

Interview with Classical Guitar

Johannes Tonio Kreusch interviewed by Lawrence Del Casale for the August 2005 issue of the Classical Guitar Magazine

Since his debut at New York's Weill Recital Hall in 1996, Johannes Tonio Kreusch has toured the world as both a soloist and chamber musician. In addition to the classical guitar repertoire, Kreusch is also interested in improvised and avant-garde music, something reflected in his own compositions. Extensive collaboration with contemporary composers including the Cuban Tulio Peramo has resulted in many new compositions for the guitar. With praise in the New York Times, the Philadelphia Inquirer, the Spanish magazine Acordes and by the Boston Globe, Kreusch has taken his place amongst the elite among concert guitarists. I met Kreusch in New York City in November 2004.

Lawrence Del Casale: It is always a pleasure to meet classical guitarists who are making a solid living and are establishing fruitful careers in music. How did you set out on your career path? What were your short term and long term goals?

Johannes Tonio Kreusch: I must admit, that having a great musical career was never an important goal for me. After finishing high school, I first started to study philosophy at the University in Munich, Germany, because I wanted to broaden up my mind and thinking. Since most of my family members are musicians and artists, music always played an important role in my life. So I decided later on to go to Salzburg to study guitar at the Mozarteum with Eliot Fisk and Cuban guitarist Joaquín Clerch. After graduating there, I ended up in New York, where I did my Master at the Juilliard School under Sharon Isbin. During the time of my musical studies it became clear to me, that it is music, what I'm really devoted to and what I wanted to do as a profession. So, it didn't really matter to me, whether I would achieve a big musical career as long as I would be happy and content with what I'm doing.

LDC: So many young guitarists want to give concerts. How did you establish yourself in this brutally competitive arena?

JTK: I never plan my concert-programs with the questions "what could the public like the most?" or "how could I be successful" in my mind. We are surrounded with "easy listening"

and "best of" programs everywhere, which lack intensity and seriousness. For my Carnegie Hall debut for example, I scheduled a program with the 12 Villa-Lobos Etudes, the Ginastera Sonata and a Bach suite. When I showed the program to friends, the reaction was mostly like this: "Well, it is a great program, but you can just play that in a big town like New York. Don't even think to play it in smaller cities, there won't be an audience for that!". My experience was totally different. I played this program on tours throughout very different countries of the world and it didn't matter, whether I played in big halls around the globe like in Mexico-City or Warschau or in front of a School class, I mostly had the feeling, that the audience was attentive and appreciated sometimes hearing things, which they didn't know before. I think, no matter if the piece one is playing is a beautiful simple and modest work or a heavy, deep piece, if one happens to reach the inner soul of the musical moment of the work, one can mediate, what should be said through music.

For me it is very important to demand great deal of myself and also of the public to deal with something new and to try to find a path besides the usual experiences. Also if one plays famous and well known pieces, one can always try to find a new and fresh way of interpretation. As artists, we have a great responsibility: through art, we can reach the people in their inner soul. People go to a concert to forget the everyday life and to experience things beyond material life. Through art they could get positive new impulses for their life's and maybe look at

things differently! Imagine for example, what effect it would have, if more school kids would regularly listen to Mozart instead to Heavy Metal... sometimes I think, that we would live in a better world, if great art would be more appreciated in our western societies!

LDC: You recently received great praise in the New York Times for your transcription of a song cycle by Aaron Copland which you performed with the Metropolitan Opera tenor Anthony Dean Griffey in Zenkel Hall at Carnegie Hall in November of 2004. How important is transcription for you and young guitarists alike?

JTK: As I said before, in my opinion, it is always important to look for new dimensions in music. My personal way to do this is to transcribe music, to compose and improvise, to ask composers to write pieces for me and always to "ask questions" about the music I want to play in order to find my personal way of expression. Through my new solo-program for example, which features exclusively my own compositions and improvisations, I try to create new sounds with my guitar.

During the program I prepare the guitar with different tools and I use for every piece a new tuning, so the guitar sometimes sounds for example like an African cora, an Indian tabla or sitar, a Japanese koto or an arabic oud.

The use of skordatur or preparation of the guitar could also be a great help for transcriptions. Since the guitar repertoire is very limited, compared to other instruments like violin or piano, transcriptions bear great possibilities to broaden up our repertoire. And very often, the guitar fits as well as the originally intended instrument, or sometimes sounds even better!

