

Interview with Mel Bay's Guitar Sessions Webzine

*Artist Interview: Johannes Tonio Kreusch
by Stephen Rekas*

I'm quite sure that German guitarist/composer Johannes Tonio Kreusch will prove to be one of the major European guitar pedagogue/performers of his generation. He seems to do it all - teaching and playing solo and ensemble music in various styles on nylon and steel strings. In the following interview, readers will quickly recognize both his depth and humility as an individual and as a musician. I am proud to present this interview with Johannes Tonio Kreusch.

PERSONAL/BIOGRAPHICAL

Guitar Sessions: Who or what events inspired you to play the guitar? Was music a part of your household when growing up?

Johannes Tonio Kreusch: I first started to play the piano when I was about 5 or 6 years old. My mother is a professionally trained classical pianist and since my brother, who later also became a professional musician, played the piano as well, I wanted to play the piano too - but later I longed for another instrument. I remember that my mother accompanied herself with the guitar, when she sang children's songs for us. Somehow I came to love the guitar through these songs and had a desire to play this instrument. So I quit the piano and began taking guitar lessons.

G.S.: How old were you when you began to play? Do you feel that your starting age is a critical factor in playing your current style?

J.T.K.: I was around ten years old when I started to play the guitar. As I said before, the guitar was not the first instrument I played. So when I started to play the guitar, I had some prior musical knowledge, which helped me in my start with the guitar. I remember that my first guitar lessons were not focused on classical guitar. I learned, for example, how to accompany myself, while singing a song or how to improvise to a certain tune. But when I first heard somebody play a piece by Johann Sebastian Bach on the guitar, I was totally electrified and since then I've had a fervent desire to play classical music on my guitar.

I'm very grateful, that I had the opportunity to develop love and passion for music from an early age. Music was always around in my parents' house. Everybody played an instrument and we often played together. But I'm also thankful that I did not have to live through the "you have to practice" thing, but rather grew up in an ambience that showed me that music is something to enjoy, and that the work one has to invest in order to learn a piece or to get over a technical problem will be paid back by moments of joy and enthusiasm when you are finally able to play the piece you've always wanted to play.

It is very important that children experience music not through pressure or mainly technically focused teaching, but through a creative though focused approach which fosters love and passion for music, an attitude which one will then hopefully keep one's whole life.

G.S.: Please describe your formal music training.

J.T.K.: After I graduated from high school, I first studied philosophy at the University in Munich. During this time I participated in a lot of master classes given by well-known guitarists like Eliot Fisk, Leo Brouwer, Manuel Barrueco, and Alvaro Pierri, to name a few. After a while I decided to study classical guitar professionally. I began studying with Eliot Fisk and Cuban guitarist Joaquin Clerch-Diaz at the Mozarteum in Salzburg, Austria. After graduation from Salzburg, I moved to New York City in order to study at the Juilliard School of Music under Sharon Isbin, where I received my Master of Music degree in 1996. Another important teacher for me was Alvaro Pierri.

For me it was important to experience very different styles of teaching and to try to learn from very different personalities. Luckily, I had the pleasure to study with some of the finest guitarists. In my opinion it can be very problematic to stay with one teacher too long, because it can create dependencies which won't let you develop in a free and open way. It is important to get different opinions and to find alternative choices in life as well.

Therefore I think whatever you do, you should always get inspiration from different areas. Aside from my musical work, it had a big impact on me to study philosophy, which broadened my mind and my horizontal of thinking. I have the feeling that most of the courses of study at universities are too specialized. In my opinion the musical education at the universities is often lacking what helps you to become a real artist and a responsible personality. For a young person searching for their place in the world, it is not enough to learn how to compete or how to be the best! We all have to look for other ideals. A good book can also be an important teacher! I recommend, for example, to every young student who wants to become an artist, reading Rainer Maria Rilke's *Briefe an einen jungen Dichter* ("Letters to a Young Poet"), which deals with the problem of finding a path to become an artist.

G.S.: What styles interested you when you first began to play? How do those preferences influence your current music?

