the high spot of audience reception in my whole life. It was intoxicating. I almost cried. It was like being a pop star. They listened very diligently and seriously, but their response was absolutely phenomenal. I thought that last night in the Young Vic was a very warm reception, close to the norm in the US universities, when I get a lot of young people who identify with my philosophical ideas and see what I am trying to do with my instrument. The Oslo reception was more shy and reticent. Of course Norway is still a musically conservative country. It was okay, but not like Warsaw or London.

At the last count how many pieces have been written for you?

About 150. Sometimes I get pieces I don't ask for. Some are terrific, some just pleasant surprises. Like Justin Connolly's duo for flute and bass which I saw for the first time yesterday and didn't even know he was working on. That was a great pleasure. I have lost count. I am trying to catalogue everything. I thought it would be nice to write a book called perhaps For Contrabass and Friends and try to document the pieces and how they came about. Then I realised that I would have to stop living and playing and just write the book. But I hope to do things with tape recorders and interview the composers and store it in a filing cabinet just like you have. If time permits we'll have an interesting documentary about the change of interest in our instrument and the change of interest in composers being closer to performers than they once were.

It seems that pieces you like are the Erickson Ricercar and Felciano's Spectra.

Spectra is a favourite. Nancy and I love it very much. Kenneth Gaburo's Inside and Chihara's Logs are two others. These three are, in a way, the cornerstones. I have warm feelings for the Erickson because of the fusion of all the pizzicato techniques and all the oriental sounds and the coloration of the ponticello sounds that make it sound quite Eastern - not bel canto at all. The Gaburo has all the vocal and speech sounds and rigorous composition. These will be the ones that point the way. The Chihara, of course, is just a very sensitive and beautiful piece of music that I am very moved by every time I play it.

Which American composers do you most admire and would like to see compose more for you?

I would like to have my friend George Crumb write a piece for me and he would like to. I like the music of George Rochberg very much. Both these Georges are great individuals and I admire them as people and artists. You could add Mario Davidovsky, who is a master of tape pieces. He is a great composer. Elliott Carter, of course. I would like a chamber work from Gunther Schuller. A solo piece by Donald Martino, who wrote a chamber piece for double bass and oboe in the 1960s, would be sensational. Bill Albright is also very gifted. A composer who knows a lot about ragtime, Bill Bolcom, has written some very clever music. Lauren Rush is a special creative force. Also Richard Wernick at the University of Pennsylvania, who is a colleague of Crumb.

Which European composers do you admire?

I must admit that I have a funny feeling about European music. Berio is a major figure. So is Maderna. Niccolò Castiglioni - he is very important. Stockhausen doesn't interest me at all on any level. That's maybe an unpopular feeling in England and Germany. The early pieces - like Gesang der Jünglinge - were major, but I have not followed his career. **Kagel** is certainly a fascinating composer. Maxwell Davies and Birtwistle David Bedford. I don't know what is going on in France. Ligeti is a fascinating composer. It would be noble if Lutoslawski has time to write a few pieces. Toru Takemitsu has expressed interest, along with Joji Yuasa. Witold Szalonek, Penderecki - it would be good for the bass if he would write a piece for it. A piece from Lutoslawski would be a sensation. Luis de Pablo in Spain I always hoped would write something, and some day it might be nice