

Chris Anderson, These Days

transcribed from the recorder of Jim Christopher

Cultural Trends Chronicle recently sent our esteemed commentator Jim Christopher to catch up with classical guitarist Chris Anderson. They met at a little bistro in Frederick MD. We last talked to Chris in November of 2008. What's he up to these days?

JC - I was beginning to think you were six feet under. It's been forever since I saw you. What has your energy been fueling?

CA - Study.

JC - Such as?

CA - Piano, English lute music, time, velocity.

JC - So what have you figured out?

CA - There's a lot to know, but I think it boils down to something pretty simple. You just have to play every note perfectly. Who knew?

JC - How's that working out for you?

CA - Some days better than others. It keeps me busy.

JC - You haven't performed recently?

CA - My last concert was in 2009 in Washington DC.

JC - What's that place you are coming from?... Hagerstown?

CA - Yeah, that's where I live. I guess the other way of answering that question would be to say that I was born in Toronto. We moved when I was seven. Or maybe something a bit more vague and mysterious... "I have been re-evaluating things lately." Which answer are you looking for?

JC - That explains it.

CA - What?

JC - The coming and going. Must be a Toronto thing.

CA - What?

JC - That classical guy... Gould something?

CA - Glen Gould, the piano wizard? I'm not a fan of his Bach but, wow, it's amazing to hear him play.

JC - Yeah. He was from Toronto. He was huge. TV appearances, signed contract with Columbia records, concerts all around the world. He walked away from performing at the height of a massive career.

CA - At the age of 35. He kept on recording. And he got interested in producing movies.

JC - What's that about?

CA - Probably a couple of things. He mentioned in interviews that performing made him feel like a "Carnival Barker"... and that the recording industry would make recitals unnecessary as we know them. He was wrong about that of course.

JC - How about the Carnival Barker thing? Was he wrong about that too?

CA - Though don't you think that YouTube videos might make recitals less relevant? I have seen some really interesting, well done, intimate ones lately. They are short which is good for shrinking attention spans, visually interesting, good sound, you can watch them in your puppy pants. Seems like the bus is headed in that direction.

JC - What about the Carnival Barker thing ?

CA - Well, ...the required level of shameless self-promotion has really blown up over the last few years. That's for certain. It's amazing what you have to do to break through the noise. It's even more amazing what's tolerated... or expected. For a private type of guy, I confess that it makes me uncomfortable sometimes. It would be easier on me if I was promoting someone else... That and I get ugly when I play.

JC - What?

CA - I get ugly... when I play. You know. Make faces and stuff.

JC - You've seen videos of that English guy? And the cello player?

CA - Yeah. But it makes me ugly man.

JC - Just own it. What about the guitar makes it tough to walk out on a stage?

CA - You have got to be pretty full of yourself to think that whatever it is you are selling is worth an hour of someone's undivided attention. It's a leap of faith to step out in front of a crowd by yourself. Maybe not so much as a piano player, but you would have to be nuts to walk out there with nothing more than a guitar.

JC - You've done that dozens of times.

CA - Exactly. The volume level and the limited amount of dynamic range and can make it tough.

JC - Whatever. You have heard of amplification haven't you? Too bad you are not performing, you could try it.

CA - Hey, hold on. We are supposed to be here today to discuss the fact that I want to start to perform again, not that I stopped performing 10 years ago. And yes, I have started to use amplification... well I never did when I started performing, than I did for awhile, then I *really* never did, and now I do again... let's call it "Sound Re-Enforcement".

JC - OK. How does that work?

CA - If you are playing outdoors, you need to Amplify it. Just make it louder. Probably a bunch louder. But in a concert room, you can increase the volume just to around that of a mid-size grand piano. Probably not even that much. The sound of the guitar itself should not be overwhelmed, just augmented. That's "Sound Re-enforcement."

JC - What else is involved?

CA - The trickiest part is the placement of the microphone. That will vary from room to room. But if you are using a well placed condenser mic, a quiet amp, and the right type of speakers, you can get pretty close to a "flat response", meaning the color or tone of the guitar should not change at all. The sound of the instrument just becomes... bigger.

JC - So exactly how is it that your past audiences have even heard you without amplification?

CA - Well, here's the thing. I heard Segovia and Bream play halls seating 2,000 people

about a half dozen times. They of course never used any sort of amplification. Two minutes after they started, it sounded like they were playing right beside you. The mind fools you. Psycho-acoustic stuff.

JC - Really?

CA - Many classical guitarists make the mistake of thinking that the way to fill a hall with your sound is to play really loud. That's kinda sorta true but actually, the real trick to hitting the back wall of the hall with your sound is to play with a big, fat, absolutely pure tone. Round, symmetrical sound waves travel farther. Angular, distorted sound waves die 30 feet out.