J.T.K.: Aside from the interpretation of music, I have always been interested in improvisation. Improvisation is still an important aspect of my musical work. At the moment I have a new improvisatory solo program called "Crystallization". For this program I make use of very different tunings on my six-string classical guitar and also use various "prepared guitars" in order to make them sound like other plucked instruments like a Japanese koto, a sitar or an oud. I just released a new recording, also called *Crystallization*, featuring parts of this program. This album is available on iTunes.

G.S.: Do you play any other instruments besides the guitar? Is there any particular advantage or disadvantage to being a multi-instrumentalist?

J.T.K.: In addition to the guitar I learned to play different kinds of instruments like the piano as I mentioned, and the clarinet. It was definitely helpful to my musical and technical approach on the guitar, to learn how other instruments work and how one can handle their peculiarities. If you go back to the origin of the Latin word "instrumentum", one realizes that it means something like "tool" and this tool helps us to get close to music. The most direct way to get close to music - even without a tool - is through singing. So if one plays an instrument, one should always try to go beyond the technical possibilities of this tool and to find a way to understand how this particular instrument "sings"! For example, playing a wind instrument taught me a lot about phrasing and musical breathing, which we guitarists often are not aware of due to our static position. So, whenever you are not sure about phrasing or articulation, sing the phrase and you will find the solution...and don't forget to breathe at the right point! Without breathing there is no singing!

G.S.: Besides trumpeter Markus Stockhausen, violinist Doris Kreusch-Orsan, and tenor Anthony Dean Griffey, is there anyone you would like to collaborate with in a recording or tour?

J.T.K.: I love to play chamber music. I have created a new program together with my wife (violinist Doris Kreusch-Orsan) featuring my own transcriptions of music by Mozart, Schubert, Granados and others. Last year I performed with the Metropolitan Opera tenor Anthony Dean Griffey at Carnegie Hall in New York. Our repertoire is mainly focused on English/American songs by Copland, Niles, and Dowland. Anthony has a very beautiful voice and it is inspiring to work with him. There are plans to record an album together and to do more concerts in the future. In addition to my work as a soloist and classical chamber musician I frequently work in the field of improvisatory music. Recently I recorded a duo

CD with the great jazz-trumpet player Markus Stockhausen. The CD is called "Panta Rhei" and is available through OEHMS CLASSICS.

Cuban composer Túlio Peramo just completed his Suite for Two Guitars which he dedicated to Greek guitarist Antigoni Goni and I and I hope that we will premier this piece soon.

G.S.: What musical avenues do you wish to explore in the future?

J.T.K.: At the moment I'm working very intensively on the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. I did a recording of some of his lute suites and I'm planning to publish some of my own transcriptions.

I'm also preparing my new solo program featuring some new works for the guitar, which I will premier in the near future. One of them will be a cycle of 5 Preludes by the Cuban composer Túlio Peramo, which I will premier in October at the University of Cardiff. As I'm currently studying the handwritten scores of the Villa-Lobos Preludes, which offer very interesting fresh perspectives on this cycle, as there are certain deviations from published versions, I had the idea to perform the manuscript version of this cycle contrasting it with a new cycle of 5 Preludes by a contemporary composer. I just received the 5 Preludes, which Túlio Peramo dedicated to me and I must say that this is very special music.

G.S.: What keeps you interested in the music business?

J.T.K.: For me it is important to always look for new and different paths in order to be creative. It is very difficult to find your own true voice in today's music business world because there are often people who try to put you in a place where you don't belong or where you don't want to be, just because they think they can make money this way. I never make decisions on a program or a project on the basis of whether or not I think it might be successful. My only motivation is whether I like what I'm doing or not.

G.S.: Have you ever had to weather a creative dry spell in your playing or composition? How did you overcome it?

J.T.K.: I think it is very normal, that there are points in everyone's life where one questions everything one is doing and the path one is traveling. In my opinion it is very important to allow these confrontations, because new things can come into being only if one goes through such times. It will help you mature and also to find new strength for the future tasks. If you translate the word "crisis" which has ancient Greek origins, you will find that it means something like "change"; in order to keep your creativity up, you always have to look for changes and new directions.

G.S.: Which of your albums would you recommend to someone buying one of your recordings for the first time?

