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## ARNAUD DUMOND

### Portrait of a French Guitarist—Composer—Lutenist

by Anne Chaurand

Born in Paris in 1950, Arnaud Dumond studied mainly under the guidance of Alberto Ponce at the École Normale de Musique de Paris, in which have been formed many remarkable performers of the younger generation including Francis Kleynjans, Roland Dyens and Tania Chagnot, the 1985 Paris prize winner. Arnaud Dumond was the first French guitarist to be awarded the first prize in the Paris Competition and since then he has won many International Awards both as composer and performer. He often appears on French radio and television and has made several solo and chamber music recordings. He has long been established as one of the most prominent figures of the guitar world in France.

Although the Channel does not seem to prove an easy crossing for guitarists from both sides—for some reason, the Atlantic seems a lesser obstacle—Arnaud Dumond was a resident guest at Cannington last Summer, where he left a lasting impression of his recital and personality.

His participation in the course gave the students an insight into his intense temperament and his personal, refreshing approach. His comments during the classes were thought-provoking, sometimes quite unpredictable and often seasoned with a healthy dose of humour. In this

manner, he managed to convince us that even memory lapses during a recital could be a creative, enjoyable experience to the performer. Why not? Positive thinking rules.

However much fun he may derive from memory lapses, none were in evidence during his splendid recital. The audience was moved by the energy and musicality of his playing, and his security and projection were quite impressive. Besides pieces from the international standard repertoire (Bach, Rodrigo . . .) Arnaud Dumond's programme conveyed a definite hint of French flavour, mainly through his own compositions: the impressionistic elegance of *Comme un Hommage à Ravel*, the blend of liveliness and nostalgia in *Comme un Tango*. I was, for my part, particularly impressed by the poetic fantasy of *Un silence d'oiseau*—'A bird's silence'. These were convincing pieces and illustrated the variety of styles and resourcefulness of the composer. Three encores completed the unforgettable experience of the evening. After *Tango en Skai*, a good piece by Roland Dyens, Arnaud Dumond came back to perform *Failing* by Tom Johnson, a very clever 'party piece' with a spoken text. The comic build up was sustained with great self-control, and the audience was in

stitches, but beyond the laughter transpired a message of importance to the artist: the necessity to demystify the concept of failure. For his third encore, the performer placed his guitar flat on his lap and carefully inserted knitting needles through the strings, according to a chart, for a piece by the French composer, Phillippe Drogoz entitled *Prélude à la Mise à Mort* ('Prelude to the Putting to Death') as in a bull fight. Then after tapping the needles with light percussion beaters, he pulled them out one by one, thus gradually freeing the guitar—the symbolized bull—from its martyrdom. A very dramatic but optimistic ending, performed with confidence. Had the guitarist not previously established his mastery, these encore pieces could have passed as moments of indulgence. But in Arnaud Dumond's case, they completed our ear-and-mind opening acquaintance with him. I was hoping to meet him again in Paris over Christmas but the transport strike made any such arrangement impossible. Nevertheless, we managed this conversation through mail and telephone.

First of all 'inevitably' I asked him if he would tell us about his first steps with the guitar.

I started playing Flamenco guitar at the age of eleven, without reading music, for three years. Then I turned towards classical guitar—but Flamenco has been, and remains my first love in music, along with Beethoven's Fifth!

*When did you start to compose?*

At the very moment I touched my first guitar—and later at the piano; now inside my head and then back on to the guitar. I used to compose rather like an artist or a film director, setting up lines of perspective, a point of focus, episodes, transitions. . . . Yet the notion of style is not my concern. The question, for me, is to build or not to build whatever house; but with something or someone in it, I hope.

*What have been your main musical inspirations?*

I had many different sources of inspiration. After the age of twenty, I turned from the middle classical period towards early music, music from outside Europe and 20th Century works, including the *avant garde*. The first composers to awake my interest were, without doubt, Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Ravel—and almost every piano concerto in history. Later came Xenakis, Boulez, Berio, Malec, Amy, Eloy, Tabachnik, Ferneyhough, Murail, Levinas, etc. . . . for the modern composers. And Shostakovich and Britten, among others, for the neo-classical one.