And a big, fat pure tone is very important when using a microphone. Garbage in, garbage out. If your sound has flaws that distance helps to mask, they will pop out like a sore thumb through a speaker.

JC - I hadn't thought about that.

CA - From my very selfish point of view, the audience hearing the music is not the issue that gets corrected with Sound Re-enforcement. To deliver a truly artistic musical performance that is worth the audience's time and money, I have to be able to get my head lost in an envelope of sound. I shape the sound, drive the emotional character and feel of the piece, and very importantly, I need to be able to focus on what I am doing and what comes next. Not to complain, but there are a boatload of notes to remember.

When I am in a beautiful sounding room, it's a really thrilling experience to play there, and the guitar can sound really fine just as it comes. There are not many things I have found that top playing a concert in a great sounding room. But from many stages, if not most stages, it just feels like I am playing in a shoebox filled with cotton balls. The sound just doesn't come back to you. It's no fun when you are working a room like that.

JC - Do you like sounding louder?

CA - The ironic, big unintended consequence from using Sound Re-enforcement is that it gives you the freedom to play quietly. From a purely objective musical point of analysis, an unamplified classical guitar has a volume range of pianissimo to piano, really soft to soft. With a lot of work, the best players can push that up to a mezzoforte, which is loud enough to be easily heard, but not actually loud. Let's call it your normal speaking voice.

That being the case, when you are performing on stage without a mic in sight, for practical reasons you are almost always in the mezzoforte volume area at the top of the guitar's volume capacity. Relative to that volume level, a pianissimo can make for a risky, inaudible destination. Sections of music demanding contrasting loud and soft volumes can become flat and uninteresting to the listener. And any attempt at a genuine forte is likely to result in noise generated by nails and/or the strings hitting the frets.

With Sound Re-enforcement, the guitar's natural unforced volume can become the mezzoforte musicians expect. That gives you enough "headroom" left for actual fortes and the pianissimos can be appropriately colored without getting lost in the air. It's actually been a ton of fun experimenting with it over the last couple of months.

JC - So your next recital at the local church... you arrive with stacks of Marshall amps or what? All those speakers must look a little odd.

CA - Not at all. The technology has evolved. I have a mind-blowing little unit about twice the size of a six pack. It really packs a punch. 60 watts and one 8" speaker. It's all black, visually unobtrusive to say the least. It fits in a little shoulder bag. I could get on a bus midtown in NYC with this thing over my shoulder. I'd have an arm free for my guitar and the other arm for a bag for the Mic and accessories. Ride down to 13th street and do a gig. Uber back to the home base afterwards. No problem.

And I like it because it's a single speaker. I find speakers on each side of the stage to be confusing. One guitar should come from a single sound source. I like one speaker right beside me as I play. Behind me is even better if the room isn't prone to feedback.

JC - You thought of all this?

CA - I'm not that smart. I rarely have an original thought. I just edit and rearrange info. I saw John Williams use Sound Re-enforcement really well 25 years ago, and then again about ten years ago. Obviously everything about electronics changes constantly, but he was using equipment that was available at the time to achieve really solid results. In my mind, he has set the bar in this area, but it's easier now. And I think audiences have gotten to the point that they not only tolerate it, they expect it, and enjoy it. From an artistic point of view, the job is to make it an extension of your instrument. You have to use it with intention.

If you think about the amount of practice that a piece of music requires before you perform it on stage, that's an indicator of the amount of time you need to spend working with your gear before you perform. It's not a "plug & play" type of solution.

JC - Interesting stuff. I hope I'll get the chance to check it out. Just curious... who is inspiring you lately?

CA - Antonio Stradivari.

JC - Seriously? The fiddle maker guy? You're considering becoming a luthier? You are all over the place, man.

CA - About 600 of his violins survive. Of course they are regarded as the finest violins ever made. But I was surprised to learn recently that the small percentage of those violins that represent the very best of his work, you know the real gems, his "Golden Age" instruments, they were built when he was in his seventies. Sign me up for that. Being a certified, tried and true procrastinator, I'm glad to know that I have four more years before I get busy.

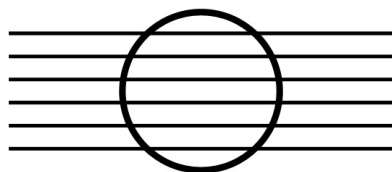
JC - Good one! Hey, I have got to get going. Looking forward to seeing you again soon. We could make it a regular thing. Can you get the check? I forgot my wallet.

CA - Really?

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