

Interview with Duo Guitartes (Anne-Kathrin Gerbeth and Bernhard Dolch)

Photo: Manfred Pollert



Duo Guitartes

remarkable career. In just over ten years they performed more than 2,000 concerts worldwide, which played a considerable role in helping this configuration to achieve a breakthrough. From that time onwards, guitar duos which performed as a fixed line-up (rather like string quartets) were formed all over the world. Of course we've met a few of them, which has been very rewarding.

4. *Is the existing repertoire all Spanish, or have you found examples from other countries?*

Numerous compositions for two lutes were written during the Renaissance and Baroque periods, in the Netherlands, Italy and Germany among other countries. Famous composers included Francesco da Milano, Georg Philipp Telemann, and Bach's friend Silvius Leopold Weiss. Lute duos were also popular in England during the Renaissance.

After this period, until the emergence of the Presti/Lagoya-Duo, works for two guitars were almost exclusively written by Italian and Spanish composers. In the course of the last half century, works for two guitars have fortunately been written by composers from all over the world.

5. *I note with pleasure that you play English lute music. Does the music lie easily on the guitar, or does it require adaptation? Does it suit most guitars or only certain types?*

The only lute music we will perform at the EMF are the two works by John Johnson, a member of the court of Queen Elizabeth I. Because the Renaissance lute was tuned in a similar way and had a similar number of strings, Renaissance

1. *How did you come together? Did the idea of playing together come up at once, or was there a gradual discovery of what you could do?*

We initially met as teenagers at a master class; Anne came from East Berlin, Bernhard from the western part of the city. But we first really got to know each other when studying under Joaquin Clerch in Düsseldorf. Our motivation to play together as a duo grew out of the fact that when interpreting complex sheet music a single guitar is subject to severe limitations regarding articulation, embellishment and the difficulty of playing individual melody lines independently of one another. A guitar duo, on the other hand, has far greater possibilities and this felt extremely liberating musically for both of us. That decided it.

Also we were (and still are) very unhappy about the fact that famous composers rarely write for the guitar. One reason for this is the difficulty of creating a sophisticated tonal language on one guitar, which as a rule necessitates a deep understanding of the instrument. As previously mentioned this works much better with two guitars, and we hope to make it easier to win over reputable composers to write for this line-up in order to expand the serious guitar repertoire.

2. *What instruments do you play? Which types of guitar sound best together?*

We play instruments by Yuichi Imai (Japan). Which instruments you feel harmonise best together depends on the philosophy with which you approach chamber music: two radically different-sounding instruments will expand the tonal palette, but this may be problematic when you want them to blend and create a single sound.

We decided on clear, bright-sounding instruments from the same luthier, because a clear and slender tone allows dense arrangements to remain transparent, and also because this bright sound is well suited to Renaissance and baroque works originally written for harpsichord, which was very important for us. There are also many situations in our repertoire where we want to sound like 'one guitar'.

3. *Is there a tradition for guitar duos, at least in Spain? Have you been able to meet other duos?*

In the classical period, works for two guitars initially enjoyed considerable popularity. The best known performers came from Italy and Spain, but usually lived in Vienna and Paris, or even in London. Some of them played in duos alongside their activities as soloists, for example Italian artist Mauro Giuliani with his daughter Emilia, or Fernando Sor and Dionisio Aguado from Spain.

After the classical period the guitar duo became less important, until the 1950s when the duo Ida Presti and Alexandre Lagoya began a

works for lute are wonderful to play on the guitar. It may just occasionally be necessary to transpose a bass note up one octave. The works by Dowland and Philipps which we are performing in Dorchester are our own arrangements. Philipps' *Pavana* was originally written for harpsichord, and for Dowland's *Lachrimae* we based our arrangement on the version for five viols and lute. When planning the programme for this concert, we decided against further original lute duets and preferred these arrangements because in our opinion the *Lachrimae* for viol and Philipps' *Pavana* offer a much more exciting tonal language than the majority of lute duets, which are usually rather unsophisticated.

Which guitars are best suited for performing lute music is a matter of taste, though bright-sounding instruments may be closer to the original sound of the Renaissance lute than others.