J.T.K.: This is a difficult question, because my recordings are very different from each other. If you like more traditional Spanish guitar music, than my CD *Inspiración* would be the best to start with. On this disc I interpret famous pieces by Barrios, Tárrega, Albéniz and Rodrigo. If you are more interested in getting to know new music for the guitar, than you should get my CD *Portraits of Cuba*. This disc is a world premier recording featuring music by Cuban composer Túlio Peramo, which he dedicated to me. On this disc one can hear music for solo guitar as well as for guitar and string quartet or guitar and voice.

If you are interested in hearing the manuscript version of the 12 Villa-Lobos Etudes, than you could listen to my CD featuring these etudes plus the Ginastera "Sonata". For me it was really a special moment, when I was able to get the manuscript of this great cycle. To study the handwriting of a composer is like being able to converse with him. If you have a question, you can go back to the manuscript and try to find the solution - and you will always find something new, especially when the writing is so excellent and clear like that of Villa-Lobos.

When I held the manuscript of the Etudes in my hands for the first time, it was like a revelation! I realised, that the printed editions are full of mistakes! This manuscript from 1928 proves definitively just how well Villa-Lobos knew the guitar. He elaborated the fingering for the musician in great detail and the intended

dynamics are even more closely specified; all that is missing in the published editions. And the print errors, which have never been corrected in any edition even to this day, finally become visible. "Etude No. 10", for example, has two more beautiful and totally new pages in the manuscript.

But above all, Villa-Lobos uses a tremendous amount of changing agogic and dynamic indications in all of the etudes. If one really carefully follows these signs, one realizes that these pieces are not just virtuosic pieces that allow you to demonstrate your technical abilities; on the contrary, this is music of its time which resembles the aesthetic ideals of the colourful French Impressionists! Finally, if you are more interested in improvisatory music or jazz, than I recommend my CD *Panta Rhei* with jazz-trumpet player Markus Stokhausen.

G.S.: Thank you for that digression, Johannes. That is fascinating material sure to be of interest to our readers. Is there any way for serious students of the guitar to acquire your corrected editions of the music for the Villa-Lobos Etudes?

J.T.K.: Unfortunately I still haven't been able to publish a revised edition of the guitar music by Villa-Lobos. If I could get permission from the publisher, I would do it in a heartbeat. I hope there will be a possibility to do that in the future. For now, if you want to examine the manuscripts of Villa-Lobos you would have to visit the Villa-Lobos Museum in Rio de Janeiro. There you can find all kinds of treasures regarding Villa-Lobos.

TECHNIQUE

G.S.: How did you assemble the body of technique you now possess?

J.T.K.: Socrates once said "To learn means to remember." I think this expression illustrates how the seeds of everything we can potentially learn are naturally deep inside us. That does not mean that we don't have to work hard in order to successfully achieve progress. On the contrary, it is only by profound struggle with certain problems and obstacles that we mature and

overcome them. Socrates expression implies that each of us has great potential for learning, but only if we look beyond the superficial or self-evident and critically question what we are doing or what is being imparted or revealed to us.

In this case "to remember" means to realize that anyone can acquire the ability to become independent and find their own ways to progress or, for example in music, to overcome certain technical problems. The ancient Greeks called a teacher "paidagogós", which means "one who accompanies pupils". It is very important, that students not become dependent on their teachers. Following the expression of Socrates, a teacher should simply accompany the student and impart to her or him the right tools, until the student is able to independently continue on his own path.

G.S.: Have you produced any instructional materials - books, videos? Planning to write or produce any?

J.T.K.: I have published some of my works [through my own publishing company]. As I mentioned previously, at the moment I'm working on a transcription of some of Bach's lute suites, discussing some of the performance practices of his time. I also write a regular technique workshop column for the German guitar magazine, *Akustik Gitarre*, and I'm working on a technique instruction book which I plan to publish soon. Another recent project is my edition of the solo guitar music of Cuban composer Túlio Peramo, which as you know will be published by Mel Bay.

G.S.: What sort of practice routine would you recommend for the beginning, intermediate or advanced player?