*Does Alberto Ponce encourage his pupils at the École Normale de Musique de Paris to compose for the guitar? (I am thinking of Francis Kleynjans, Roland Dyens. . . .)*

Not exactly. I observe that guitarists are a little suspicious of guitarist-composers. Maybe they look for the security of more universally established names, even if these people have not always produced the best of their work for the guitar. So you can hear about Poulenc or Milhand or even more recent composers who just wrote for the sake of experiment or circumstance, rather than by necessity. Works by non-guitarist composers who have reached the right degree of coincidence between the nature of the instrument and their own form of style and expression, are rare. We can mention here Britten, Ponce, Tristan Murail, Rodrigo and a few others. Britten possesses a real genius for assimilating the nature of every instrument. Think of the *Suite for Harp* or of his 'Cello Suite. One could say that he reached straight for the very essence of each instrument. As

for composer-guitarists some of them have achieved, with undeniable success, the reconciliation between fingers and music. Think of Barrios, Villa-Lobos, Brouwer, Štěpán Rak or Roland Dyens. Through them the guitar sings from the top of its own tree.

But I would like to point out, to conclude this important matter, that an instrumental work achieves true greatness only when it outlives an intrinsic contradiction: to be both within the nature of an instrument and to somehow transcend it. A worthy piece for me must fail somewhere precisely because it must have tried to succeed at all costs. And it is the mad ambition, this intense hope, which makes its existence necessary, whether the piece is beautiful or not. Is it not just so in life? You will find works such as Liszt's Sonata in B minor, Beethoven's Opus 111, Don Giovanni or Monteverdi's *Orfeo* or the *Rite of Spring*, etc. . . . which aim at triumphing over the limits of the instruments or the orchestra. In this way, instrumental possibilities are stretched further, and so are human feelings, in a better adjustment with reality. Such is the 'heroic' concept of art. Well, there also is art as supreme pleasure—the modest, humble ideal to please the ear only—I am referring here to people like Debussy and many French composers. It is also a wonderful approach. I, for my part, cannot choose between these two visions of art. The choice is up to everyone's own personality.

*Do you write music for other instruments or groups of instruments?*

Yes, for violin, flute and harpsichord—but always in combination with guitar, thus keeping within my own field as a guitarist.

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*Do you enjoy performing your own music?*

Performing my own music is not always fun, though it can be occasionally. It is a necessity. I do so because I need to because I cannot find emotional fulfilment in other people's music. Each work has been an urgent personal necessity during its elaboration: revolt and tenderness in *Comme un Tango*, drama and Mediterranean moods for *Medée Midi Desert* for flute (recorder) and guitar, fairy tales and nervousness in *Un Silence d'Oiseaux* etc. . . . It takes

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***"It takes time to recognise yourself in your own music"***

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time to recognize yourself in your own music. And when you do, all initial emotion has vanished.

*Your selection of encore pieces played at Cannington was a very interesting choice. Would you have performed them to a 'general public' audience?*

For me a 'general public' audience, as you say, is the only true audience. Perhaps, because when I do attend a concert, I feel myself a simple member of the 'general public'. I don't feel a specialist at all then. I am a really appreciative audience. The point is not so much playing well or even extremely well but building up an atmosphere; a drama as complete as possible. This is why, since the start of my career, I have always concentrated on performing pieces of a variety of styles or from contrasting periods—I do not enjoy performing 'the complete works'. I can thus express everything in one go: charm, sentimentality, beauty but also intensity, paradox, strength, violence or madness. Nor could

Photo: Pascal Prince.



I do without humour. Not only for the pleasure of laughing—I love to laugh!!! But also because humour can contrast with, and highlight, any previously expressed serious thought. Each reinforces the other. I believe very strongly in the creative complementarity of human emotions. Something gracefully fragile can hide amazing strength. I am thinking of certain women, for example. On the other hand, some displays of violence can be totally meaningless and ludicrous—think of facism.

*Do you regard the encore as a vital part of your programme?*

Certain encores are for me a chance to complete the programme, not just a meaningless piece of entertainment. It all depends on how I sense the audience's reaction; if I feel that they need more, if they really listen or if they consider me as a mere entertainer or, again, if I feel that they project themselves through me. I can only experience this when I have succeeded in setting myself totally free, and it does not work every evening because unresolved fear is the enemy of freedom. But if I do succeed, I feel myself almost wholly legitimate. I forget myself almost completely and I celebrate the reconciliation of human nature with itself. The focal point ceases to be the music or myself but becomes a sort of moving spell; a mysterious communion.

*Do you play much chamber music?*

I work with chamber groups and in a duo with harpsichord, in which I also play Renaissance lute, and with recorder.

