

CELLO CLASSICS INTERVIEW:

HOW DID THE RECORDING “JAGUAR SONGS” COME ABOUT?

I first learned of Paul Desenne’s music through my doctoral student, Venezuelan cellist Tulio Rondon. Tulio’s doctoral thesis was on Desenne and his lecture-recital was a performance of Jaguar Songs, complete with a demonstration of the indigeneous instrument, the Birimbao, (imitated at the beginning of the last movement, Birimbao-Jaguar, with its string tapping technique), as well as actual film footage of the ritual ingestion of a hallucinogenic showing the dramatic snorting of the substance through a long gourd-like tube and the dramatic swooning of the shaman in the resulting trance, (imitated in the second movement of the piece, Tombeau de L’Amazonie, with it’s bizarre catapulting arpeggios followed by a huge falling glissando and repeated hypnotic and trance-like figure.) As we worked on the piece in lessons for weeks I became familiar with it and thought it deserved to be heard, so the project started with the recording of that work, the only solo cello work on the CD. Only later did I worry about what else I’d actually use to complete the disc.

AN ENTIRE DISC DEVOTED TO PAUL DESENNE?

After recording the solo work, Jaguar Songs, there was a period where I was tossing around different ideas of what else to complete the disc with. I was having difficulty getting an inspiration of what would fit well with it and one night had one of those crazy ideas that come up at 4 am when one can’t sleep, “what about doing the multiple-cello pieces recording all the parts myself?” Usually these crazy ideas disappear when daylight comes bringing with it the realization that one’s ideas are impractical, but this idea kept niggling at me. So I gave my friend Wiley Ross at the University of Arizona recording studio a call and when I asked if such a thing would be possible to do he gave a resounding “yes!” (Little did I know what a monumental undertaking the whole thing would be due to the multi-tracking, but in retrospect it’s a good thing I didn’t have a clue because the recording might not have happened!)

WHAT WERE THE MAIN CHALLENGES IN MAKING THIS RECORDING?

Probably the first thing that comes to mind would be...the click track!!! Although Pop artists work with click tracks all the time I was utterly unfamiliar with the technique except for the one time I did an extremely simple cello line on a pop recording for one of my son’s songs (and even then I found it challenging to play exactly together with the click!) In order to synchronize the various instruments, in this case the various cellos, one plays with what amounts to a metronome that one hears through head-phones (or ear buds which I found out worked quite well). Once one of the voices is recorded one can continue layering on with the aid of either the click-track, or just the voice one has already recorded, or both. In the case of this particular recording, some of the rhythms were so sophisticated that it was unbelievably difficult to synch up and some of the

passages were much harder to play with the click-track than without it where one can let the phrase breathe naturally. This was probably the biggest challenge for me, trying to play well while having half of my ear on the click track!

Another huge challenge was that I didn't have a recording of the works to go on, and wasn't playing with other people where I could get familiar with the music in rehearsal. Some of the pieces for four cellos were on Paul Desenne's website played by the San Bolivar youth orchestra cello section with three players on each part. This is a fantastic group of young players, but with twelve cellists playing at once I couldn't distinguish separate voices so listening to it was not helpful. Consequently I had to discover the music as I recorded, little by little, and amend my interpretation as I went along.

It was also challenging to expand my technique to encompass some of the crazy cello writing that Paul is so fond of! Jaguar Songs, the solo work on the disc, uses batutto extensively in complicated rhythms, wild arpeggios to the top of the fingerboard and huge glissandi, ponticello in imitation of an electric guitar, or the sound of birds, or peeping frogs. In the movement "Tombeau de L'Amazonie" he uses repetitive gritty bow sounds evoking the image of the chain sawing of the rain forest which is very chilling, but followed hauntingly by a pulsing ethereal sound evoking the still living and breathing spirit of the rainforest. The perfect legato that all we bowed-string players work so hard to perfect was completely useless for this music, which uses the cello in a completely different way! . In working on a section of the Glass Bamboo Frog Consort (which, by the way, is one of the most transcendent pieces I've heard, a meditation in itself), Paul has used mostly harmonics, but sometimes they are very obscure, not ones that sound easily and yet the marking is forte since they need to pop out in the texture. Getting them to project even though one can barely find them on the cello was one of many cellistic challenges.

HOW MIGHT THE RECORDING BE DIFFERENT HAD YOU RECORDED WITH OTHER PLAYERS RATHER THAN MULTI-TRACKED?

The experience of making this recording would have been incredibly different had it been a collaboration. In many ways it would have been easier since I would have only had to learn and record five parts rather than eighteen! (Three cello quartets and two trios.) I wouldn't have had to deal with wearing earphones or ear buds while playing which was a bizarre and disturbing experience! But probably the biggest difference would have been that I would have been able to hear what the piece was about earlier in the process. Since I was layering on the different voices myself I was literally discovering what the piece was about AS I RECORDED! So I was interpreting it as I went along, kind of discovering it step by step, (like walking through a dense rain forest not being able to see if you were going to step on a snake any minute!) Sometimes I had to back up and re-record something as I would constantly re-assess what I had done. If I had worked with others we would have rehearsed and been familiar with the pieces in their entirety before going into the studio. I tried at home as preparation for the sessions, recording one part and playing it back while playing another part with it, but this was minimally helpful since there were always one or two cellos missing.

