



SATURDAY, APRIL 22, 2006

A Rare Combination

In Concert with Michael Kevin Jones
& Agustin Maruri

on the Cello and Guitar

British cellist Michael Kevin Jones and Spanish guitarist Agustin Maruri play separately as solo musicians or in chamber groups, but meet frequently to play concerts together and to make recordings.

Performances have taken the duo to Europe, as well as North, Central and South America, the Caribbean and Australia and New Zealand. They have played at famous venues in many of the major cities in Canada and the USA, including the Lincoln Centre and Roy Thompson Hall. They have also made recordings in collaboration with Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

The repertoire for this unusual combination of instruments includes rare compositions from the 19th Century by Leonard Von Call, Thomas Matiegka and Friedrich Dotzauer, as well as the original repertoire of the 20th Century. The success of the duo has inspired outstanding young composers such as Pedro Saez, Francesco Tellì and Stefano Catalano to write for them.



British Cellist Michael Kevin Jones pausing for a photo at last week's duo concert with Agustin Maruri. — Photo by Patricia Groves



Spanish Guitarist Agustin Maruri performing in Muscat to a full house in the Jabrin ballroom at the InterContinental Hotel



By Dr Patricia Groves

ONE summer in Madrid, Spanish guitarist, Agustin Maruri and British cellist, Michael Kevin Jones decided to play together in the city's annual concert series, as an experiment. That was sixteen years ago and they have since become one of the world's very few established cello guitar ensembles, perhaps the only one.

The two musicians had met by chance that fateful summer when Agustin had been asked to play chamber music and was looking for something different and original for his ensemble. Normally the guitar is paired with voice or violin. Agustin had had Michael on the cello and was impressed. "I liked his playing very much. It seemed an ideal combination. The only problem was in finding a repertoire. I discovered that, in the 19th Century, a crossover instrument called the *arpeggione* was invented. This hybrid instrument looked like a cello, was played with a bow, but had 6 strings with frets like the guitar. Schubert composed a lovely piece to assist in the birth of the new instrument. Nevertheless, luck was not with the *arpeggione*, and it is now only in museums."

But the concert that Michael Kevin Jones and Agustin Maruri gave for cello and guitar that summer in Madrid was a great success and many people encouraged them to continue as a duo. Their first CD featured more than seventy minutes of original music for the cello and guitar and sold out quickly. Agustin's research yielded a number of historical and contemporary compositions for this rare combination of instruments. Michael and Agustin set to work improvising with existing pieces for voice and guitar, substituting the cello for the voice. It was from the voice and guitar repertoire that Agustin and Michael chose their opening set last week's Muscat concert.

Evocative Sounds of Spain

La Sol de Espana, the Chacon of Spain is a collection of 19th century Spanish romantic melodies. "The songs are very sweet and unpretentious with old fashioned escapist lyrics from what is a sad, war-torn century for Spain. This is when the Spanish idiom of tragic love was lost. When you remove the words of the songs and reveal the purity of the melodies, the music becomes very beautiful."

The cello is an instrument that can express pure emotion, in the depths of tragedy to the soaring flight of feelings in joy, while the guitar is an evocative, romantic instrument that takes us dream and excites us with dramatic contrasts. The combination is especially well suited to the Spanish sensibility of tragic love themes like *Don Quijote y Dulcinea*, which

came next on the programme. We heard excerpts from a compilation of original compositions by Erik Marcheli, inspired by Spain's most renowned literary work, *Don Quixote de la Mancha*, expressly composed for Michael Kevin Jones and Agustin Maruri in 1999.

Don Quijote y Dulcinea is high among the compositions cherished by Agustin: "It is a gorgeous piece, pure romance and belongs in the winners' circle. This composition is all about love. The most deeply felt love is one that is unrequited. *Don Quixote* is obsessed with the beautiful *Dulcinea*, an ideal maiden who unfortunately exists only in his mind. This story speaks the truth about illusions in love, because when we are in love we project everything on the loved one, even our own souls."

Agustin is explaining a central drama in Miguel de Cervantes' classic novel first published five centuries ago in 1605, but timeless. It is about a self proclaimed knight errant, Don Quixote, who roams the countryside on his old skinny horse, passionately chasing his dreams and illusions. And it is about the iconic romance of Spain.

Agustin Maruri and his Guitar

The story of how Agustin Maruri came to play the guitar is also a tale of romance. And it begins in church. "I went to a Catholic school where we had to attend the grand mass each Sunday and there was wonderful organ music, very often Bach. We have to recognise that the Church has done a great deal for art, especially in painting, sculpture and music. During mass, I found it hard to concentrate on the service, but the music would wake me up; I could not resist it."

