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IN MUSIC SCHOOLS?

ALBAN GERHARDT

THE GERMAN CELLIST WHO DARES NOT TO BE PERFECT

'If something doesn't come
off in the concert, it's not
the end of the world'



**BOWS: A WISE
INVESTMENT?**






‘Many musicians are unwilling to risk anything for the sake of spontaneity’

The German cellist Alban Gerhardt is concerned that today’s performers are sacrificing instinctive expression on the altar of perfection. He tells **CARLOS MARÍA SOLARE** how the ‘personal touch’ of Pablo Casals – the subject of his new CD – provides a corrective

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HEN I MEET ALBAN GERHARDT at his home in the leafy Berlin district of Nikolassee, he has just been listening to the first edit of his latest recording, a selection of short pieces taken from the repertoire of Pablo Casals. ‘Hyperion Records asked me to do a CD of encores,’ he explains, ‘so I looked for a thread when choosing them. Although some of the pieces were, of course, also played by Feuermann, Piatigorsky or Rostropovich, most of them were most closely identified with Casals.’ Gerhardt raided Casals’s recorded output in his research, and the next hurdle was finding the sheet music, as several of the pieces have long been out of print, ▶





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Although the subject of Gerhardt's new CD is Pablo Casals's encores, he is not an uncritical admirer of the Spanish master

nobody but Casals having taken them up, apparently. The Christmas carol *El cant dels ocells* (Song of the Birds), which became so strongly associated with the Catalan cellist, is a case in point, but Gerhardt is also unaware of any other recordings of, say, Eduard Lassen's *Thine eyes so blue* or Edward MacDowell's *Romance*. Too much his own man to turn himself into a Casals clone, Gerhardt does admit to having adopted some unwritten embellishments that he took from the old records.

Listening to his CD's first edit caused Gerhardt some suffering because it went against the normal way of listening to music. 'You start looking for mistakes, and whatever good things there might be in there become less important. Fauré's *Élégie* caused a little argument with the producer, who thought

'I would much rather arrive at the tenth, twentieth or fiftieth performance of a new piece than move on to the next one'

my tempo was much too fast. Rehearing it now I still like it my way, since this is one piece that has become slower and slower as the years go by. Conversely, I now play Saint-Saëns's *The Swan* slower than I used to. The music should be – literally – timeless: one should see the swan floating by without being aware of its little feet paddling underneath the surface.'

However, Gerhardt is not striving for ultimate perfection, as he explains: 'The constant pressure of feeling that you have to be perfect is something I keep sensing in performances by many musicians. They are unwilling to risk anything for the sake of spontaneity. My teacher Boris Pergamenschikow was also like that: in the three years I was with him, he wouldn't let me take part in a competition because he insisted that I must have every little detail perfectly planned in advance, and I'm just not the kind to do that. If something doesn't come off in the concert, it's not the end of the world. Heinrich Schiff, with whom I also worked, would risk 100 per cent every time – and sometimes he would lose. But Pergamenschikow wasn't perfect every time either. I know which kind of musician I prefer.'

PLANNING A WHOLE CD OF ENCORE-TYPE pieces raised a musical-psychological question, says Gerhardt. He usually plays with pianists of the first rank, and why should they bother to accompany a bunch of cello showpieces? He picked up the courage to ask Cécile Licad, with whom he has also recorded Fauré's complete output for cello and piano for Hyperion, and could hardly believe it when she agreed. 'The calibre of her playing lifts the piano parts to an unprecedented level of quality, and some of these parts, for example those in David Popper's pieces, are really hard to play. Listening to Casals's recordings you sometimes wonder how he put up with certain pianists who just plodded along and didn't even play all the notes. Precisely because Cécile is not used to "accompanying", we sometimes had to work harder at getting some rubato or other perfectly together, but it was certainly worth it.' ►

According to Gerhardt many of today's top players are unrecognisable when listened to 'blind'





▲ Gerhardt has been exploring alternative music venues, including this Ohio supermarket

I remind Gerhardt of some critical remarks he made about Casals in a previous interview for *The Strad*, twelve years ago, when he complained that Casals's Bach 'sounds very much like his Dvořák, and it's all more about him than the music'. Today he is less strict, pointing out that too many of today's players are unrecognisable when listened to 'blind'. 'Some time ago, for a feature in a music magazine, I was asked to listen to and comment upon several recordings of Bach's suites without knowing who the players were. Casals – who, needless to say, I recognised immediately – was the only one who made the music speak, as Nikolaus Harnoncourt says it should. This has nothing to do with authentic performance: Casals set a pulse going, and within it he took all kinds of liberties. It is this personal touch that I find is missing today, for all the excellence on show. For example, I've never recognised Yo-Yo Ma on the radio. I always thought that it must be somebody fresh from college, very well trained but without much character as yet.'