*You play the lute. Do you ever include both instruments in recitals?*

I used to begin my recitals with twenty minutes on the lute, for the reasons I mentioned earlier; contrasting atmospheres, different civilisations and historical moods. And I learnt a lot from the lute as a 'non-voluntary' sounding instrument. I mean that the lute 'proposes' the

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***"The lute proposes the sound; it does not impose it"***

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sound; it does not impose it. The guitar is much more temperamental. A lute is less personal, like a harpsichord or an organ, for example. So you have to articulate the music through understanding it. That is good, excellent training.

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You have compiled and published a collection of progressive pieces for guitar students (*Repertoire Pedagogique*—Ed. *Transatlantiques*). Would you tell us about your conception of teaching?

First, it is about exchanging ever expanding interests which do not always have to be clearly defined. I prefer teaching people to play simple music very well than difficult music badly. Dealing with a piece of simple music, which can happen to be a very good piece, I can always be more demanding of phrasing, melodic articulation, tone and soul. I also try to give pupils some autonomy through sight reading, chamber music and creative ways of working. When the pupil is good enough, together we open doors on many styles of music and on the technique to achieve them.

*So you enjoy teaching?*

Yes, I do, especially during short courses.

*Why?*

Maybe because I keep pursuing a few ideals. The first one is to continue to learn new ways of translating formulas, expressions and images so that beginners can reach a better understanding of the guitar. As for the advanced pupils, they sometimes ask questions in words or through their playing that I had not yet asked myself. Well, I must add that I am lucky enough to have students who play as well as I do besides the fact that they are not 'me' and I am not 'them'. The second ideal is to find an explanation for everything. I love to analyse technique as well as music. And I analyse both together since technique without music, or the reverse, makes no sense. There are some performers

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*“Some performers make no sense because they are imprisoned by their techniques—especially if it is excellent”*

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whose playing makes no sense because they are imprisoned by their technique, especially if it is excellent. It can take the place of musical thoughts. For example, the scales passage in the *Chaconne* becomes absurd when it is played without articulation. Natural phrasing involves uneven accents, waves of melodic lines and punctuation.

*Does teaching, like performing, bring fulfilment to your need for communication?*

Well, I hope that pupils understand everything I tell them. I do not wish to give a recipe but to teach the art of observing and listening to oneself. All teaching should aim at eventually suppressing the need for a teacher! Such is the tragic destiny of teaching (he laughs) . . . like that of parenthood. But how wonderful it is to see pupils begin to think for themselves; to analyse their own playing and observe other people's including their teacher without realising it; to draw their own conclusion and a new appetite for finding out their own solutions. Of course I try to put pupils on the right track. Easy, natural ways must

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*“Easy, natural ways must prevail over all kinds of technique-dominated ideology”*

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prevail over all kinds of technique-dominated ideology. My approach is a pragmatic one—laws succeed to reality, although there remain some superior laws of a general nature: laws concerning the style and character of pieces and the truth in each mode of expression, deep or light; laws about ease, economy of means and mainly the expression of one's true self and not the projection of an image one would like to give of oneself. This last point may be art's ultimate target and its true function.

*Is the personality of musicians, in your eyes, revealed through their music?*

It must be understood that each human character is manifold and that different personalities can be expressed through similar styles: Beethoven and Mozart, for example, Britten and Tippett or Pinter and Beckett. While similarities between personalities of far apart lifetimes can transpire through different styles—like Britten and Purcell.

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*“The world's artistic realm is wide enough to provide for the darkest, as well as for the most transparent needs of the heart”*

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The world's artistic realm is wide enough to provide for the darkest, as for the most transparent needs of the heart.

To come back to the subject of teaching, I will conclude by pointing out first that our duty, as teachers, is to tackle the contradiction between technique and musical content in a creative way for the pupil, trying to avoid the idealistic trap that music is the guide to technique as well as the opposite approach. We must foster in each pupil the courage and the patience to always aim at reconciling one with the other.

Teaching a musical instrument gives a special insight into human nature. We are lucky that most pupils come to us out of their free will. I think we must guide them towards some form of self-revelation, concentrating on their personal qualities. We must enrich them with themselves. The pupils bring the bricks, the teacher the cement. They



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teach them to build, to listen to their musical instinct which can be often caricatural at first, and then to gain culture by observing with love and curiosity how others have attained mastery and translated their personal destiny, thus allowing many people to share it.

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Apart from the compositions mentioned in the text, Arnaud Dumond has many compositions, arrangements and didactic works published. Those interested in obtaining the full catalogue should write to him at:

Editions Musicales Transatlantiques,  
50 rue Joseph de Maistre,  
75018 Paris.