J.T.K.: I think the most important ingredient in striving for anything in life is patience! Never attempt to achieve too much in too short a period of time! If you want to run a marathon you have to pace yourself - so start slowly! Whatever you play, don't play it too fast. If you practice slowly, you will reach your goals much more quickly than if you practice fast without precision or control. You should also learn to listen to your playing very carefully, and

immediately on hearing something you don't like, look for a solution or a means of making it more beautiful. And never just accept anything at face value- whether from your teacher or anyone else- without questioning whether you really understand what is being said and whether you agree with it. If you always ask questions like, "Why is he saying that?" or "Why does this edition offer this fingering solution?" you will become more mature and acquire the ability to solve problems on your own.

G.S.: Do you recommend any particular teaching/learning techniques, such as maintaining a log of practice time?

J.T.K.: The main focus of my practicing is to get as close as possible to the message of the music. That means I would never abstract the technical aspect from the musical point of view. Whenever I approach a technical aspect, I always try to play it musically. I advise my students to do the same because otherwise - if for example you would play a technical etude without looking for its musical phrasing, but just paying attention to your fingers - you would be practicing something that would go against the natural flow. Every technically challenging spot will definitely get easier, if only you look for a musical approach. It's like memorizing a poem. If you had to memorize it in a language you don't understand, it would be very difficult. We all understand the language of music; consequently, we should use this knowledge also to overcome technical difficulties.

G.S.: What do you feel are your technical strengths and weaknesses?

J.T.K.: I have never been interested in showing off with an emphasis on virtuosic or technically focused playing. I'm more interested in letting my instrument "sing".

G.S.: Please describe your own practice routine and give us some insight as to how you keep your repertoire sounding fresh?

J.T.K.: The great conductor Sergiu Celibidache once said, that routine is one of the biggest enemies of music. I also try to keep my practice

approach very open and free from any routine. The amount of time I invest in practicing or in the preparation of a new program depends on how many new pieces I have to learn. If I practice pieces that I've performed before, I try to approach the pieces as if I were getting to know them for the first time. Through this approach I always find new aspects in the music and this keeps the music "fresh" and lively for me.

G.S.: Have you commissioned any works for the guitar?

J.T.K.: I have commissioned a large number of pieces, from music for solo guitar to chamber music with guitar and even concertos for guitar and orchestra.

G.S.: In your teaching at the university in Munich what areas do you emphasize with your students?

J.T.K.: My main goal as a teacher is to accompany my students on their path to independence and to assist them in finding their own musical voice. A teacher has a great responsibility, especially when a student is planning a career in music. In this case it is not only important to supply students with the best musical and technical abilities, but also to encourage them to get a broad education, one not based on musical skills alone. With a narrow-minded view, one would have a very hard time exhausting all the individual possibilities that life offers.

As I mentioned before, it is essential to learn as much as you can and to get as much background information as you can. As an artist you never know, what life is preparing for you and it is careless to think, "Oh, I want to be a performing artist and therefore I'll just learn how to play my instrument." As an artist especially, you must be as flexible as possible. Through learning other styles of music, for example, or through learning the harmonic context of music or even through learning conducting or how to compose- you could suddenly experience new instrumental abilities. In any case you'll become a better, i.e., more mature performer!

G.S.: Would you offer suggestions on forming a concert repertoire or preparing for a concert? When preparing for a specific concert or tour, what changes do you make in your practice routine?

J.T.K.: The only criterion for choosing a specific repertoire is whether or not I like the piece. I simply choose pieces of music that I can identify myself with and which I think are worthy of being played. I never decided a program from the perspective that it could be successful or not. When I prepared my debut recording featuring the manuscript version of the 12 Villa-Lobos Etudes and the great Ginastera Sonata, a lot of people implied that this program might be too heavy to be marketed on a commercial CD. The great success I had with this recording showed me that one should always follow his inner voice.

G.S.: How do you build consistency in performance?

J.T.K.: For me it is important to always be engaged in new activities and directions. As I said before, I not only perform classical solo guitar music, but also chamber music and concerts with improvisatory music. I do my own transcriptions of pieces which were not originally written for the guitar, I commission new music, and I compose. These activities help me stay involved in new areas and new approaches. Through these activities I can get new performance experiences, which help me to build a growing consistency in performance.

CREATIVE PROCESS

G.S.: What inspires you to write music? Do you begin a composition with a specific goal in mind or fly by the seat of your pants?

