



"Being a woman guitarist can be a positive advantage"

ELEFTERIA KOTZIA

Interview & photos by George Clinton

One of the pleasantest personalities on the English guitar scene during the period 1984-5 belonged to Elefteria Kotzia — yet another of those talented Greeks. Elefteria was here on a British Council scholarship to study renaissance music and 20th century composers; the former with lutenists Nigel North and Jakob Lindberg. An enthusiastic guitarist herself, Elefteria's cheery smile could be seen at most of the London concerts. Her absences invariably coincided with a concert given by herself, for although she was here primarily to study, during her sojourn her private recitals for guitar societies etc., gained her a following, so that her London debut at the Purcell Room in October last was well enough attended — and reviewed.

Elefteria Kotzia was born in Alexandroupolis (where at sixteen she was to give her first recital) and studied at the National Conservatory in Athens with Dimitri Fampas. Later she travelled to France to study with Alexandre Lagoya at the National Conservatory of Paris. She has also studied with Julian Bream.

Here we must correct a statement we made in March issue concerning Elefteria's compatriot guitarist Elena Papandreou. We said she was the first Greek to win a guitar competition. We were wrong. And in connection with the subject under discussion, it is a pleasure to report that Elefteria has also achieved a First — the 6th International Guitar Competition in Milan.

Elefteria now lives in Paris where she enjoys a

busy professional life. She has given concerts in Spain, Hungary, Morocco, Tunisia, Greece, France and the U.K., here, apart from the aforementioned debut etc., she performed the Giuliani concerto in St. John's Smith Square. Elefteria's guitaristic enthusiasms extend to her teaching too. Since 1982 she has been on the teaching staff of the Conservatoire de Vaux le Peyil. "It isn't at all an austere conservatoire", said Elefteria. "It's very progressive, with new ideas. The staff are very young with a young director. I really enjoy teaching there."

Out of interest I asked her about the student's exam pieces: and she gave me the current list as laid down by the Federation Nationale Des Ecoles et Conservatoire Municipaux de Music, de Dance et d'Art dramatique (FMSC), explaining to me at the same time:

"The idea is probably very French. During the year my students work on more traditional material, but one month before their exams there are special works to prepare and perform by heart, completely unknown to them which they have to do in a short time and perform from memory. This starts in the first year. You'll notice that it's called *concours* — competition. When I gave the *concours* to enter the Supérieur National Conservatory I had to prepare in 1 month, the Prelude and 2 Gavottes from Bach's 4th Lute Suite."

As readers can see from the list, the works are both testing and interesting:

Débutant 1		Danza No. 1 (5 Danzas)	M. Parison
Débutant 2		Ballade No. 2 (sans ornements) (5 ballades d'antan)	J.J. Werner
Préparatoire 1		Pièce No. 10 (12 pièces rythmiques)	A. Miteran
	ET	La guitare baroque (menuet p. 2) (12 pièces faciles originales du 17ème siècle)	anonyme
Préparatoire 2		Orchidée (sans ornements) (Voyelles) pour guitar seule	J.M. Mourat
	ET	Sehr leichte Übungen opus 35 volume 2, pièce No. 14 ou No. 36 de la Guitare au XIXème siècle	F. Sor
Elémentaire 1		Petite ouverture à perser No. 1 (petites pièces intimes)	F. Kleynjans
	ET	Lointaine no. 2 (créole et Lointaine)	E. Vasquez
Elémentaire 2		Etude No. 5, page 6, (6 études pour 6 cordes)	P. Meranger
	ET	Fantasia del quarto tona pages 4 & 5. (Hispanae Citharae Ars Viva)	L. Milan/Pujol
Moyen 1		2 menuets de la 2ème suite page 17 (6 suites pour violoncelle volume 1 — transcription Sadanowski)	J.S. Bach
	ET	Ariette	J. Ibert
Moyen 2		Vals chôro (suite populaire brésilienne)	Villa Lobos
	ET	Presto (Sonate en ré majeur)	S.L. Weiss
Fin d'études		Sir John Smith's Almain (Collection Davezac)	J. Dowland
	ET	Chanson (Sonate No. III)	M. Ponce
Supérieur		Hommage à Tárrega (Garotin et Soleares)	J. Turina
	ET	Courante (avec reprise dans la 1ère partie seulement) (1ère suite pour luth)	J.S. Bach
Excellence		El Decameron Negro	L. Brouwer
	ET	1er mouvement (Sonate en do majeur Opus. 15)	M. Giuliani

