

THREE DAYS AT THE ABBEY ROAD STUDIOS

Stein-Erik Olsen interviewed by Graham Wade

GW: First of all, how did you come to choose these three Concertos?

S-EO: I had been planning for some time with two different ideas about the recording. I wasn't sure whether to record concertos by non-guitarist composers or concertos by guitarist/composers who know the technical and musical possibilities of the instrument and are able to write idiomatically. In the end I chose to record three works by leading composers for the guitar, composers I am very fond of who know the guitar in a perfect way.

GW: So we have two reasonably well-known Concertos by guitarist/composers Heitor Villa-Lobos and Leo Brouwer?

S-EO: Well, the Villa-Lobos *Guitar Concerto* was an obvious choice because it is absolutely one of my favourites. I contacted the Villa-Lobos Museum in Rio de Janeiro and they kindly sent me a copy of the original manuscript, which is very useful. I had already performed the Concerto in my debut concert with an orchestra in 1976. I have of course developed my ideas about its interpretation, and re-studied the entire work for this recording.

I have always admired Brouwer for his exciting and inventive compositions and knowledge of the guitar. The *Concierto Elegiaco* attracted me because of its virtuosity and all the beautiful moments. The second movement is a musical pearl, one of the most exquisite in the field of guitar concertos.

GW: I was very impressed that you persuaded Nikita Koshkin to write a new Guitar Concerto for you. How did this come about?

S-EO: Nikita Koshkin has been a good friend of mine since the nineties. He contacted me after hearing my recording of the flute and guitar sonata and since then has written several works for me. In 2013 he dedicated to me a large song cycle called *Snowsong*, based on poems by Jon Fosse. I asked him in 2004 if he would write a concerto for me and he immediately gave me a positive response.

I studied the concerto very intensely for two years before the recording. In my opinion it is a very special concerto using all kinds of genuine Russian musical concepts never heard before in this kind of piece. Sometimes composers tend to sound influenced by the Spanish when they compose for guitar and orchestra but not Koshkin. Technically it is a 'monster-piece', challenging in all aspects.

Nikita Koshkin came to Bergen twice in order to work with me on his *Bergen Concerto*, which actually was great fun as he is such a wonderful person, both serious and humorous. We worked on various technical issues as well as interpretation. Nikita knows the guitar so well that there was nothing essential to change in the score. Obviously there are always many aspects of interpretation to discuss with such a new composition.

GW: I gather that the recording venue was rather exciting!

S-EO: Yes indeed, it was none other than Abbey Road Studio, a wonderful location loaded with music history. The sound and atmosphere in the studio were marvellous.

Moreover, we had one of the finest sound engineers and producers in Arne Akselberg, who has already produced eight previous recordings for me, and Simon Kiln, the recipient of several Grammy awards. Working with the Norwegian conductor, Terje Mikkelsen, is a pleasure and the Academy of St Martin in the Fields are an outstanding orchestra of the highest professional quality. The atmosphere was very congenial, concentrated, intense and professional of course, but also friendly and relaxed.

GW: How about the balance between guitar and orchestra?

S-EO: The question of balance is obviously always challenging, but I sat facing the orchestra to play, so the players could hear the guitar. The conductor wore headphones to hear me, as did the percussion section, so (with the expertise of Arne Akselberg dealing with all problems brilliantly), we found good solutions for balance and contact options.

GW: How long did the entire session take?

S-EO: We were there for three days, rehearsing and generally recording one concerto a day.

GW: What are your recording plans for the future?

S-EO: Yes, I will do a recording with the Norwegian Chamber Orchestra and a string quartet this year, with music by the eminent Norwegian composer Ketil Hvoslef. I am also planning a recording of concertos with the Academy of St Martin in the Fields within a couple of years. I have a lot of ideas and hope to record some newly written concertos.