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An Interview with Luiz Mantovani, by Ian Gallagher

Having won Pro Musicis's prestigious International Award in May 2002, 29-year-old Brazilian guitarist Luiz Mantovani gave his premiere performance at Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall in New York this past April. His program featured a daring transcription of J.S. Bach's *Sonata No. 3 in C major BWV 1005*, as well as Ginastera's *Sonata, Op. 47* and *Appassionata* by Ronaldo Miranda. Mantovani's emotional and technically solid playing was appealing to the audience because of his bold sound and melodic interpretations. I discussed his growing career with him the next day. Since the interview took place, Mr. Mantovani has officially received the position of professor of guitar at the State University of Santa Catarina in southern Brazil. He will be moving to the city of Florianópolis very soon.

Where in Brazil are you from?

I am from Jundiaí, São Paulo state, a medium-sized city with about 300 thousand people. It is very close to São Paulo city, one of the cultural poles of Brazil, so I am close to where things happen but I do not have to deal with the urban problems of living in huge overcrowded city.

Is there an active musical and cultural scene in your hometown?

Yes, for a city of that size, it is pretty active. We have some very good musicians coming out of there; perhaps the best example is Fábio Zanon, who also studied with my first guitar teacher, Antônio Guedes. There are several community music schools for children, teenagers or adults who wish to play an instrument or sing. But as ever in Brazil, there are material problems – for example, we used to have a nice youth orchestra and we lost it because there were no means or political interest from the City Hall to sponsor it anymore. On the other hand, there is a Music Society that works with donations and organizes a nice series of concerts every year. You see, things happen, even though not as regularly as one would like.

How old were you when you started with the guitar?

Fifteen.

That seems a bit late?

Kind of late, but what helped is that I already had some musical knowledge from when I was a child. When I was about seven years old I had my first music classes at a community music school where I learned the recorder, solfege, played in groups and so on. Later on I took violin lessons, but that did not last long – shortly after I started, I quit music until much later, when I discovered the guitar. However, I always liked to use the musical knowledge I had acquired when a child.

I remember that my sister used to take piano lessons and I would try to learn the pieces she was practicing just to keep up my skills. So when I took up the guitar at age fifteen, it was not exactly like starting from scratch.

So what kind of music did you listen to growing up, before you began studying seriously?

I used to listen to the music all the other kids would listen to, although I always had some classical music at home as part of my life. My father had a huge record collection of all kinds, from Brazilian country music to classical. He also likes to sing and accompany himself on the guitar... nothing too complicated, but somehow it helped to make music very present in my life. It was through my dad's Segovia recordings that I remember first discovering the classical guitar, and I was fascinated with it. After attending a concert by Antônio Guedes, in which he played *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* – he has a magnificent tremolo! – I knew that was what I wanted to do in my life.

So when did you decide that music was it for you?

After about two years of very intense study with Guedes, the time had come to decide what to do with my life after high school. I did not have much knowledge of what it would be like to pursue a professional career in music, but I followed my instincts anyway and decided to go to college for music.

So when you entered the University were you immediately successful after just 2 years of prior study?

Well... not really. Actually even prior to that, one of the things that made me feel confident in pursuing music was winning a guitar competition in São Paulo after little more than a year of study. I received a lot of encouragement from teachers and people I met at that competition, some of whom are very important guitar educators in Brazil. I ended up attending the State University of Campinas, one of the most important universities in the country, which is located very close to my hometown. Since they did not offer a guitar major at that time, I decided to study composition, but that really was not my field. Two years later I took lessons with Rio based guitarist Nicolas Barros in a festival in Curitiba (Paraná state). There was empathy between us right away and I decided to transfer to the University of Rio de Janeiro to study with him, now majoring in guitar. Living in Rio was a very important experience – it really broadened my cultural horizons. Nicolas was also great, for I had already a strong technical base from my early years, but he helped to take my playing to a new technical and musical level.

By the time you got to Rio what music were you most interested in learning... what was your repertoire?

When I met Nicolas, in my early twenties, I was working intensely with a flautist friend of mine, Michel de Paula, who now lives in Switzerland. We had this crazy idea of being the best flute and guitar duo in Brazil, so we had an obsessive rehearsal schedule, and, while we were probably too young to turn out to be the best duo of the country, we managed to develop some really strong chamber music playing. Due to these activities, I had left my solo repertoire a little aside. By the time I went to Rio, Nicolas told me that “it’s nice what you are doing in your duo, but be prepared: if you come to study with me I will have you play all the major solo repertoire, playing from lute tablatures to Ginastera’s *Sonata* and beyond!” What happened was just that; he wanted me to learn a lot of repertoire and develop my technique and musicality as quickly as possible. I think there is a time in the learning process that music students should build as much repertoire as they can, even though sometimes they will only get the benefits of it much later in the career. And my years in Rio were devoted to that.

What made you decide to move to Boston?

It is not uncommon for young musicians in Brazil go to study abroad after receiving their Bachelor’s degree. It is almost a necessary experience for classical musicians. Many people go to Europe, where are the roots of the music we play, after all. And many go to the U.S., where there is this great access to information and a great sense of professionalism. After researching schools I decided I might want to go to the U.S. because the academic systems are very similar to Brazil’s and, upon returning, I would have an equivalence between degrees I would earn there and what is offered here. I had heard many good things about Boston’s New England Conservatory and more specifically about David Leisner. When I started taking lessons with David I realized I had made the right choice, for he turned out to be the perfect teacher at that time of my life. His approach to the physical relations between body, instrument and music making helped me enormously and his sensitivity both as a teacher and as a person helped to open up my musicality in its entirety. At NEC I also was fortunate to meet Eliot Fisk, who is a major influence to any young guitarist of today.

