



(LEMS 8074)

Jerry Willard's Night at the Opera

Jerry Willard, Guitar

Guitar made in 1820 by François Lacote

Music by Rossini, Bellini, Verdi

Guitar arrangements by Mauro Giuliani and Johann Mertz

1. *Allegro/Andante (from Semiramide) Giuliani/Rossini*
2. *Overture from Cenerentola Giuliani/Rossini*
3. *Fantasy on Themes from La Traviata Opus 8 Opern-Revue No. 29 Johann Mertz/Verdi*
4. *Fantasy on Themes from Rigoletto Opus 8 Opern-Revue No. 21 Johann Mertz/Verdi*
5. *Fantasy on Themes from Il Trovatore Opus 8 Opern-Revue No. 27 Johann Mertz/Verdi*
6. *Fantasy on Themes from La Sonnambula Opus 8 Opern-Revue No. 4 Johann Mertz/Bellini*

The arranging of tunes and orchestral overtures from popular operas onto the guitar was one of the most lucrative and important aspects of musical life for professional guitarists throughout the 19th century. Without the benefit of recording technology the public's demand for recreating well known operatic arias was met by various degrees of success by nearly all major concert artists on the instrument. The formal settings of these arrangements varied from strict transcription to variation form, but the predominant vehicle for composition was the free fantasy, where the concert-goer would enjoy both the beauty of the tune itself as well as a display of the performer's cantabile playing and virtuosity. The mass popularity of opera along with the role of the guitar within the private music making setting in middle class homes throughout Europe created a publishing bonanza for opera inspired guitar compositions. With the emergence of the piano as a predominant household instrument, by the 1850's the decline of the guitar was guaranteed as were the number of published works in the genre. What is left to us today is a large and rich body of work that brings us closer to a true appreciation of the extraordinary musicianship of early 19th century guitar virtuosi.

The most energetic contributors to the legacy of operatic guitar arrangements were Mauro Giuliani and Johann Kaspar Mertz. Giuliani's career had three distinct phases; his youthful touring throughout the Italian peninsula, unparalleled success in Vienna, and a return to his native country, where -in his late 40's-he composed his classic opera based scores. Unlike Mertz – who drew on a number of opera composers for inspiration – Giuliani focused almost exclusively on Rossini as the basis of his opera genre output. The two works on this recording, a duet from the second act of Rossini's *Semiramide* and the overture from *La Cenerentola* are (unlike Giuliani's more free form fantasy pieces) straightforward arrangements. The two-part duo aria, *Se La Vita* unfolds at a pivotal moment of the *Semiramide* story when the title heroine confronts Assur, the opera's villain about the murder of her husband. Apart from key changes, from B-flat to D in the Allegro and from G to A in the Andantino, the structural integrity of the aria, minus repeats has been preserved by Giuliani, who blends solo vocal lines and orchestral accompaniment with characteristically remarkable skill. The score is typically ripe with Rossini's flowing *bel canto* passages, a lyrical style seen routinely in Giuliani's late music.

Giuliani's preferred ensemble setting for overture transcriptions was the guitar duo, yet the overture from *La Cenerentola* works remarkably well in a solo version. Printed by the publishing house of Ricordi in Milan the arrangement, like the duet from *Semiramide* does not include an opus number, perhaps due to the fact that Giuliani didn't consider it an original enough composition to list it as such. Nonetheless the work is filled with the dexterous arpeggio patterns that double as orchestral fortes. Whether Giuliani worked from memory or if he had scores, perhaps piano reductions to help in the transcription process remains an interesting but likely unanswerable side question.

The astonishing number of operatic fantasies published under the title *Op. 8* by Johann Kaspar Mertz, are the single largest collection of guitar pieces within one opus number. With thirty-three in all, the collection ranges from fantasies on operas from Mozart to Bellini to Verdi. Though formally standardized, with an introduction followed

by several aria settings and ending with a finale Mertz's operatic fantasias are evidence to an exceptionally original musical voice. Born in Bratislava, Mertz was a multi-instrumentalist whose career was cut short by illness and death brought about by badly prescribed medication and a weakened constitution. From his music as well as through the eyes of his contemporaries it is clear that Mertz's developed a level of sostenuto melody playing unparalleled during his life-time for its clarity and effectiveness.

It is possible that Mertz's published operatic arrangements, including those in Op. 8 were merely starting points for the composer's creative abilities during concerts. This would not be unusual during an era of outstanding instrumental improvisers and indeed some of Mertz's autograph scores found in the Boije Collection confirm that he reserved only the most virtuosic solos for his personal concert use.

Given Mertz's year of death (1856), his arrangements of material from the three great middle Verdi operas *Rigoletto* (1851), *Il trovatore* (1853) and *La Traviata* (1853) fall in the final years of his creative output. In these works and in others Mertz's scores are remarkable for their attention to the details of interpretation with frequent dynamic and articulation and color indications. The arrangement of Bellini's *La Sonnambula*, or the sleepwalker from 1831 brings together some of the most attractive arias from this still performed tragicomedy. As in the Verdi the formal design follows the standard mold but Mertz's freshness in musical connective ideas gives the medley an artistic purpose beyond the predictability of other contemporaneous examples from the genre.