For all his admiration of Casals the musician, Gerhardt is not uncritical of Casals the man. 'He had a big ego problem. His book

'The personal touch is missing today, for all the excellence on show'

of recollections, *Joys and Sorrows*, is one long self-adulating indulgence. And he practically killed Gaspar Cassadó's career by accusing him of fascist sympathies.' These accusations have indeed remained unproved to this day, and what little evidence there is suggests that they are unfounded. Casals apparently resented his former student not having joined his own

'silence strike' against Franco's dictatorship in Spain, and the last straw was a review crediting Cassadó with the best cello playing ever heard in New York, where, of course, Casals himself had often appeared. Gerhardt appreciates Cassadó highly both as arranger and composer, and featured him prominently in his debut CD for EMI in 1999.

'CASALS WAS ALSO VERY CONSERVATIVE musically,' observes Gerhardt. 'For him, music history ended with Brahms and, as opposed to, say, Piatigorsky, he didn't inspire composers to write for him.' He has a point, of course, since the one piece I can think of that was written for Casals – the Cello Concerto by Donald Tovey from 1935 – is quite Brahmsian. What about pieces written for or commissioned by Gerhardt himself? 'I haven't actually commissioned that many pieces, but this is intentional. I would much rather arrive at the tenth, twentieth or fiftieth performance of a new piece than move on to the next one. With most pieces you have the world premiere followed by a string of local premieres, and that's it.'

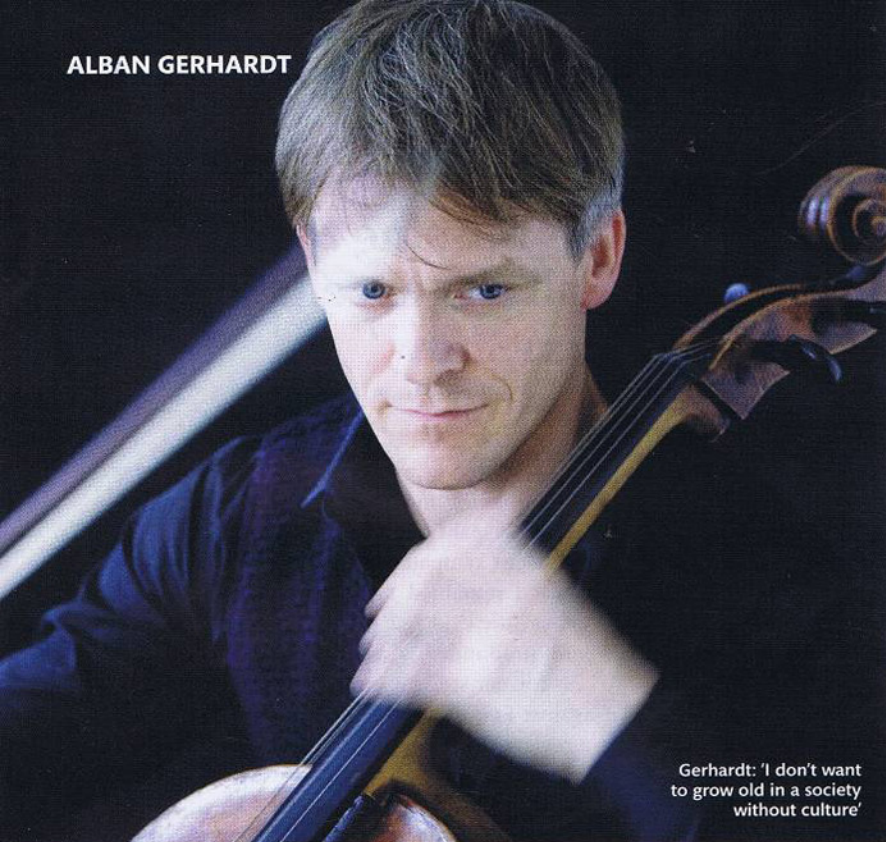
'The last cello concertos to have really entered the repertoire are those by Dutilleux and Lutoslawski, and they are both from 1970. Of course, many concertos have been written since then, but the media – and the players too, unfortunately – are only interested in the world premiere, which I find comparable to an athlete striving for a world record. And then there are the ownership claims, real or imagined: sometimes people assume that I won't be interested in a certain contemporary piece because it has been written for somebody else. Nonsense! It's the music that's important. I very much enjoy playing, say, Matthias Pintscher's *Reflections on Narcissus* from 2005, which was dedicated to Truls Mørk.'

Gerhardt waxes lyrical about the concerto by Unsuk Chin that he premiered in London at the 2009 BBC Proms and is now championing. When we talk he has just performed it at the 2010 Amsterdam Cello Biennale, and is pleased about the positive feedback from an audience consisting almost exclusively of cellists. 'I had a blackout during a passage in harmonics,' he remembers. 'It is a dangerous piece to play from memory, because there are many places where you can easily take a wrong turn. It is also technically much harder than Dvořák, Shostakovich or Prokofiev. Every time I play it, I have to dedicate two weeks to preparing it at the exclusion of everything else.'

