

## **STEIN-ERIK OLSEN**

Interviewed by GRAHAM WADE

*The Norwegian guitarist, Stein-Erik Olsen, Professor of Guitar at the Grieg Academy, Bergen, made his British debut at the Cannington Summer School in 1985, and ever since has established a flourishing international performing and recording career. Stein-Erik Olsen has given concerts not only throughout Europe but also well off the beaten track in unusual venues such as North Korea and India. His varied recordings, from 1984 to 2010, cover the range of the repertoire, though it is his advocacy of contemporary guitar music which has won him wide critical acclaim. One of his recent CDs, recorded with Olivier Chassain, presents the duo compositions of Ida Presti, played on the Presti-Lagoya Bouchet guitars.*

*Did you begin to play the guitar as a child?*

Yes, I was ten years old when I started, fingering chords, playing by ear, and trying songs by famous pop groups of the time.

*What about actual lessons?*

At first, I had a few private lessons with a local teacher, doing some theory and a bit of guitar and piano. The teacher was a good musician who played in dance bands. From him I learned the chords necessary for pop and jazz and how to transpose. It was all very practical. I didn't have any ambitions to play classical music in those days.

*How did your conversion to classical guitar come about?*

Well, in the mid-1960s I heard Julian Bream play a lute and guitar concert at the Bergen International Festival. I was amazed and overwhelmed by his playing, his musical approach, the technique, and his beautiful tone quality. Ever since he has been my guitar hero and always will be!

*What was the next step?*

Then I contacted the Bergen Conservatoire and found out that they had someone who taught classical guitar. He was a former violinist who had fallen in love with the guitar and went on playing it for the rest of his life. He was utterly devoted to the instrument. Even though he was self-taught, he was an extremely inspiring tutor.

*But presumably this tuition was not quite enough for a professional career?*

The situation improved when Torbjörn Wiberg, a very gifted guitarist from Sweden, came to Bergen in 1972 to teach at the Conservatoire. I was studying there by this time on the Music Course and was very fortunate to have lessons with Torbjörn over the next two years. The guitar was a fairly new instrument in Bergen at the time. Later Sven Lundestad came for a while and I also studied with him.

Torbjörn Wiberg was a pupil of Gunnar Lif, the first Scandinavian guitarist educated in Spain. Lif went for lessons with Eduardo Sáinz de la Maza in Barcelona. Torbjörn became very inspired and influenced by the Spanish school, which emphasises the importance of good tone qualities and the *cantabile* nature of the guitar, as well as all the other aspects of guitar technique.

I was at the Conservatoire from 1973 until 1977. It was a good place to be with lots of enthusiastic guitarists, as the Bergen students still are!

*But of course you also have a flourishing Guitar Society in Bergen.*

Yes, the Guitar Society was founded in 1974. We had meetings once a month and before long the membership was well over a hundred. Gradually a number of other classical musicians were drawn in as well. Sometimes we listened to a string quartet or choir though the guitar was always a central part of each programme. Many of the best players in Bergen took advantage of the Guitar Society to try out new pieces, perform in front of an audience, and generally develop their abilities.

*Did you do much ensemble playing at the time?*

Yes! When I was studying in Bergen I was part of a student ensemble (piano, voice, recorder and guitar) selected to represent Norway in the Expo Nor Festival in Sweden. We played a lot of contemporary stuff and Ketil Hvoslef and Øistein Sommerfelt, two of the most distinguished composers in Norway, wrote pieces especially for us. We played several concerts in Norway and Sweden and we even did a recording in Stockholm (my very first one) for the Swedish *Caprice* label. Being part of this group encouraged me to work at chamber music and this has been one of my main interests ever since.

*I'm sorry but I don't know much about these composers.*

Well, Øistein Sommerfelt (1919-1994) was one of our leading twentieth-century Norwegian composers. He studied with Boulanger in Paris, and

composed some eighty works. In 1978 he wrote *From William Blake's Poetry* for soprano, guitar and flute.

Ketil Hvoslef was born in 1939, and studied viola and organ at the Bergen Conservatory. He has written orchestral works, string quartets, instrumental pieces, film scores, and also an opera, *Barabbas*, as well as quite a bit of organ music. Gro Sandvik and I premiered his beautiful double concerto for flute and guitar in 1978. In 2008 I performed Hvoslef's *Guitar Quintet* with a string quartet from the Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra. This is a real masterpiece, difficult as a chamber work but a strong composition, lasting for about half an hour.

*After your Bergen studies, I believe you went to France?*

Yes. In 1972 someone told me about an annual guitar festival in Nice where it was possible to study with Alexandre Lagoya. So each summer for the next five years I went down there and took lessons with him. On the strength of this I went on to the Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique de Paris (CNSMP), where Lagoya taught, and studied with him there for two years.

*What repertoire did you learn with Lagoya?*

Naturally we covered many of the standard pieces such as J.S. Bach, Torroba and Albéniz. In 1976 I was selected as one of the young soloists to play the Villa-Lobos *Guitar Concerto* with the Bergen Philharmonic. Orchestral concerts featuring the guitar were rare at the time so I was lucky to have this opportunity.

