

Letter from New York

By JULIA CROWE



Valerie Hartzell.

GUITARIST VALERIE HARTZELL runs the Classical Minds Festival, a branch of the annual orchestral Texas Music Festival. Held at the Moores School of Music, University of Houston, this five-year-old festival recently added a competition. This year, local luthier Aquiles Torres, who is originally from Venezuela, will be donating a guitar. 'We grew from 30 students to 45 and now have three divisions' high school, undergrad/community college and an open division, Hartzell says. 'We have cash prizes and, for the open division, the winner also receives the luthier-made guitar. The support from the community in Houston has been monumental in creating the prizes and scholarships.'

Hartzell also directs the Greater Houston Guitar Guild, a non-profit club which hires young, up-and-coming artists along with local, national and international artists. 'We have been fortunate to grab artists such as Soloduo, Ernesto Tamayo, Randall Avers and Andrew Zohn; they are usually in between concerts in Texas and will stop by Houston in order to perform for the guild. The entire ticket sales and masterclass fees go to the guest artist. The concerts are inspired by the 19th century salon tradition, which offers an intimate way of enjoying the performer's music.'

Hartzell was inspired to play guitar by her mother, a classical guitarist who attended the New England Conservatory of Music. 'She was still in school when I was young and I would sit at her feet playing with my toys and listening to her practice. I'd started to ask for a guitar and she began my musical studies with *solfège*. By the time I received my half-size Ramirez at the age of three-and-a-half I could already read music, had a solid understanding of rhythm, and had begun to develop my ear. My fondest memory is of my mother placing her right hand over mine, moving my fingers in what I now know to be free stroke! My other fond memory is of her practising *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* by Tárrega. This has become a staple of my repertoire and it is important for me to keep this piece within my programme. It is a constant reminder of why I started playing the guitar, since this piece is at the root of my love for the instrument.'

Hartzell's mother brought her along to France, where she had the opportunity to study with Alexandre Lagoya at the Académie Internationale d'Été in Nice.

'I was so young, between the ages of six and eight I studied with Lagoya,' Hartzell says. 'He

was always very warm and encouraging. Like Ako Ito, he too encouraged me to use colour to contrast phrases or sequential patterns. I still listen to his solo recordings, and to those of Presti-Lagoya. Mostly, I try to emulate their dynamics and vibrato. From both Ito and Lagoya, I have gained the understanding that the guitar is like an orchestra; we have to explore different colours to truly imitate the different instruments.'

'Ako Ito is a strict teacher who reinforces technique. I liked her regimen of scales, slurs, arpeggios, tremolo and multiple etudes by Sor, Carcassi and Villa-Lobos. Her method of teaching motivated me. I spent more time on technique than on repertoire. Ito likes to tell the story about a masterclass in which she had asked me to play my piece for a second time without mistakes. I must have been seven at the time, and sure enough I played the piece without mistakes. Her point was that children do what is asked of them without panicking, whereas adults tend to overthink or become tense. She wanted to show the class that if you play without worrying about the notes, the notes will come. Ito lives in the mountains outside of Nice in a beautiful house with lush gardens full of fruit trees. We often would have lunch after our lesson and linger in the garden talking about guitar. Her husband and duo partner, Henri Dorigny, is a fantastic cook. I have based my teaching methods on hers, and I organise events for my students that hopefully will one day remain in their minds as fond memories.'

During this time, Hartzell adopted the technique of using the right-hand side of the nail. 'When I met Manuel Barrueco at the Domaine Forget in Canada, he encouraged me to change my right-hand technique to playing on the left side of the nail. After already twelve years of playing, this was a major undertaking.'

'The advantage I found with the Presti-Lagoya technique was that it set up the thumb in an elongated position and allowed it to strike the string with incredible power. If you listen to the older recordings of Presti-Lagoya, you will note the extreme vibrato and use of the *ponticello* and *tasto* colours. They used more colour than most people today. I have always maintained this use of colour in my music, and I try to emulate their vibrato in appropriate pieces, such as Villa-Lobos' *Preludes No. 1 and 4*.'

'I never teach my students the right-hand of Presti-Lagoya; the angle of the wrist could irritate the tendons and cause tendonitis. Keeping the wrist in a more natural position decreases the risk of injury considerably. When I compare recordings of the two playing styles, I hear two different, beautiful tones, neither of which is better than the other. And when comparing power, I only hear my playing today as louder because recording equipment has moved on and my custom-built 630mm-scale Greg Byers guitar is a powerhouse.'