I asked Elefteria if studying the lute with such scholars as Nigel North means that her future performances of the music would be on that instrument. To which she replied that as a guitarist she would play it on that instrument, adding that the present period of scholarship is a good thing in that everyone can hear how the music was played as far as style and manner is concerned. Nor is she interested in the compromise of a ten stringed guitar.

"The ten stringed guitar doesn't appeal to me. I have heard it in performance and it was quite a heavy sound for my taste. The guitar for me is the six string guitar. I think one can do so many things on it. All through the centuries we have had guitars with varying numbers of strings but the six stringed version has sustained."

A plus feature of Elefteria's programme is a healthy balance of popular classics — Albeniz, Granados, Villa Lobos etc., music from her own country, (Giorginakis & Fampas) and contemporary music. When I interviewed her before Christmas she was working on Tippett's *Blue Guitar*, and I notice that in her present recitals, for instance her recent, very successful concert on 5th April for the Havant Guitar Society, that this work was included in the programme — much to the enjoyment of her audience.

"I always try to have at least one modern work in my repertoire each year. Last year I did *Mosaïque* by George Delerue, the French composer who now lives in America. I love that piece, it's really great. He's not a guitarist-

composer and the piece isn't written in a guitaristic way, but it works well and I think the public and the critics really like it.

"Of course being Greek I like to play Greek music. So I include a work of my old teacher Dimitri Fampas. As well as being a teacher he is a very good composer. It was Fampas who started the guitar at the Athens Conservatory where there is the biggest tradition in guitar playing. I wouldn't say his music is contemporary in style — it's more nationalistic — his own ethnic origin comes through very well, and that's a great attraction of his pieces. George Anakis too is a wonderful improviser. When I was a student he hadn't started writing, and when I saw his compositions I thought God, they're so nice. These *Four Greek Images* is a wonderful piece. And *Dance of Clocks* too, is really good. His writing is inspired by Greek folklore but also jazz and other influences. And *Haliasas' Echo*... a wonderful piece — there's a lot of really good guitar music from Greece now."

"Next year I plan to do *Fatum* by Charles Chaynes, another French composer. I play music by Smith Brindle and Lennox Berkeley too; and of course I'll play *The Blue Guitar*, which I love; I think it's a great work. It's very well written. Also I think it succeeds well because of Julian Bream's involvement with it, in the sense of the fingering, for example, because everything is perfect for the instrument. I heard Bream play this at the Wigmore Hall and it was fantastic. He plays some pieces in such a way that it is unique."

"Unique in the way Susanne Mebes said could

actually prohibit anyone else playing it?"

"Well no, I think it is true that there are some performances you can't imagine otherwise, but after all it is music and I think that one has to give his own try. And if that was really the case, we would have a very limited repertoire because most of the important works of the 20th century were written for Bream and played by him in his genius way; so we would be in trouble if we didn't play these pieces."

Perhaps close proximity to the master induces enthusiasms rather than inhibitions. This was certainly the result of Elefteria's studying with Bream.



The guitar for me is the six string guitar.

