

In praise of classical guitarists Alexandre Lagoya and Ida Presti

By Tony Cornwell
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Alexandre Lagoya (1929-1999) and Ida Presti (1924-1967) formed the greatest classical guitar duet in the world to date. This was not simply due to their technical excellence, but their subtlety and force in emotional expression. They also transcribed music for the instrument from many sources, most notably the harpsichord, violin and piano.

By the time Lagoya—born in Alexandria, Egypt of Italian and Greek parentage—was 19, he had already given about 500 concerts throughout the Middle East. He decided to move to Paris and continue his studies with Jean Saudry, also studying harmony and counterpoint with Brazilian composer Heitor Villa-Lobos.

He met the French-born Presti—already a celebrity, having made her first recording at 10—soon after his arrival in Paris when he was invited to perform at a guitar society concert. (Presti had been a student of Segovia and he fondly called her *Ida Prestissimo*.)

At the concert Presti declared Lagoya the best guitarist she had ever heard. They soon married, and from 1950 until her death in 1967 performed exclusively as a duo. In a musical world that still regarded the guitar as a folk instrument, duos were comparatively rare. Most other guitarists were finding it hard to establish solo careers.

To meet their need for material they began transcribing keyboard works by Bach, Scarlatti, Debussy, Falla, Granados and Haydn—among them a concerto by the last-named originally written for two hurdy-gurdies—and commissioning works from other composers.

Segovia was so taken with their performance at their New York debut that he wrote to Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco asking him to consider writing for two guitars. The resultant 24 Preludes and Fugues

became a staple piece. Castelnuovo-Tedesco also composed for them a *Concerto for Two Guitars*.

André Jolivet, Pierre Petit, Federico Moreno Torroba and Joaquin Rodrigo, amongst others, also wrote for them. Between 1952 and 1967 they played some two thousand concerts.

Tragically, in 1967, Ida Presti died in New York City of an internal hemorrhage resulting from cancer of the lung. Alexandre survived her by 32 years. He became professor of guitar at the International Academy of Music in Nice from 1960 and at the Paris National Conservatory in 1969. He retired from these positions in 1994. He began to perform solo again in 1972.

In these tawdry times where great emphasis is given by the media to celebration of the purely physical side of humanity—sport, models, etc.—questions of the mind and heart are often given short shrift. At a time when intimacy between adults is most often identified with the sexual act, it is refreshing and invigorating to hear proof of the narrowness of this view and the possibilities that exist.

If you listen to any of Lagoya-Presti's playing—not just hearing, but actively engaging with the music—you will hear conversations of such intimacy that one at first feels embarrassed at being privy to them. It is hard at times to believe that two people could communicate so intricately. Given that both are playing classical guitars makes it all the more extraordinary.

The instrument is perhaps the finest made by the hand of man for the hand of man to play. Beethoven, on hearing the guitar for the first time, was moved to say: "It is an orchestra in one instrument." It is, for example, the only instrument on which can one can play two notes—or more—of the same pitch at the same time.

However, it is truly said of the instrument that it takes

“a minute to learn, but a lifetime to master.” The problems of construction, strings and tunings aside, the critical issue is that the instrument is played not with plectrums, bows or hammers, but only by the hand.

Being less than a millimetre off either way in fretting or striking the strings will result in a variation from pitch. Given that there are up to nine fingers at work at any one time, the chances of a “bum” note are raised considerably.

It takes great control and coordination to play even most solo pieces of the concert repertoire. When we get to duos it becomes hellishly complicated. Most of us who play a bit can only gape and marvel at the pristine technique of Lagoya and Presti. For example, in their transcriptions of harpsichord pieces the pair have to play what one person would normally play.

There they are, with all 20 fingers flying around the neck, fret board and sound hole and landing perfectly every time. I saw them once in an old documentary. It was astonishing to see the ease with which they played. Ida seemed to be merely waving her hands up and down the front of the guitar without any effort. And this amazing music seems to be pouring out of nowhere.

At times I would have sworn there had to be another guitar somewhere, and perhaps there is a point in that: that something more is produced than merely $1 + 1 = 2$; that from their control, nuance and precision in dynamics the resultant overtones and harmonics produce a third sound arising from the interplay.

This does not happen in every duet. More often than not what one hears is two people playing the same bit of music at the same time, coincidentally as it were; not genuinely listening to or feeling what the other is playing.

For two people to be able to play as one is an amazing demonstration of not only human capability and possibility, but of human intimacy. And one must note the considerable courage it took, on both their parts, to bare so openly and generously their innermost selves and love for each other.

To work, love and play as one; to express precise shadings of emotion in unity. It speaks volumes about the possibilities of human beings and their relationships.

It is in this spirit that I recommend any and all of their recordings. There are several inexpensive CDs of

their playing available: Belart, Nonesuch, Naxos, and so on. Most cost less than \$10 (Aus) and will give a lifetime of pleasure.

My personal picks for the tracks to look for would be: Ferdinando Carulli's *Serenade in G Op. 96, No. 3*. Claude Debussy's *Claire de Lune*, any of the Scarlatti harpsichord transcriptions, Enrique Granados's *Intermezzo and Danza Espanola, Op. 37 No. 2, Oriental*, and Fernando Sor's *Premier Divertissement pour Deux Guitares, Op. 34, L'encouragement*.

However, one shouldn't be too fussy. Listen to any of their recordings and they will take you on a musical journey of passionate and tender beauty. You will return to the tasks and worries of the world re-energised, more thoughtful and re-sensitised.

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