Hartzell attended Peabody Conservatory where she studied with Manuel Barrueco and Julian Gray. After receiving my her Masters degree from Radford University with a Graduate Teaching Fellowship, she met her then future husband, geophysicist Robert Nejako, at Virginia Tech. 'We shared a love of nature and hiking. Unfortunately, he graduated in December and moved to Houston. I knew I was in love with Robert because I became lovesick after he left. I decided moving to the forth largest city in the country would be beneficial to my career. It proved to be the best decision of my life. I married Robb and ended up creating a major festival and competition and also a guild; I have a large studio with wonderful students and a nice job at the Houston Community College where I lecture on the history of music and theory.'

'I must mention that we are fortunate as female guitarists to be working in the 21st century. My mother's generation had very few female guitarists and she had to deal with a lot of sexism. This was a contributing factor in her quitting the instrument. She married young and she also had me at a young age. Her teacher at the conservatory did not support her at all. She often heard that a female could not play as powerfully as a male. In my experience I have encountered the same philosophy from certain people, but have fought against it.'

Hartzell balances her festival, guild and teaching with performances at numerous guitar societies, concert series and festivals across the country. This year she has concerts planned in Texas, Pennsylvania and Kentucky.

'Most musicians have a tendency of saying 'yes' to too many things', Hartzell says, as a way of explaining how she balances her schedule. 'I have learnt the hard way and now say 'no' to accepting more students when full. I always have a buffer of two teaching slots open in case there are high school students looking to prepare for college. I also lecture at Houston Community College and must carve out time for correcting papers and preparing those classes.'

'Another aid in keeping me sane is exercise. I started to walk my dog again in October and I feel stronger, calmer, and have more energy. Exercising is also a great way to avoid injuries and I strongly feel all musicians should be physically active.'

This year she is recording works by Ponce, Tárrega and Lennon for a forthcoming debut CD. 'I have noticed that Tárrega's smaller works are not performed all that often. Many times I find myself hearing epic works, which can be inspiring but heavy on the ear. Audiences also like to hear shorter, character-type pieces such as *Maria*, *Marieta* and *Rosita*. I am currently planning adding *Adelita* to the programme so I have set of 'ladies' pieces. On this recording I will include *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* because of my emotional connection to that work. John Anthony

Lennon's *Another's Fandango* is a perfect combination of audience friendly themes and guitaristic quirkiness.'

'While studying at Radford University for my Masters Degree, Robert Trent suggested I learn a sonata by Ponce. He chose *Sonata III* and I eventually wrote a large research paper on this work. All the research and in-depth analysis has inspired me to bring this piece back to my repertoire and include it on the CD. I also plan on adding Barrios' *Julia Florida* to the disc, in between the Tárrega set and Ponce sonata. It's necessary to have something lyrical and sweet as a contrast to the rest of the programme. My favourite music comes from the 20th and 21st centuries because I love fusion between different styles. My favourite composers are Dyens, Koshkin, Brouwer, and Mark Anthony Cruz. I'm starting new relationships with young, up-and-coming composers like Andy Mitchell, and I feel this is where I need to invest my time. I'm also learning David Mallamud's *Spatula*, which is a perfect example of fusion of various musical styles.'

Hartzell underscores not only the generosity but the enthusiasm of Houston's community toward all things guitar. Apparently, neither hurricanes nor blackouts will intimidate their audience turnout. 'In September of 2008, Hurricane Ike hit Houston. Damage is usually limited to the

coastal area and the southern side of Houston, but Ike actually devastated the Woodlands area, downtown and Katy, where the guild holds its concerts. Parts of our neighborhood had lost power for weeks in the middle of 100-degrees heat. Houses in our neighborhood had large trees running straight through rooftops immediately after the hurricane hit.'

'Robby Gibson was to be our first Greater Houston Guitar Guild guest artist of the season two weeks after the hurricane struck. He was on tour and Houston was his second-to-last concert before Austin. We considered canceling but at the last minute thought, 'the show must go on'. Mr. Gibson even performed on 88.7-FM KUHF radio's *The Front Row* radio show on Houston's National Public Radio affiliate. Between this and the fact that many people in our audience did not have power and were desperate for entertainment we had a great turn-out.'

For more information, please visit:

www.valeriehartzell.com and on youtube, she has performances of works by Tárrega, Dyens, Ponce and Legnani for viewing.

For the Greater Houston Guitar Guild:

<http://www.valeriehartzell.com/GHGG/index.html>