J.T.K.: As a way of breathing in, most of my concerts begin with an improvisation. This allows me not only to acquaint myself with the acoustic possibilities of the concert hall in every detail, but also to build up a very personal relationship with the audience. This kind of tonal breathing-in of the acoustic space and the direct search for optimal sound can be a linking

process for player and listener, and make up the framework within which the pictures imagined by the composers gathered together can come to life.

I always prepare some ideas in the direction I want to go through my improvisations. Sometimes I'm inspired by the composition, which will follow later in my recital. I do have motifs and rhythmical elements, which I prepare ahead of time and then let flow during the improvisation into something complete. It's like telling a story; it's important to create a bow of tension through finding a proportionate beginning, climax and ending.

My compositions mostly go a similar way. Through improvisation I often find ideas and motifs, which I want to develop into something complex and which I write down and which build up the beginning of a compositional process. I would describe the way I compose like a painter who tries to paint through sounds, because I often have certain moods or atmospheres in my mind, when I'm composing.

G.S.: Do you ever get the feeling that the notes are being "given to you", or that you are a conduit for a higher intelligence or power?

J.T.K.: Again, the great conductor Sergiu Celibidache once said that when he makes music, he is close to God. There are very rare moments when one can experience this kind of power while playing music. If you work very hard and try to reach deep, then you're more likely to experience these special moments of inspiration.

G.S.: Do you compose or arrange for various instruments or only for the guitar?

J.T.K.: All of my compositions or arrangements are connected with the guitar, since this is the instrument that most deeply makes me feel at home.

G.S.: Do different guitars in your collection inspire different types of melodies?

J.T.K.: My playing is totally different when I perform on my beautiful 1935 Hermann Hauser guitar than when I use, for example, my Spanish

Paco Marín guitar. The Hauser guitar is sweeter and I love to play Renaissance or Baroque music on it. The Paco Marín is better for Spanish repertoire or contemporary music.

G.S.: When playing steel-string instruments, do you ever use a thumbpick, flatpick, or fingerpicks? How about acrylic nails?

J.T.K.: I always use my natural fingernails, even when I play on steel-string guitars. I have relatively short nails and have put them through a lot with the plucking of the right hand. I've realized that if I use a very relaxed movement of the right hand I rarely have fingernail problems anymore.

G.S.: Have you given any thought to playing an instrument with more than 6 strings - say, lute or 7, 8, or 10-string guitars?

J.T.K.: I experimented with a lot of different instruments, but I always came back to the six-string guitar. With my new improvisatory solo program, I gained experience with a lot of different tunings and opened up the range of the guitar through scordatura [altered or open] tunings. It's a bit like having more strings on my guitar...

GEAR

G.S.: Inquiring minds will want to know your preferred guitars, strings, and recording mic. Do you have any product endorsements? What's special about the instruments you play? Is there anything on your wish list as far as equipment or instruments?

J.T.K.: I'm endorsed by G.H.S strings. They provide me with great strings. On my classical guitar for example I use the Nickel Smooth-wound Vanguard Classics which I love because of their warm, beautiful timbre and the incredible noise-free sound. I have a beautiful Herman Hauser I guitar, a Paco Marín guitar and a beautiful maple guitar by the Munich luthier Fritz Ober, who builds in the tradition of Hermann Hauser. My steel-string guitars (6 and 12 strings) are from Lakewood Guitars

(Germany), and I'm also endorsed by AER amplifiers.

CURRENT

G.S.: How did you first encounter the music of Cuban composer Túlio Peramo? What do you find attractive about his music? Is he himself a guitarist?

J.T.K.: Túlio doesn't play the guitar. Although he is always proud to show you, that he is able to play the introduction of one major guitar piece- Brouwer's "Elogio de la Danza", by plucking the open E-string three times. For me it is amazing how one can capture the possibilities and the soul of the guitar in such a great manner without being able to play that instrument.

I met Túlio Peramo for the first time in Cuba at The Havana Guitar Festival in 1994 when I was 23. I was touched and honored when he approached me after my performance and asked me whether I would like to come back to Cuba to premier the revised version of his first guitar concerto Tientos y Cantos during the regular season of the Cuban National Symphony Orchestra. From this point on a deep musical relationship began to grow, a relationship which has given the guitar repertoire some very fine new works.