"I first met him in Greece where he had come to give a concert; and it was unbelievable to hear him. It was hard to believe that I was even in the hall to hear this great myth. But I remember even in that moment, that I said to myself what a great idea it would be to study with him! I suppose everyone thinks that at those times, especially after the concert. Well I saw him in the Green Room and said "I would like to study with you." And he replied "I don't teach." "Oh", I said, "I thought you would teach at one of the big colleges, if so, I would like to come and study there after I have finished my studies with Dimitri Fampas." And Bream said "Why don't you go and study with John Williams?". Then I asked him if he was ever going to give any masterclasses. To which he replied that he did give occasional masterclasses but that he hears each player before hand, and if I was interested he would fix up an audition for me. So the British Council arranged things and I played for him. I asked him if he wanted me to play this suite by Bach or the Mozart Variations by Sor ... I thought it better if he chose because I couldn't

make up my mind. And he chose the Bach, the prelude and presto from the First Lute Suite, and one or two other movements. And then he asked for the Sor. I can remember it all as if it was yesterday; all my fear and admiration for him, and my playing, and what he said — everything. The memory is so strong; it was like magic for me of course. As to what he said, it was more afterwards that things began to sink in. You know sometimes there are things that you can't really understand at the moment you are told them. It's afterwards, even perhaps a while afterwards, when you have matured enough to think about them. He spoke about the Sor Theme, to think about Mozart, to listen to that composer, to play it like a Mozart theme and not like other influences I might have. Of course, in the Bach I was trying to imitate him from his records, and of course, it didn't really work.

"I remember Bream stressing that we must all have a convinced idea of our own conception of the work. You must put your stamp on the piece. Really it's like the theatre — say in the ancient Tragedies; you can see two or three of the big actresses, and each one plays it differently. Yet the images are there. But as I said what he told me took about three years to work through me."

"As the Russian proverb says 'You learn to swim in the winter and ski in the summer'. How important is it for a player to breathe in the culture of the music?"

"Very important, I think. If you are Greek you can never feel how it is to be under the weather in England, for example. It might sound strange to you but since I've been living here I understand much better the music of the English composers — even the lute music of Dowland. So when I chose to play English music it was obviously better for me to come to England than go to Italy. I think living in a country, its culture, climate, environment, all tend to change your personality a little. If you are an Englishman and want to play Spanish music you go to Spain. You discover things you can't even dream about. And all this effects your understanding and so the interpretation of the music. So yes, travel is important. But I love teaching too. It is very important to me, just as performing, because it sort of balances my activities well. Also you can learn much from your students, some of your solutions work well for yourself too."

"Are there any aspects of performance that you have to constantly work at?" I asked Elefteria.

"When you start playing progress is obviously much, much quicker. Then when you arrive at a certain level; at a higher standard, it is difficult to progress. Not in the technical way necessarily, but to give better interpretations. To do better and better I have to practise all aspects of my performance — interpretational and technical. Also improvement is very much tied to one's own development as a person, and as that changes so does one's performance."

"Looking back on your career so far, and I take it that at the start you were full of optimism, have things turned out to your expectations, or have

any illusions been shattered?"

"Obviously it has changed. It doesn't only apply to your career. When you're very young, you are much more idealistic and you think everything is wonderful, it's like a fairy tale. And then there are moments when you just feel it would be better to be a stone — without feelings. It's all part of growing up. But you can't tell a very young guitarist how things really are because he just can't take it in; he can't understand. When you're a kid you start the instrument and your teacher says you have a certain talent and tells you to go and practise eight hours a day — which you never do — and that you are going to be the best woman guitarist in the whole world."

"Do you ever envy your male counterparts as far as your career is concerned?"

"Sometimes, yes — when I'm not in my best moods I can think God look at this chap with his nice lady doing all his secretarial work, or his washing, or his cooking, his cleaning — or whatever. It's so easy for him to concentrate on

his priorities. But really, I wouldn't like to have a man around to do my chores. We women manage. And being a woman guitarist can be a positive advantage in a man's world, because there aren't so many of us around!"

Julian Bream happened to pop in to see us at the time we were transcribing the interview with Elefteria and we played him her demonstration cassette. We had played this ourselves a few times and enjoyed it especially Elefteria's performance of Albéniz' *Mallorca* (one of her own favourites) and the Greek pieces mentioned above. However, we were critical of the opening of Torroba's *Suite Castellana*, which seems to us a little turgid. I opined this to Bream to which he replied "Oh, I don't think so, it's a little laid back, but that's all right. I think that's very pleasant playing and a nice recording." We felt honoured, it's not everyday we have Julian Bream as a reviewer.