*How did your professional career begin?*

My debut concert was at the Aula, Oslo in 1981. I decided to play four substantial pieces, J.S. Bach's *Lute Suite in A minor*, BWV 997, Giuliani's *Rossiniane*, Op. 119, Walton's *Bagatelles* and Britten's *Nocturnal*. The debut was well reviewed and after that I was invited to play at various festivals in Norway and abroad. Later in 1986 I played my Wigmore Hall debut, which was well received, and opened up even more possibilities. I was invited to the Cannington Festival several times and this generated more recitals.

*When did you begin to teach at the Bergen Conservatoire?*

I started working there in 1989. But in 1996 it became part of the University of Bergen and was called the Grieg Academy. In 2003 I was appointed to the full-time post of Professor of Guitar.

*What is the duration of degree courses at the Grieg Academy?*

There is a standard system for music education of four years for a Bachelor's degree, which can be followed by the Master's degree lasting a further two years. The other Norwegian conservatories, such as Oslo, follow the same pattern.

*I was fortunate enough to hear your students and they certainly are very accomplished.*

Yes, our students in Bergen are very good indeed, but we have splendid co-operation with other teachers. For example, Tino Andersen, the artistic director of the Bergen International Guitar Festival, provides the Academy with many excellent students.

We founded an organisation called Guitar Express and for the last ten years concerts and master classes have been set up with some of the best players and teachers in Europe. We usually arrange six events (concerts and masterclasses) every year and so about fifty of the foremost players in Europe have already visited us in Bergen. This is extremely important for our students as they get an opportunity to meet different players and also get an awareness of varied traditions of teaching.

I think Bergen, from the mid 1970s when the Guitar Society started, has become one of the most active cities for classical guitar, and seems to be getting better and better. The performance level of the students is developing well and we hear many high quality guitar recitals. There is excellent support from the general public for the guitar.

*I gather you have had some very unusual concert experiences!*

Yes, I was able to travel to a number of unfamiliar places such as North Korea in 1988, where I played in an April Festival celebrating Kim Il Sung's 75<sup>th</sup> birthday. I went there with the panflute player Roar Engelberg and we performed several shared concerts with musicians from different parts of the world. The audiences were six or seven thousand at each concert in really massive halls. It was quite an experience.

*I imagine a lot of strange things happened!*

Well, there were a lot of funny things, as there always are when you go on tour. One day, for example, we wanted to go to a small restaurant, just opposite the big international hotel where we were staying. To do this we had to ask permission from our interpreter as we were not allowed to leave the hotel on our own. We always went out and about with the interpreter or in official groups. So we went to the restaurant and it was very pleasant and attractive. We checked the menu and discovered the food was very

cheap, so cheap that we thought that they mainly served tiny dishes not full dinner. Nobody spoke anything except Korean so there was a communication problem.

We decided to order about six or so of the small dishes, for each person. We wanted something to drink, so we ordered, and demonstrated with our hands and arms to the waiter to explain how thirsty we were. Unfortunately each dish on the menu turned out to be full dinner. Before long we had an entire table packed with every kind of food. Then the man came out from the back room with two barrels of beer. We left the restaurant very full, carrying what was left of the two barrels and laughing all the way to the hotel, probably a little bit too happy!

*Then, of course, you did concerts in India?*

Yes, these were with the famous Indian violinist and composer, Dr Lakshminarayana Subramaniam in January 2004. He's a marvellous musician, a real superstar in India, playing many styles with tremendous technical ability. He has worked with Yehudi Menuhin, Herbie Hancock and George Harrison, among others, and plays not only Indian folk and classical music but also a fusion of Indian music and funk jazz. Hundreds of people attend his concerts. Each year he invites different musicians to travel on a tour around India, and Roar Engelberg and myself were lucky enough to be with him. We played five concerts in different parts of India, a really amazing experience and met so many fine musicians and heard the terrific improvising skills of Indian performers. We stayed for two weeks and played in the south in Bangaluru-Trivandrum, then on to Chennai-Mansor, and Hyderabad.

The first concert we did was just outside Bangalore and the host was one of India's holy men. There were several thousand people in the audience and the concert was televised.

Just before we went on stage somebody came up to us and said that we were not allowed to play wearing our shoes! I shall always remember the feeling of sitting there playing classical music in formal dress suit and no shoes.

In Hyderabad there were twenty-three thousand people for the concert, which took place on the beach. The performance was televised on Asia Net TV, catering for a billion viewers. I played a number of pieces, including Albéniz's *Asturias-Leyenda*. The audience applauded during the faster parts, and started talking to each other during the slow middle section.