"I can still hear Bach's *Prelude and Fugue* and I can see the lady sitting at the organ in the church, playing with utter beauty. I told my Mother I wanted to play the organ, which of course was not an instrument suitable for a house. Instead she suggested the guitar, but I was strongly opposed. I saw the guitar as a popular instrument, unworthy; not serious and noble like the organ.

My Mother was very clever; she bought me a long playing album with Andres Segovia on the classical guitar, and so I found out that the guitar is really a wonderful instrument. And that was the beginning of my love affair with the guitar. To honour the 20th anniversary of Segovia's death, in 2007 I am preparing a tribute. I am going to record about seventy-five minutes of Segovia's own compositions. These are original, unknown works; and I am going to play them on Segovia's own instruments borrowed from a small museum in Spain."

Agustin is currently playing a freshly made instrument which he commissioned, according to his own well-researched

As we listened to the sonorous, moody cello interwoven with the bright delicacy of the guitar, it seemed as if the two instruments had always been together

requirements, from one of Spain's premier guitar makers, Ignacio Rozas. The new guitar is made from rare Brazilian rosewood and Canadian red cedar, both personally selected for the quality and 'colour' of sound that the raw pieces of wood produced when tapped.

The new rosewood-cedar instrument sent Agustin into raptures. "This guitar is incredible, just a miracle. I am mad and crazy about it; I am very, very happy; very much in love with my new guitar". It is hard to listen to Agustin and not to wish you were a musician. Music, for this guitarist, it what saves him from the inevitable pain of life and the destructive power of the passing years, "which seem to take away all the wonderful things we have come to love or need. My family wanted me to be a lawyer or a diplomat; and I was told that, as a musician, I would never have money. This is to a certain extent true; I am not rich, but I have something that makes me happy every day. — Music."

Cellist Michael Kevin Jones

Michael Kevin Jones first heard the cello played at school in the UK and immediately fell in love with the musical 'colour' and the deep melodic sound of this beautiful instrument. He was thirteen years old and had been playing the piano for a number of years, but it seems Michael was fated instead for the cello. "The piano was not really for me and I was too lanky for the violin; but when I heard the cello, everything came together, almost like a star burst". Still, Michael grew up in the David Bowie era and had enduring fantasies of being a rock musician.



This romantic CD, based on a theme from the classic novel *Don Quixote de la Mancha* by 17th Century Spanish author Miguel de Cervantes, sold out after the concert

Michael said that this all changed when he met Agustin and began to reach a deeper level of appreciation in classical music. "Agustin helped me a lot in finding the true character of this music."

The Spanish connection was critical. "Spain saved my life. I had been studying in Germany and might have become a professional there with minimal work hours, good money and a pension. But I knew that, under these conditions, playing becomes like a routine job and there is little joy in it. One day I saw a position for the cello advertised in Barcelona and I could feel my heart race. I was sure it was right for me; and so off I went, just like that! I'd rather live a little dangerously, as if I have gypsy blood". Now Michael has a small house in the south of Spain near Gibraltar and rents an apartment in Madrid. He travels the world in concert with Agustin and would not exchange his life with anyone, or for anything.

Michael has a very fine cello which he found tucked away in a dusty corner of an old shop in Madrid. And he could just tell that it was an exceptional instrument. Michael paid not a small sum for the old cello and spent more to have it transformed. As one would expect with such a story, the cello turns out to worth more than triple the original investment; and its already lovely sound just keeps getting better. While the instrument has been dated to circa 1840-60, its origins are a mystery. Michael, ever a romantic, senses that it came from Italy and is therefore part of his heritage as his maternal grandparents were Italian.

Along with many others, I had been looking forward to this special concert which promised to be quite wonderful, but which was hard to imagine because of the unusual instrument combination. As we listened to the sonorous, moody cello interwoven with the bright delicacy of the guitar, it seemed as if the two instruments had always been together.

Whether the two musicians, each a brilliant virtuoso, took dramatic contrasts, or flowed together with the music, or chased each other in rhythms of chance, the interplay of the two instruments was both natural and magical. And always exciting. At the end of the concert, the audience could not stop clapping. The encore was absolutely exquisite — *Ave Maria*, a breathtakingly beautiful rendition.

I will have to say that interviewing Agustin and Michael was just about as exciting and interesting as hearing them play. I met Agustin with all his enthusiasm and musical passion the day before the concert, and Michael immediately afterwards, in the thrilling atmosphere of a successful performance. While Michael was telling me his cello stories, Agustin kept bringing us food and making us feel happy and comfortable. It was plain to see that the two colleagues are thoughtful friends who like each other as much as they do the gorgeous musical life they have built up together.

For a truly excellent concert here in Muscat, thanks are due to the Embassy of the Kingdom of Spain and to the Ambassador, Juan Luis Flores who graciously hosted the evening, fulfilling his opening promise of "very beautiful music which comes from Northern Europe and the Mediterranean, and yet is universal ... with a Spanish accent."