When I returned to Cuba in 1995 to give this performance, Túlio offered to write a new work for me. I came up with the idea that he should write a piece for guitar and string quartet, because I loved the way he composed for string players. A second idea sprang up when I asked him to write as Piazzolla had in his *l'Histoire du Tango*, "a little history" of Cuban tango music, combining all the different elements and styles of Cuban music. *Tres Imágenes Cubanas* was born and with this piece our musical work began. Túlio is an acknowledged expert in Cuban musical history and tradition and, in a way - all of his pieces are imbued with a true Cuban spirit.

We approached our collaboration through a process which resonated deeply within the two of us. We were always in touch at the onset of the writing of the pieces. I made suggestions, providing basic programmatic or structural ideas

and Túlio was always open to my suggestions. Even after finishing the music, he was open to changes and suggestions. For me, it has always been important to be with the composer at the start of the composition process.

Túlio wrote a great variety of music for me, ranging from music for solo guitar to chamber music works including the guitar and concertos for guitar and orchestra. The majority of this music is recorded on my CD Portraits of Cuba (Arte Nova/BMG re-released on OEHMS CLASSICS), a world premier recording. Every piece is connected with great memories and beautiful experiences and in all of these pieces, Túlio demonstrates that he is really an inspired composer.

Another special work is "Aires de la Tierra", which one can also find on Portraits of Cuba. It should be mentioned here, because of its very personal history for Túlio. The song cycle "Aires de la tierra" originated in 1998. I asked Túlio to write a cycle for the Carnegie Hall concert where the cycle was performed with mezzo-soprano, Nan-Maró Babakhanian.

Túlio was originally trained as an opera singer, but chose to end that career when he was in his twenties in order to become a composer. Imagine, he was already working at the Opera House in Havana but felt that it was not his destiny to be a singer! So he took drastic steps to change his life and began to study composition. With Portraits of Cuba he came back to the world of singing for the first time, and the great success of this cycle shows that he should write much more for the voice!

G.S.: Are there upcoming performance dates or tours you would like to mention?

J.T.K.: As I mentioned before, my new CD Crystallization was recently released on iTunes. At the moment I'm working on a new recording featuring music by Bach among others.

In the coming months I will be doing some touring and giving performances at international festivals as well as holding seminars and offering master classes. For more information please visit: or send email to info@johannestoniokreusch.com.

I was recently appointed artistic director of the International Guitar Festival in Hersbruck, Germany near Nürnberg. The 7th Hersbruck International Guitar Festival will be held August 19-26, 2006. The beautiful surroundings of the medieval city of Hersbruck and the familiar atmosphere make this festival unique. The featured artists at this year's festival include musicians of many different styles ranging from classical, flamenco, and fingerstyle to Brazilian music and jazz. In addition to daily concerts, the festival offers individual instruction at all levels of playing ability as well as seminars, workshops, open master classes, student concerts, jam-sessions and music vendor exhibits. Students have the possibility to apply for scholarships.

The event will feature many great artists including Costas Cotsiolis, Aniello Desiderio, Gerardo Nuñez, Peter Finger and Beppe Gambetta to mention just a few. For more information about the festival, please write to: [International Guitar Festival Hersbruck](mailto:InternationalGuitarFestivalHersbruck@touristinfo1@hersbruck.de)
touristinfo1@hersbruck.de
info@gitarre-hersbruck.de
www.gitarre-hersbruck.de

G.S.: Apart from music, what are your interests?

J.T.K.: I think it is very important to always be open-minded and to take part in everything that happens around us. For example, if you take a look at today's political situation or the general situation of our world, it becomes clear that everybody has to engage himself in order to make our planet a better place. Especially as artists, because art is a medium through which we can deeply reach and communicate with people- we have the responsibility not just to care about our art, but also to stand up for fairness and improvement in the global situation.

One shining example of this concept is the Indian writer Arundhati Roy, who uses her great success and abilities as a writer to speak out about the danger of globalization and the growing social injustices of the world. As artists, whenever we are standing in the spotlight and receiving applause for our performance, we have to remember that we have other responsibilities than satisfying our egos!