One interesting thing, had I recorded with others, would have been having a variety of timbre in the different cello voices, not only because of different playing styles but also in the fact that there would be three or four different instruments involved. But all-in-all I'm happy that I did it using multi-tracking, not only because it satisfied my "I can do it myself" obsession (apparently my mother said that that was already my mantra when I was a toddler, even though when I insisted on dressing myself I put everything on backwards...), but also because I had the special satisfaction of having been able to realize my own vision of the works.

TELL ME ABOUT THE INSTRUMENT USED FOR "JAGUAR SONGS"?

I used my usual instrument, which is a Paolo Antonio Testore cello made in Milan in 1732. At one point I considered using my carbon-fiber bow for the battuto sections in Pajaro-Guaracha and the Gitane movement of the Jaguar Songs solo piece, so as to spare my beautiful Fetique bow. But in the end I stayed with the Fetique since I decided that I handled that bow better, and controlling the battuto so as to stay with the click track was more important than getting a stronger hit of the wood on the string, which would have been at the expense of the bow!

There are many examples of interesting things Paul does in his writing for cello and where, being a fantastic cellist himself, he has a distinct advantage over non-cellists. The beginning of Pizziquitiplas uses a wooden mute which gives a very particular sound, unlike other kinds of mutes. The Glass Bamboo Frog Consort (for cello quartet) requires the two lower strings to be tuned down a half step as in the Kodaly solo sonata, giving the bass register of the instrument an unusual and deeply rich sound.

One of the more humorous moments in this project was in returning to the studio after having dinner the engineer. We were about to record a section with pizzicato that needed to replicate the sound that one gets on a guitar when a pick is used. So I ran over to the 7-11 across the street from the studio, grabbed some super glue, and experimented with putting a small dab on the tip of the finger to be used in that passage. When the super glue dried and hardened it sounded like a fingernail or pick! Hey – whatever works, right?

WHO HAS MOST INSPIRED YOU IN YOUR WORK?

It perhaps sounds strange in the context of discussing the Jaguar Songs recording, but Wilhelm Furtwangler is one of the musicians that I am most inspired by! The Jaguar Songs project is completely different from anything I've done before and it required me to make a huge leap out of my comfort zone. There's almost nothing lyrical on the entire disc, so for someone who worked incredibly hard for years to achieve a sublime legato

this was a stretch for me, learning to do some of the battuto passages for instance, or the descending crazy riffs that sound like one is jumping into a cello abyss!!

But the Jaguar CD aside, my biggest influences have been Furtwangler, for his incredible sublime depth of interpretation, as well as all the great so-called “historic” string players of the past who my dear friend Eric Wen introduced me to while I was a student at Juilliard, greatly influencing how my playing developed during those important years. Also, my last teacher, Johannes Goritzki, was a huge influence. The hours I spent working with him at the Hochschule in Dusseldorf were some of the most rewarding musical experiences of my life.. It was as if every atom of latent musicality in my being was being awakened during those lessons by the depth of his musical vision.

OF WHAT MUSICAL PROJECT ARE YOU MOST PROUD?

I feel very honored to have been able to help some great but neglected music be heard more widely than it might have been. This includes works by Robert Fuchs, (one of the few composers that Brahms, being very hyper-critical, had good things to say about!), Ferdinand Ries, (a pupil of Beethoven but a fantastic composer in his own right), Brahms Hungarian Dances in wonderful arrangements by nineteenth-century virtuoso cellist Alfred Piatti, and almost unknown works by Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco, among others. (Both the Fuchs and Castelnuovo-Tedesco discs are to be re-released on JRI recordings since they are almost out of print.) I also feel extremely blessed to have been able to record staples of the repertoire ie. the Brahms sonatas and Kodaly solo sonata.

WHAT ARE SOME OF YOUR MUSICAL AND NON-MUSICAL “GUILTY PLEASURES”?

Just watching the trees or dust motes, whatever is available to observe with an empty mind...seriously! Like a meditation...

Musically I would have to say it's great fun to listen to my son, singer-songwriter Rafael Green play his original songs and also fascinating to watch his creative process in songwriting since I'm strictly an interpreter myself.

IS THERE A UK VISIT PLANNED IN YOUR CONCERT SCHEDULE?

For now I'm enjoying not traveling and just focusing on a few local performances and continuing to record. I like spending time quietly in an atmosphere of beautiful nature with plenty of solitude and meditation, enjoying my recording projects instead of dealing with the increasing hassles of air travel and the hectic rushing around associated with being a traveling performer. Simplicity is very high on my list of priorities! So I'll just take each moment as it comes and see where it leads me, wherever that may be.

WHAT WILL BE YOUR NEXT RECORDING VENTURE?

My next recording will be out in October on Cello Classics, my second for this label. It is called "Song of the Birds – Spanish & Latin Cello" and includes works by Sarasate, Cassado, Ginastera, Piazzolla, Granados, de Falla, and Casals.. I'm very excited about this release because it's been an idea I've had for years and now it's finally coming to fruition. The CD is passionate and sizzling but ends with the sublimely simple "Song of the Birds" by Casals which ends the CD. I loved choosing this order because it throws the listener into a deep silence when the disc ends, kind of like life where there's all sorts of passion and excitement, but at the end we're left with the depth of silence and stillness. Breath-taking!!!

As for further CDs, I have some nice things coming up but for now they are secrets!