The "American Folksongs" from Aaron Copland, which you mentioned before fit beautiful on the guitar. Somehow I see the transcription for the guitar as a return to the origins, because plucked instruments play an important role in American Folkmusic. For that transcriptions, I also make use of skordatura to broaden up the tone scale and use preparations in order to let the guitar sound sometimes like a banjo or a slide guitar.

Coming back to your question about the importance of transcriptions for young players. I think one can learn a lot if one does own transcriptions of the pieces one wants to play. Every transcription of whatever kind of a piece bears somehow a personal view of the transcriber. If one works for example with a published edition, one should always - in a positiv way - "ask questions" to the proposed solutions and try to find out, how the original really sounded.

If you do this, you will learn a lot about the piece and you will also find your very personal way to interpret music. With this edition of the "Classical Guitar" magazine, you can find one of my transcriptions of the Bach "Allemande" from the famous Suite BWV 996. For this transcription, I make use for example of the Campanella technic, which is a crosstring playing technic frequently used by lutenist in former times to achieve beautiful legato lines. To be able to lengthen certain notes, which are impossible to hold on the guitar in contrast to the lute, I suggest here also the unusual use of the flageolett technic for some spots (like bar 2,9 or 12). As I said before, this is my very personal view of this piece and it could bear some ideas for other players as well, but at the end it is always important for each player to find her or his personal way of realisation.

I think, one should always question, what one is doing and what one has learned and question, which was hand down by tradition. I always encourage my students to discuss with me and to try to disprove me. A fruitful learning process is just possible if both sides - teacher and student - are really open to always try to find new ways of looking at things.

LDC: I have listened to your many CD recordings including the wonderful Villa-Lobos (manuscript version) of the Etudes. How do you market your recordings and how does an aspiring guitarist get started with recording?

JTK: I was very lucky to get a good recording contract with the BMG-company. I recorded 3 albums for the Arte Nova/BMG label (which are available again at the moment on the Oehms

Classics label). They had a great distribution, therefore I didn't had to bother with marketing the CDs by myself. My debut-CD was the recording of the manuscript version of the 12 Villa-Lobos Etudes along with the Sonata by Ginastera. Initially during the preparation of this recording, I got a lot of sceptical reactions about the program. People said, that it wouldn't be a good idea to overtax the listener with such a heavy program - especially since this was a debut CD - and I wouldn't get a market for that.

But despite these reactions, this record sold nearly 10.000 copies in the first two years and received musical awards. Again it made clear to me, that one does not have to look for a "best of guitar program" to be successful. On the contrary, as I said before, one has to be honest to oneself and follow one's true artistic voice in order to find the right and individual path.

My second record "Portraits of Cuba" sold even more copies than my first CD although it is a recording, which features exclusively contemporary music (chamber music as well as solo guitar music), which was dedicated to me by the Cuban composer Tulio Peramo. This program is also not the easiest music to listen to, but since it presents something new and since the music is very fresh and inspiring, I guess that's why it also found a lot of listeners behind the guitar world. I think it is always important - in order to find a market for your recording - to have a programmatic idea behind your product and again to look for something new to say.

My programmatic idea behind my CD "Inspiración" for example, is to pay tribute to some of those composers, who had an important impact on the development of the guitar during the last century and from whom I got my first personal inspirations for the guitar like Barrios, Tárrega, Albéniz, Rodrigo or Brouwer.

This CD is dedicated to the great Argentinian guitarist and poet Atahualpa Yupanqui, whose art also inspired me for the guitar and whose following poetic description of our instrument is a motto for my work: " The guitar is the only instrument when pressed upon one's heart can express the landscapes of music and being human." On this disc, I perform, next to two

own improvisations, very famous pieces of the guitar repertoire, which all are recorded hundreds of times before...nevertheless, I tried to find my personal view of this music and I hope, that I found at some spots also new ways of looking at these pieces...

There are so many recordings out now. So one shouldn't record for the sake to just have a another CD out but to say something original and in the best case also to express something new!

LDC: Does the internet play a role in your career? And how do you utilize it?

