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# AALBORG INTERNATIONAL GUITAR FESTIVAL

16-21 November 2010

By PAUL FOWLES



Zoltan Katona, Finn Svit, Pavel Steidl, Dusan Oravec and Bernard Hebb.

PHOTOS: PAUL FOWLES

**A**fter attending the same annual gathering on six consecutive occasions, it's only natural to develop some affection for the city in which it takes place. This has certainly been the case with Aalborg, which has a number of parallels with my hometown of Bolton. Neither achieves a cigar-winning score on the 'wow' factor, even though Aalborg was once a world player in the tobacco industry, and yet both provide a secure and agreeable environment in which a human being may quietly exist. The difference is that Aalborg has its *International Guitar Festival (AIGF)*, which is why I spend a sizeable chunk of every November away from Bolton.

Although AIGF director Finn Svit is a classical guitarist by trade, the event he created some 15 years ago endeavours to represent a broader view of the instrument's possibilities. This led to an exotic mix of music and location at the 2010 opening concert, with senior bluesmen Ole Frimer and Olav Poulsen jamming before a capacity crowd at the former monastery known as the *Aalborg Kloster*. The concept worked remarkably well, and if any of the ghosts said to roam the

echoing corridors disapproved, they kept it to themselves.

The following evening, a highly talented brace of Carlo Marchione students operating under the name *Duo Scarlatti* presented the *Aalborg Kloster* with a quality helping of the type of music to which its spectral inhabitants have surely become more accustomed. Although Scarlatti made one fleeting contribution, the greater part of the programme was devoted to Frederico Mompou, whose lyrical and evocative *Cancion y Danza* pairings entered the frame on no fewer than six occasions. Equally impressive was a noble account of J.S. Bach's *Italian Concerto BWV 971*, which replaced the scheduled movements from *English Suite No.2*. The *Italian Concerto* will always enjoy a strong personal resonance because it appeared, performed on harpsichord by Edith Weiss-Mann, on what was effectively the flipside of the first Segovia LP my youthful self ever owned. More than four decades down the line, that triumphant opening figure still hits the spot.

The only disappointment was the modest audience figures, especially in the wake of the previous night's full house. I'm

sure I speak for the majority of CG readers in stating that if I attend a successful evening and see something even mildly appealing listed under *What's On Next*, there's a pretty strong chance I'll show up for it, if only because I'd never know what I'd missed by staying away. Curiosity may have killed the cat, but it's unlikely to cause many fatalities among all those people who turned out for Frimer and Poulsen.

The symbiotic relationship between the AIGF and the *Aalborg Symfoniorkester* is well-documented in past CGs. This year, it scored a resounding double top with the arrival on stage of the Katona Twins for Rodrigo's *Concierto Madrigal*. The Katonas have enviable form where this work is concerned, their 2005 performance with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra (CG Dec 05) being one of just two previous live outings I've personally witnessed. And yes, the Katonas did stand up and wield their groovy nylon-strung electro-acoustics on what was fortunately a fairly spacious podium. Although I can't see it becoming the crest of a new wave, stage presentation Katona-style at least enables more members of the audience to see what's going on. I also found myself warming to their audacious rock-driven take on Scarlatti, which I first became aware of in Hersbruck and which was served up as a fully-justified encore in Aalborg.

There's nothing more embarrassing than coming face to face with someone you know you've met before but simply can't remember where or when. The fact that he plays left-handed should have been enough to jog the memory, but I'm ashamed to admit that Cuban guitarist Alfredo Panebianco eventually had to remind me that our one previous encounter was at the *Wirral International Guitar Festival* in November 2000 (CG May 01). On that occasion, the dashing and charismatic Panebianco was fulfilling the role of 'first among unequals' in the company of a somewhat indifferent guitarist named Vania del Monaco. But the pianist and the percussionist who accompanied him to Aalborg were more than worthy of sharing the same platform, the twilight concert at the *Klaverstemmeren* piano showroom emerging as a surprise highlight of this year's AIGF. Panebianco and his team fielded a set with distinctly



Art Duo.

retro overtones, his original compositions conjuring up images of the *Buena Vista Social Club*. Nothing wrong with that, of course, and nor was there anything wrong with the inspired revivals of such time-honoured classics as *Besame Mucho* and *El Cumbanchero*. But finest of all was the exhilarating account of Chick Corea's *Spain*, Panebianco's innings as a whole providing a Hispano-Caribbean diversion from the near-freezing temperatures outside.

An occasional hazard, if that's the right word, which every reviewer faces from time to time is that of being required to report on the same performer twice in close succession.