6. *Inevitably most of what you play has to be arranged for the medium. What are the problems you encounter with this, and what kinds of music have you found most suitable?*

The question of how to approach arranging serious compositions initially confronted us with a number of very fundamental questions:

Is it disrespectful towards the compositions to adapt them? Does it make sense and does it have any value artistically? Why bother? At first we tried to resolve these issues by only arranging works which in our opinion could be realised on two guitars in a way which measures up to the original in terms of artistic value and dramatic effect. For example, if we are arranging a composition for harpsichord, with the exception of a few octave transpositions we can play the original score. Although we cannot play embellishments or arpeggios on the guitar with quite the same brilliance as is possible on the harpsichord, we have a broader palette of dynamic possibilities and numerous sound colours, so that melodies can be made to sing more and complex passages rendered more transparently than is possible on the harpsichord. Our intention is to avoid any artistic loss, so that the arrangement is on a par with the original. Some form of reworking was always essential for us because we really wanted to help expand the very narrow repertoire for guitar.

In the course of time we have become less strict and have come to believe that an arrangement for two guitars, even if the original is more effective, can still have artistic value as long as it genuinely reflects the character of the work and is musically convincing.

We encounter a variety of different problems here, depending on the literature. Works for harpsichord are generally fairly straightforward, whereas compositions for piano or larger ensembles confront us with a wide range of difficulties, which is one reason why we rarely arrange such pieces. To mention briefly two major difficulties: the range of the original is often far greater than that of the guitar. We generally deal with this by transposing the piece into a more suitable key, which necessitates as few (artistically acceptable) octave transpositions as possible. Passages which are very typical of a particular instrument can of course also be problematic. If we are unable to render such passages so that they also sound typical of the guitar, then we do not pursue the arrangement further. We therefore tend to prefer works which are not focused too strongly on the specifics of any one instrument.

7. *You have also commissioned new works. How many so far? Do composers welcome the challenge of this unusual combination or do they have difficulties?*

To date, eleven works have been composed specifically for us. We only ask composers to write for us if we really love their tonal language: we do not want to simply première the piece and then consign it to the archives. We want to be able to play works that have been written for us frequently and over a long period of time.

To our surprise, the few composers whom we have asked were almost without exception extremely open to the proposal, for which we are most grateful! If a composer has no experience of writing for the guitar, we send them examples of all the playing techniques we know, as well as recorded and sheet music examples of representative parts of the repertoire, and also help with the writing process if desired. Fortunately we haven't experienced any difficulties here.

8. *Can you say something about the two pieces by Joseph Phibbs, one of which you will première in Dorchester. How were they commissioned? Were you able to work with the composer?*

In Dorchester we will perform a new composition by Joseph Phibbs which has no title as yet and of which only a short interlude exists. His very intimate *Serenade* we already performed in 2014 at the chamber music festival O/MODERNT in Stockholm.

Joseph Phibbs came to our attention through his famous composition *Rivers to the sea*. After that we listened to everything by him that we could lay our hands on, and completely fell in love with his way of composing. We immediately asked him if he could imagine writing something for us, which he did and for which we are most grateful. The *Serenade* is one of our favourite repertoire pieces. We haven't yet worked together with him in person, but will do so before recording any of his pieces.

9. *In arranging a programme for a concert, what are the principles you like to follow?*

Usually we have many more pieces in mind that we would like to play than time permits. If a festival requests us to propose a programme with a particular theme we try to select pieces from our repertoire as well as fresh works which interest us, to create a programme which, depending on the occasion, offers a suitable mix of sophistication and more entertaining elements. Here we like to juxtapose compositions from the Renaissance, Baroque and Classical periods – related by a common theme – with works from the 20th and 21st centuries. At guitar festivals, on the other hand, an overall theme is not of primary importance for us. Here we usually concentrate on presenting new compositions or new arrangements.

Duo Guitartes are to give a recital at this year's English Music Festival to include music by Purcell, Dowland, Peter Phillips, Joseph Phibbs, John Johnson, Vaughan Williams and Stephen Dodgson. See page 6 for more detail.