*As well as your solo work, you also play a variety of ensemble music, some*

*of it slightly different from the usual material.*

Well, I have done more than a thousand concerts over the last twenty-five years with Roar Engelberg, the first panpipe player in western Europe to obtain a Performance Diploma in Amsterdam. He is an amazing musician who plays traditional Rumanian folk music and gypsy music, as well as classical, besides being a composer in contemporary styles. We have a repertoire stretching from Bach to the present day. But much of the material we play is inspired by South American or Rumanian folk music. It has been particularly inspiring to work with someone whose perspectives are quite different from the usual classically trained musician.

*And you have just completed a new recording of this?*

Yes, we have made a new CD with music from Latin American countries. It is quite difficult to find idiomatic music for the panflute but Roar is able to play just about anything. We are always looking for pieces that sound appropriate for the instrument even though the technical difficulties are often extraordinary. We found that the music of Maximo Diego Pujol is ideal, so we include three pieces originally for flute and guitar. The other works are by Piazzolla and we also play some Sanz arrangements.

*One of your recent recordings was for flute and guitar.*

For many years I've been working with the flautist, Gro Sandvik, who used to be the principal flute player in the Oslo Philharmonic as well as the Bergen Symphony Orchestra. Gro is professor of flute at the Grieg Academy and frequently gives masterclasses in the USA. She's a very experienced chamber musician and it's great fun to work with her.

Our most recent recording consists of American and Russian music. We perform two pieces dedicated to us, *L'espace entre nous*, a very demanding work by the American composer, Noel Zahler, and Nikita Koshkin's *Oratorium*, a suite lasting for about half an hour. The other compositions on the album are by Edison Denisow, the Russian avant-garde composer, and Lowell Lieberman of the USA, both marvellous composers.

*Finally, could you tell us something about your latest project, the recording by yourself and Olivier Chassain of the Ida Presti duo compositions?*

Olivier Chassain and myself entered the Conservatoire in Paris in 1977 and immediately became good friends. In 2003 I invited him to play and teach in Bergen and the year after he invited me to play and teach in France. We did some concerts in the south of France and we noticed very quickly that we had very similar attitudes towards music. So we decided to continue the

collaboration.

In the concerts we included a few of Ida Presti's pieces then available. But Olivier told me that the Presti family possessed a collection of her works and he had been asked to edit them. Later on we received an entire batch of handwritten manuscripts.

Presti did not write out complete scores but just the separate parts. Olivier re-wrote some of the pieces, correcting the manuscripts where necessary, putting in missing sharps and flat signs, and so on. The problem was that Ida didn't have any formal musical education though she did have remarkable aural facility. Sometimes, for example, when she wanted to write an E major chord, she would put down E-Ab-B when it should of course be E-G#-B. All these charming notational mistakes have been corrected.

I went to Paris many times for two years rehearsing with Olivier, and getting the pieces into full playing order. The recording was completed over three days in April 2009 and, with the assistance of the Musée de la Musique in Paris, we were offered the opportunity to play on the famous Bouchet guitars previously belonging to Presti and Lagoya. Before I first played them, I had imagined these guitars made in 1958 and 1959 might be a bit tired, but they were very fresh. Presti died in 1967 so these instruments were in use for less than ten years.

We were lucky to have Arne Akselberg from the Abbey Road Studio as producer and sound engineer and he did a fantastic job. For many years Arne worked with Julian Bream's recording engineer, James Burnett. It is very important to have a sound engineer with a good ear and understanding for instrumental qualities, who also knows how musicians function.

We hope to present these Presti compositions in our recitals for some time to come. We have played several concerts with the programme consisting entirely of Presti's pieces, but we usually include other highlights from the Presti-Lagoya repertoire such as music by Petit, Rodrigo, Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Marella, etc.

#### **DISCOGRAPHY**

Hommage!	Simax
PSC1008 (1984)	
Double Delight (Gro Sandvik, flute, Stein-Erik Olsen, guitar)	Bergen
Digital Studio DB7004 (1986)	
Panorama (Roar Engelberg, panflute, Stein-Erik Olsen, guitar)	Kirkelig
Kulturverksted (1986)	
Mosaic (Roar Engelberg, panflute, Stein-Erik Olsen, guitar)	Kirkelig
Kulturverksted (1987)	
Blue Sonata (1987)	Simax PSC1031

Masterpieces of the Beatles (Roar Engelberg, panflute, Stein-Erik Olsen, guitar) Kulturverksted (1987)	Kirkelig
Songs and Dances (1991)	Simax PSC1084
Balletto (Roar Engelberg, panflute, Stein-Erik Olsen, guitar) (1994)	Alba Records
Diptych (Gro Sandvik, flute, Stein-Erik Olsen, guitar) PSC1083 (1994)	Simax
Sonata Mongoliana (2000)	Simax PSC1172
Fløyelstoner (Roar Engelberg, panflute, Stein-Erik Olsen guitar) (2001)	Tylden
3-way project (2005)	Simax PSC1253
Les Compositions de Ida Presti (Olivier Chassain, Stein-Erik Olsen) (2009)	Simax PSC1289
L'espace entre nous (Gro Sandvik, flute, Stein-Erik Olsen, guitar)	to be released 2010