JTK: The internet definitely plays a role in building up a career. But one shouldn't overrate it. Much more important are still personal contacts. If people know and appreciate you personally and are also fond of your playing, than you will be successful. It is more important to be out in the real world than in the hyperspace. The internet is very anonymously and you can't really build up a personal relations through it. It offers a great way to easily get in touch, but after all, the contacts you build up in the real world will last longer and will be more grounded.

I use the internet especially to promote my own publishing house "KreuschBros. Publishing", where I publish guitar music by contemporary composers like Tulio Peramo. Our catalogue ranges from music for solo-guitar, to chambermusic with guitar and guitar concertos. You can get informations about these publishing activities through my website:
www.johannestoniokreusch.com

LDC: I see you teach regularly at the University of Munich. Teaching and performing go hand in hand. How does one get onto a college faculty?

JTK: Teaching is very important to me and I think every teacher has a great responsibility especially when it comes to the young generation. For young people it is very difficult to get an orientation in this materialistic world and to find their individual place in the society. They experience from a very early age on

through mass medias like television or computers a destructive and often unpleasant world and they have to realize, that human ideals are often disregarded in political or economical decisions. In my opinion, art could be a way to become sensitive again for human ideals and needs. I think through art we could help to bring especially young people back to those ideals. To make music together means to learn to openly communicate, to listen to each other and to perceive your partners - elementary things, which one also needs in the "real world"! Music could be a real positive social exchange.

As we all know, it is very hard and competitive to get onto a college faculty. But I think, one doesn't have to have a job at a college in order to be a successful and content teacher. Whereever one works and whoever one teaches, it is always possible and necessary to serve art and to help to get the students close to the miracle of music!

LDC: You perform with a wonderful ever expanding roster of musicians and not only from the classical field but from World Music and Jazz . How much ensemble work is part of your regular concert schedule?

JTK: To play with other musicians is one of my favourite things. I just released a duo CD on the "Oehms Classics" label with the great trumpet player Markus Stockhausen, which features original music of the two of us. On this disc I don't play exclusively classical guitar, but also use steelstring and 12string acoustic guitars, which I occasionally combine with live-sampling.

I also frequently tour with my brother, the Jazz pianist Cornelius Claudio Kreusch, with whom I established a world music ensemble, with musicians of all over the world, like the percussionist from the latest Paul Simon band, Jamey Hadadd. In the classical field, next to my solo recitals, I perform widely with my wife, the violinist Doris Kreusch-Orsan as well as with different singers, like the Metropolitan Opera tenor Anthony Dean Griffey. I also work with different chambermusic groups like the New York ensemble for contemporary music called CONTINUUM or symphony orchestras, mostly

performing the guitar concerto "Tres Imagenes Cubanas", which composer Tulio Peramo dedicated to me. To share music with all kinds of other players is somehow the essence of making music for me. Therefore, chambermusic plays a very important part in my musical life.

LDC: How many concerts do you normally give in a year and how do you juggle all your other musical activities around your concert schedule?

JTK: As a musician, who wants to live from my profession, I'm used to work all day!!! Last year I had three long tours with my new solo-program and also played quite a lot of chamber music tours. I do several masterclasses and seminars throughout the year and have my regular teaching job at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Munich. Next to these activities, I work as a studio musician and write for different musical magazines for example for the German "Akustik Gitarre" magazine, where I publish a regular classical guitar workshop. And next to all this: practicing, composing and looking for new ideas and projects...

LDC: What piece(s) of advice would you give the guitarists just emerging from the conservatories around the world and what realities do they need to face?

JTK: If one decides to become a musician, one has to be aware, that on the professional side one enters a very competitive and sometimes cold world. It is often hard to find your personal and individual path through this world. Especially as a young musician it is very important to have a focus to work really, really hard. You should love what you are doing so much, that you are not discouraged, if you don't get the attention you are looking for. If you are content with yourself and if you love what you are doing, you will always reach other people with your work.

It is very important to always question your dreams of what you want to be and how you see yourself. Are you really just a good musician if you become famous ? I don't think so! Start always with small steps! To bring for example school kids close to music through teaching

them how to play and really love an instrument is in my opinion maybe more admirable than performing in big halls!

As an artist you should never have an attitude like "oh, I'm the greatest, I don't have to learn anything anymore" - if you think like that, you

stop to be an artist - because art is always a process of developpement. You should know your strenght and always work on your weak sides - also concerning your character!

And don't forget: it is music what counts - not your ego!