



Denis Azabagic

Denis Azabagic (Bosnia and Herzegovina), is one of the most compelling classical guitarists on the international concert circuit today. He performs concerts around the globe, maintaining a balance between his solo recitals, chamber music with the Cavatina Duo, and engagements as soloist with orchestras.

Azabagic's flawless performances have set a standard for the new generation of guitar players. He has won twenty-four prizes in international competitions and Mel Bay has published a book based on his experience and insights on the subject of competitions. As a guest instrumentalist and soloist Azabagic has appeared with the Chicago Symphony, Chicago Sinfonietta, Tallahassee Symphony, Illinois Symphony, Sacramento Chamber Orchestra, Madrid Symphony, Traverse Symphony, Monterrey Symphony, L'Orchestre Royal de Chambre de Mons, among many others. He has also collaborated with the Casals Quartet, Civitas Ensemble and the ensemble Music Now. Azabagic's love for performing extends to sharing with others his knowledge of music making.

He frequently offers master classes while on tour, teaches at the University of Illinois and is the head of the Guitar Department at Roosevelt University in Chicago.

by ANA M. VERNIA

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Ana M. Vernia **Denis Azabagic**, is today a reference for the interpretation of the guitar. How do you see the international panorama regarding the interpretive quality?

Denis Azabagic

I think that there are always players who will lean more towards the technical precision, and leave much to be desired in terms of musical expressivity. This certainly is case within the guitar world, but I am certain that this is not typical just for the classical guitar, but applies to other instruments as well. However, there are many players that I find have great expressive qualities and transcend the instrument. I am glad to have many of those great guitarists as my colleagues and friends. This past August I have been a member of the Jury at the International Guitar Competition "Francisco Tarrega" in Benicassim, and it was great to see many young players with very strong personalities.

AV Given your career, we can understand that music is part of your life, what other things fill your day to day?

DA My family, teaching, mostly...being with friends, reading,...

AV Now we see you in a high position regarding the quality of music. Have you had difficult times?

DA Yes of course. I was born in former Yugoslavia and in 1991 the civil war broke out and my parents sent me to the Netherlands to avoid being drafted into the Federal army. I was a student at that time, at the Music Academy in Zagreb, Croatia. One of my fellow students ended up in the Croatian Army, so theoretically we could have been fighting each other...those were terrible times...being in another country (The Netherlands), uncertainty arising about my future, financial and emotional hardship... I did what I had to do to go ahead, and my wife Eugenia helped me tremendously through those times.

AV We know that you also develop a teaching task (classes, training courses, etc.). Do you perceive education very different from when you started studying music?

DA There are certain principals that I apply to myself and teach to my students, which are the same that were taught to me when I was student by my teachers: diligence, precision, understanding of the written score (notes, rhythm, dynamics, phrasing...and all other indications written by the composer), style, expression, esthetics, imagination, translation of feelings into music, story-telling, stage presence, ...

The technology has changed, but not what we use it for...we have more technological tools to learn ear training, theory, music history, we have much more audio libraries available to us instantaneously, but we still have to make good use out of them. So, I am prone to say that in essence, it is more the same than it is different.

I was lucky to have had several really great teachers. My first teacher, Predrag Stankovic taught me more than just how to play the guitar, but at very early age introduced me to aspects of phrasing, style, imagination, expression...In Zagreb, with Darko Petrinjak I learned a lot about analysis and disciplined and methodical approach to

learning how to play better and how to interpret different styles. In the Netherlands I was looking for a best education possible, and I ended up asking my wife Eugenia's teacher, principal flutist of the Rotterdam Philharmonic at the time, Jo Hagen, to give me some lessons. I did that because I sensed I could get incredibly valuable knowledge from this musician, and so it was...he taught me how to think as musician, how to think as orchestral player or a conductor. These are the pillars of my musical education. All of them very passionate about teaching and they transmitted their knowledge with ease.

For those reasons I think education is more the same than different than before, in a sense that we always will need a great teacher to transmit and inspire the students. Technology can not do that.

AV You usually take a risk in a new, contemporary repertoire. Do you consider that audiences are capable of new musical challenges?

DA Yes, and also I think audiences are hungry for new music. New music does not have to be something written in a very contemporary and hard to understand language, but it can also be tonal. With my duo partner, my wife Eugenia (Cavatina Duo), we commission new works for flute and guitar (and other instruments), and we tend to lean more towards those composers who's language is more tonal than not. It is our preference. We have done several projects including commissions of new works. Balkan project, based on melodies from the part of the world I am from (Balkans), Sephardic Journey, based on old Sephardic melodies and now we are working on a new project, River of Fire which is based on music of Roma people. Composers we are commissioning are using the music of Roma people, tracing their travels from India to Spain...

So far, the new works we have commissioned have been very well received and I am convinced that we (performers) need to work on bringing new repertoire to the stage, and we will always find audience for it.

AV How do you see the future of Education and Musical Performance, under your international gaze?

DA There are few aspects here I would like to address. In US there is a very strong movement of involving entrepreneurial skills into the musical education program. This is reflecting the current economy, in which more and more musicians are making their living from different sources of their musical activity (performance, education, music administration, etc...). It is almost as each individual has his own business to run, and for this students need to learn skills that will enable them to successfully operate in this way.

So, for example, we (faculty of Roosevelt University) are working on implementation of a requirement for our undergraduate students of music, in which they will present a musical project that will not only consist of a music recital, but contain another component, relative to their recital that will have entrepreneurial or academic character, for example, they will have to present their final concert in a venue outside the University and arrange for all logistics necessary for a presentation of a concert (dealing with the venue, printing the program, promoting the concert, etc..)

Another aspect, that actually worries me, is that here in US, we have many private Colleges and Universities, and at the end of the day, these institutions have to operate as a business, meaning they have to earn money, which comes from the students enrolled. So, in order to make the quota, and even to grow, the Universities need to enroll a certain number of students, and the competition among universities is fierce, so this leads to situation where universities are enrolling students into their program which are not ready to start musical education at the University level. In many instances we find students who are not able to keep up with pace of the instructions simply because they do not have a sufficient foundations, especially in music theory and solfeggio.

AV Finally, what advice would you give to current students, and future interpreters?

DA I find it difficult to give general advice. Many students are asking general advices, and the best I can say is that they have to learn, learn and learn, to seek good mentors, good colleagues, to work hard and to be persistent. Their challenges will be different than the ones my generation faced, and as it is challenge for anyone, at any given point of time, one has to observe it's own environment, and make best decisions at the time. Be critical of yourself, do not expect anything from anyone, work hard...

AV Thank you very much for your attention and time for ARTSEDUCA

DA Thank you. ♦