PLAYING WITH EARPLUGS

FOR SOME TIME NOW, Alban Gerhardt has been practising, rehearsing and performing while wearing earplugs. 'I am more concentrated,' he explains, 'because everything else is filtered out. I hear the core of the tone, and funnily enough I can listen much better for intonation. One becomes harder to please intonation-wise, and absolutely impossible to please as far as tonal quality is concerned. I am spurred on to do more musically, to exaggerate. I used to play for myself, and many things didn't get across. Interestingly, I get a better feeling for the balance with an orchestra. In a hall with a flattering acoustic, you might be tempted to lean back, but earplugs take care of that. I also feel less disturbed by the bow's mechanical noises.'

'I recommend earplugs to everybody. In the practice room you always sound big enough, and then you get a shock at the rehearsal. With earplugs in, I practise as I play at the concert. There can be problems, though: once I had new earplugs and didn't hear the soft pizzicatos after the cadenza in Tchaikovsky's *Rococo Variations*. However, as opposed to most cellists, I never complain that the orchestra is too loud. But when I do, I'm right!'



Gerhardt: 'I don't want to grow old in a society without culture'

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for the pianist. It is full of extended techniques, such as playing inside the piano. Steven and I worked very hard for the first performance, which was also broadcast by the BBC, which had commissioned it. Unfortunately it has proved very difficult to convince pianists to learn it for just a couple of performances.'

PIANO-ACCOMPANIED RECITALS, Gerhardt has found, are hard to come by unless you really belong to the chosen few. Many subscription series have been discontinued, with promoters concentrating on big events. The only way to sell a recital is with an attendant CD from a big label. Not least for this reason, Gerhardt has been exploring alternative concert venues. 'It started more or less as a gag, suggested by a PR agency,' he explains. 'I went to a radio station, played a few minutes of unaccompanied Bach and then announced that I would be giving a free concert in the evening, and people had to call in and suggest a venue. Thus I ended up playing in a maternity ward, in a fitness studio, and in a pub, for opponents of the transportation of nuclear waste. Every time I was

amazed at the music's power to reach people.

'Before travelling to Cleveland for the Pintscher performance, I proposed that the orchestra there do something similar, and they jumped at it. They organised a concert at a supermarket in a run-down neighbourhood. A small stage was built, with a banner announcing "the Cleveland Orchestra off stage". It was also advertised on radio and TV, and many people came especially for the music. There were about a hundred people there in the fruit and vegetable section, as well as the actual customers. I played Bach's suites nos. 1, 5 and 6 – about an hour of music. They were all extremely quiet and paid attention. I repeated the idea in a socially challenged part of Berlin. It is a sobering thought that you can actually organise a concert and get a full house in three hours.

'I also play in schools and am delighted by the children's response. They often like Bach best, ahead of a fast movement by Ligeti or a fun piece by Rostropovich. In spite of all the governmental dumbing-down, quality is recognised and honoured. Once a child asked me why I was there, and as I searched for a way to articulate the answer, I realised that it is because I don't want to grow old in a society without culture. There are not enough people interested in the arts, which are often not perceived as something essential, and this is our – the artists' – fault. I have often been asked to teach, but I'd rather go and play for schoolchildren. There are enough good teachers and more than enough good cellists out there, so I'm not concerned about that. Rather, I am concerned about the world at large not caring.' ■

Alban Gerhardt's new CD, *Casals Encores*, is released in June (Hyperion)

Between the US and German premieres, Gerhardt gives the concerto its Asian premiere in Seoul this month. He will travel to South Korea – the composer's homeland – for just the one concert, but he is looking forward to it because he really believes in the piece. 'Audiences like it too, although it is an unspectacular piece. Much of it is soft, with beautiful colours redolent of French Impressionism. A practical problem is that it requires an uncommonly large orchestra with extra brass and percussion, and this makes it expensive for orchestras. I am sure the score could be easily adjusted to avoid the extra cost. If I can put the Chin Concerto and the as-yet-unwritten one that Brett Dean has promised me firmly on the map, I'll count myself happy. I don't have to premiere a new piece every year.'

Gerhardt has already premiered a piece by the Australian composer Dean: the *Huntington Eulogy* that he and pianist Steven Osborne first performed in 2002. 'It is a great piece, but very hard

INSTRUMENT AND BOW

ALBAN GERHARDT PLAYS A MATTEO GOFRILLER CELLO

made in 1710, which he has had for six years. It wasn't in the best condition when he bought it, but that meant he could afford it. Apparently, the instrument used to belong to a most unlikely music lover, Benito Mussolini, who later gave it to the poet Gabriele D'Annunzio. 'It is a good solo instrument,' says Gerhardt. 'It can assert itself well when playing with orchestra. In this respect it's better than its predecessor, a Lorenzo Guadagnini that was stolen from my practice room. It is quite large, though: I can barely manage an octave in half position!'

'I have just one bow, a Nicolaus Kittel, which has been through a lot with me. It has broken four times, but I still prefer it to others by Tubbs and Tourte that I have tried over the years. When it has to be rehired, I just take a rest.'

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Discover more about Alban Gerhardt's early career in the May 1999 issue of *The Strad* by subscribing to The Strad Archive at www.thestrad.com/StradArchive.asp