Did you like the music scene in Boston?

Boston is very special because even though it is a relatively small city – compared to New York or Chicago, for example – there is a huge amount of musical activity going on. I had my environment at the conservatory, but I also had chances to interact in the larger musical community, with solo and chamber playing. So besides the wonderful learning experience, during my years in Boston I took the first decisive steps towards a professional career.

It was during this time you won the Boston Modern Orchestra Concerto Competition for playing the Villa-Lobos concerto. What do you enjoy playing most, chamber or solo?

I love to play solo, but in a way I think it is more fun to play chamber music. It is nice to share the stage with someone, especially when you play with people you like not only as musicians but also as friends. It is not just music interaction: it is personality interaction. Playing a concerto is very different; you are really put on the spot and given an individual and most important voice. This experience of playing the Villa-Lobos *Concerto* in a sold out Jordan Hall was very rewarding, and what made it even more special is that I played a piece by a Brazilian composer in my American debut with orchestra.

Besides Segovia who are you heroes, composers or performers?

I do not know if I have any musicians I can call heroes... I do have my preferences depending on what type of repertoire, but it would take too long for me to name all of them. I believe that it is important to develop our own voices as performers, but it is equally important to keep our minds and ears very open to everything that happens around us. I had a teacher tell me once "we learn music by osmosis". I think he is right – we are musicians primarily because we love to listen to music and if we live in a musical environment we are constantly sending and receiving information, sometimes without even noticing the process. Concerning my favorite composers, I have periods... sometimes I am up to researching early music repertoire, sometimes I look for contemporary music of different stylistic currents. I wish we had more meaningful Romantic repertoire for the guitar, because it would fit my personality very well, I think. But the composer I always love to play and listen to since I discovered him long ago is J.S. Bach.

Now that you are back living in Brazil what are your short and long term goals?

It was a difficult decision for me to go back to Brazil. After these four years in Boston, I managed to create my own professional environment. I had some students, a guitar quartet I was very excited about, and my solo career was starting to take off, especially after winning the Pro Musicis Award. On the other hand, I had ended my studies and I could not stay in the country unless I changed my visa – something that is not very easy to do these days. Then there was another side of myself reminding me about my roots, to which I am very attached. I knew if I stayed longer it would become more and more difficult to leave the U.S. because things were building so fast. After much thought, I finally decided that it was emotionally important for me to go back to my country. As soon as I got back I tried to revive contacts and get performances, but I actually did not have a clear idea of how I would build in Brazil the same kind of life and musical environment I had in Boston. Then I heard about an opening for full-time teaching at the State University of Santa Catarina, in the beautiful city of Florianópolis. I applied for it, got the job, and I will start teaching there in the Spring semester (August, in the Southern hemisphere). I love teaching, and this opportunity came to me in the right moment.

In the solo performance field, I am slowly making new contacts and reviving old ones, and performance opportunities are appearing throughout the country. I am putting an old idea into practice with musician friends and forming an eclectic multi-instrument ensemble that we hope will establish a strong presence in Brazil in the years to come.

I have also many ideas for outreach projects, and working in a university will help to make them feasible. A few months ago I played a concert in a small town not too far from São Paulo and the turn out was huge. The price of admission was a food donation for hungry children and we got more food than many benefit rock-and-roll shows could! All these projects make me very excited, but for them to happen it is necessary to settle down here and stop with this nomadic life I had lived in the last ten years. Perhaps it is time for that, anyway.

Tell us about the Pro Musicis organization.

The beauty of Pro Musicis is that at the same time they offer you a debut in a hall like Carnegie Hall they also set you up to play many community concerts. Here in New York I had the experience of playing in a drug rehabilitation center, and in the lock-up unit of a psychiatric hospital. I had never played in places like those and it was just wonderful to see how my music could touch those people, many of them whom would never be able to go to a hall and listen to a live concert. These concerts also made it much easier for me to play the big concert (Carnegie Hall). I am also going to play community concerts in Boston before the Pickman Hall concert, and I am looking forward to them. I am really happy and honored to be the third guitarist – after Emanuele Segre and Iván Rijos – to be part of the Pro Musicis community.

Its sounds like you really want to move the audience with your playing.

The best feeling for the performer is when you are onstage immersed in the music and completely connected with the audience, rather than playing for yourself and dealing with your fears and expectations. There is something that only a live performance can offer and this is related to that exchange of energy between the performer and his audience. The day before my concert in Carnegie Hall, I learned that an organization of relatives of victims from 9/11 had requested tickets from Pro Musicis for my concert. Thinking that these people, who were still missing so hard their loved ones, were coming to my concert, possibly to seek some sort of emotional relief, helped to reinforce the focus of my performance: it was not about me and my debut in Carnegie Hall, it was about offering a sincere gift to everybody who came to see my performance. Music is a language. I try to tell something to my audience, and if they can understand what I have to say, that is already a good reason for having chosen music as a path in life.

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