Given that neither the programme nor the interpretations are likely to have changed radically, the hapless scribe is in danger of merely reiterating what he's already stated. But no such problems arise when the performer happens to be Pavel Steidl who, despite having appeared just two weeks earlier at the *Glasgow Big Guitar Weekend* (reported elsewhere in CG), arrived in Aalborg with one major work he didn't perform in Glasgow and a significant twist on one that he did. Having personally experienced Steidl's unique take on *Domeniconi's Hommage à Jimi Hendrix* three times over during the summer of 2008, his decision to add it to the Aalborg programme, replacing the *Castelnuovo-Tedesco* sonata presented in Glasgow, offered a timely opportunity to revisit a work which places considerable demands on performer and audience alike. It's still a somewhat chewy agenda, but Steidl's typically kaleidoscopic account is persuasive, the vibrant acoustic of the *Ansgarskirken*, a new addition to the AIGF roster of venues, offering the perfect environment for the ethereal vocal effects Steidl has added, reportedly with the full approval of the composer.

But the finest moments of all came in Steidl's own *A ty taky jdi do Ithaky*, a personal homage to the late Jana Obrovská that customarily appears as the valedictory item on Steidl programmes, Glasgow included. But what made the Aalborg performance special was that it culminated in Steidl singing the gentle and introspective ballad he usually replaces with an instrumental fade-out. Both versions work well, but the understated warmth of Steidl's almost whispered vocal line must surely have the casting vote. A standing ovation duly took

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Duo Scarlatti.

place, Steidl returning to the platform to present, pleasingly enough, two movements from the unscheduled Castelnuovo-Tedesco.

Given that the AIGF takes place during the school term, the didactic component, for which the majority of participants are aged 16 and under, can only happen over the final Saturday and Sunday. But much ground is covered in that time, the classrooms at *Skipper Clement* school playing host to masterclasses and individual lessons with Steidl, the Katonas, Finn Svit and others. Aalborg regulars Bernard Hebb and Soren Bodker Madsen were on site throughout, Madsen's lively and informal ensemble classes always proving a hit with the youngest players.

But my first port of call on Saturday morning was Aalborg's ultra-modern central library, where Thea Vesti Pedersen, recipient of the AIGF's annual *Danish Talent* award, was to give a lunchtime recital. Now it goes without saying that no reviewer should be swayed in either direction by programme content alone, but the fact that Pedersen chose two of my all-time favourite middleweight guitar sonatas, namely those of Ginastera and Turina, certainly did her case no harm. And apart from a momentary loss of direction in the *Scherzo* from the Ginastera, it was convincing throughout, Pedersen's decision to hold most of the raw energy of the Turina in reserve for the final *Allegro Vivo* proving particularly effective.

But in terms of sheer substance, even Pedersen was trumped by her overseas counterpart, Bernard Hebb student and *International Talent* beneficiary Dusan Oravec. With a stylish account of the Walton *Bagatelles* providing



Katona Twins.

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the relatively light relief, Oravec proved himself fully capable of meeting the challenges of the Bach *Chaconne*, with which he opened, and the Brouwer *Sonata*, with which he closed. With newcomers serving up programmes of this calibre on a fully professional level, the guitar surely still has a future.

Unfortunately, this level of optimism could not be applied to the *Corona Guitar Quartet*, with whom Oravec shared the bill at the Ansgarskirken.

Minimalism has at times attracted a hostile press, the fine line between repetition and tedium being one that's all too easily crossed. With the best will in the world, *East LA Phase* by Wayne Siegel (b.1953) spent almost all its mercifully brief duration on the wrong side of the divide. The fact that a four guitar setting of the *Italian Concerto* was next on the agenda at least gave us something to look forward to, but those hopes were soon dashed. Having started on the wrong foot, the opening *Allegro* came to an ignominious halt after about 45 seconds, the ensuing restart proving successful only insofar as it made it to the end. Was this really the same *Italian Concerto* that *Duo Scarlatti* presented with such verve and precision just three days earlier?

Despite all the time I've spent in and around Aalborg, I've never been able to puzzle out what the primary function of the labyrinthine building referred to as the *Huset* actually is. It was here that this year's sole jazz offering was served up, the *Art Duo* from Germany presenting a refined and classy set to accompany the Sunday brunch buffet. Comprising singer/guitarist Norbert Gottschalk and lead guitarist Frank Haunschild, the *Art Duo* soon established themselves as master purveyors of those slick and slinky soundscapes you find gracing the airwaves of *Smooth FM*. This they did with consummate style, even managing to get away with adding some dodgy English lyrics to Pat Metheny's *James*.

Following the final student concert, at which Madsen's superbly-drilled kids had, as always, been a key element, all that remained was to remove the AIGF paraphernalia so that *Skipper Clement* could resume its function as a high school the following morning. This included vacating the kitchen where David Svit, son of Finn, had carried out his customary role as AIGF five-star chef.

My thanks to Finn, Bernie, Herman and everyone at the AIGF for an eclectic and inspiring conclusion to my calendar of guitar events in 2010.



Alfredo Panebianco.