The instruments used by the great virtuosi of the era differed significantly from guitars used in our own time. While the mid 19th century was a time of experimentation in guitar construction and tone theory the first part of the century had a remarkable number of luthiers that defined the early development of the six-string guitar with a small, balanced instrument with a deeply resonant yet private sound that offered the experienced performer both projection and warm cantabile playing. On this recording Jerry Willard performs on a guitar from the 1820's by Rene François Lacote, one of the finest guitar builders of this period. Nearly all of the published music by Giuliani and Mertz was intended for such an instrument.

Notes by Paul Cesarczyk

Lacote Guitar History

One morning in 1986 I was at my desk pondering the idea of asking a luthier in Canada to make a theorbo or archlute for me when the phone rang. To my surprise it was an old friend I hadn't heard from in years. He was hoping I would buy his Lacote guitar built in 1820. In those days these old instruments were a novelty for collectors and not for meant for concert guitarists. They were especially not meant for guitarists hooked into the Torres style of guitar-making of which I was one. Although expensive by 1980s standards I made the decision to buy it.

My friend and his Lacote were in Cleveland, Ohio and I was on Long Island, New York. Because of my concern for the welfare of a guitar that was so old and its questionable ability to fly well without being damaged in some way, the obvious solution was to drive to Cleveland, buy it, and turn around and come back. Pat Caruso, my good friend and the maker of my Baroque guitar, agreed without a second thought to go with me. We left at noon and arrived in Cleveland at 11 in the evening.

I looked at the guitar, handed over the money, and Pat and I got in the car and drove back to Long Island getting home around ten in the morning, bleary eyed and exhausted. Ah the joys of youth!

Later that week I took the Lacote to a luthier who worked for The Metropolitan Museum of Art. He did some restoration work and advised me that the less work done on an instrument this old the better. I have rigorously followed his advice and only allowed the absolute minimal restorative work done. The Lacote, although obviously smaller, is subtly different from the modern classical guitar. The fingerboard fans out from the nut to the bridge making it easy for the right hand and also easy for the left hand to get double stops on adjacent strings with one finger. The machine heads are original and are a good example of the workmanship of the early nineteenth century. Lacote was responsible for adding machine heads and the raised fingerboard. Although my Lacote has machine heads, it does not have a raised fingerboard. The guitar was now playable, but I had no idea what to do with it. I felt I certainly couldn't use it for concert playing because it seemed to have a quiet sound with very little projection. At that time all my energy and enthusiasm was for the modern guitar. The Lacote remained in its coffin case except to take it out occasionally for classes or students.

All that changed dramatically when a mezzo soprano asked me to do some Schubert songs. I suggested we use the Lacote since it fit the period perfectly and was already at low pitch, perfect for a mezzo range. It was then, when I got it into a hall, that I noticed the precision and projection of the sound. This little guitar that looked like toy, with lute-like bracing and a miniature body, filled the hall easily. I began to use it for all my nineteenth century repertoire. It took some adjusting to get used to playing the guitar at low pitch, to the small size of the guitar and to the quality of the Lacote sound which in many ways is more like a fortepiano than a modern guitar sound. No wonder there is such a brilliant nineteenth century repertoire for guitar and fortepiano.

Jerry Willard
Sept. 2009

About the Artist

Jerry Willard was born in Cleveland, Ohio and began studying the guitar with his father Jeff Willard who was a guitarist. The guitar pedagogue Sophocles Papas recognized his talent and invited Jerry to study with him in Washington, D.C. He expanded his knowledge of music interpretation when he worked with violinist Misha Mishakoff

and cellist Warren Downs. Mr. Willard also studied with guitarists Richard Lurie and Alirio Diaz, both of whom influenced his musical and technical approach to the guitar. Mr. Willard's performances have taken him to Alice Tully Hall, Carnegie Hall in New York City, and he has concertized extensively throughout Europe and The United States. At Mr. Willard's New York debut, Raymond Ericson of the New York Times said, "The recital was exemplary. Mr. Willard took lute in hand for some pieces by Adrian LeRoy and John Dowland and turned that normallypale-sounding predecessor of the guitar into a brilliant and vivid instrument. Back with the guitar, the performer played his own transcriptions of Bach's Lute *Suite in E minor* and five dances from Britten's *Gloriana* plus Henze's attractive *Drei Tentos*'. It was again the clarity of Mr. Willard's playing that gave special pleasure."

Well known as an ensemble player, Mr. Willard has performed with the Cleveland Orchestra, The New York City Opera Company and the Queen's Chamber Band. Mr. Willard resides in New York City and is on the faculty of the State University of New York at Stony Brook . He has published many transcriptions for guitar including "The Complete Lute Music of J.S. Bach", "The Library of Guitar Classics" and the "Complete Works of Gaspar Sanz available through Music Sales Corporation. Mr. Willard records for Lyrichord Discs.

CREDITS

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