

Flute Talk

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Interview by Flutist Lisa Shroeder

The Energetic Passion of The Cavatina Duo

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As the room began to fill for the Opening Gala Concert at the National Flute Association convention in Kansas City, I took my seat in the audience and listened to the chatter around me. We were all waiting to hear a world-class flute and guitar duo perform Astor Piazzolla’s *The Four Seasons of Buenos Aires*. Originally written for Piazzolla’s quintet of violin, bandoneon, electric guitar, piano, and bass, the virtuosic piece had been rearranged for the night’s duo performance by a longtime friend of Piazzolla, Sergio Assad – a great guitarist and composer in his own right.

The lights dimmed as Eugenia Moliner and Denis Azabagic took the stage. *Cavatina Duo*’s dynamic presence and musicianship were felt right away, and the audience was soon transported into a world of strong conviction and passionate understanding of the tango.

Eugenia Moliner “grew up in Burrianna, which is in the province of Valencia in Spain. I am probably the first musician from my family. My parents loved art, but they had little knowledge of what it meant to be a musician. There was always music in our house, however. We listened to it all the time.

“Just before my 15th birthday, a neighbor asked my sister Minerva and me if we wanted to play an instrument. A few months later a flute landed in my hands, and I knew what I was going to do for the rest of my life. My sister chose voice and is now a great soprano, singing important roles all over Europe.”

Moliner studied briefly with Antonio Alapont in the Castellon conservatory and Dolores Tomas at the Conservatorium Superior de Musica in Valencia. While there she also met and studied with Jaime Martin (St Martin on the Fields, European Chamber Orchestra), who recommended that she study in Holland. Shortly after arriving in the Netherlands, Moliner met Denis Azabagic, who was also a student there.

She studied with Jo Hagen of the Rotterdam Philharmonic and Els Van Zundert of the La Mone opera orchestra in Belgium and worked on solo and orchestral repertoire, specializing in chamber music with pianist and chamber musician Jan Gruithuizen. To pay the bills she free-lanced and played in many chamber ensembles and orchestras.

Denis Azabagic is from Bosnia and Herzegovina. He was around six years old when he started playing guitar. “My parents enrolled me in music class and when the time came to choose an instrument I went for the electric guitar. However, that year a great classical guitar teacher, Predrag Stankovic, came to the music school in my home town and enchanted me with this instrument. After that I went to Sarajevo and studied with Mila

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Rakanovic. I longed for more education and found a great source in guitarist and composer Vojislav Ivanovic.”

After Sarajevo, Azabagic studied at the Academy of Music in Zagreb with Darko Petrinjak, but Yugoslavia, a six republic federation at that time, dissolved into an international armed conflict in the 1990s. To continue his studies Azabagic went to the Netherlands, thinking that it was a temporary visit until things in his homeland quieted down. They didn't for the better part of a decade.



Moliner and Azabagic married in 1993 and began playing flute and guitar together for fun. “Then we suddenly started playing more difficult repertoire,” Moliner states, “and around 1996 we did a tour in Europe and won a competition in Rotterdam, The Young Musicians of the Doelen. Neither of us thought the duo would be such a big part of our careers until the release of our first CD in 1999” which received rave reviews.

They began touring and playing in concert series and festivals around the world. “When we got the first reviews we were ecstatic and felt that we had to explore the possibilities of becoming a serious duo. That meant creating more

repertoire, recording, and performing as much as possible. After finishing our studies in Holland we moved to the U.S.” They arrived in a Chicago suburb in 1999 and are now both artist/faculty members at the Chicago College of Performing Arts at Roosevelt University.

The Duo's name is based upon a musical form – cavatina, which is a short melodic line used mainly in 19th-century operas. Moliner writes that “it is an aria sung with brilliant character. Beethoven also used cavatinas in some of his string quartets. We liked the meaning of the musical form and decided to adopt it for our name.”

When asked if there were any particular challenges for flutists working with guitar, Moliner responded, “I feel no difference playing with guitar, piano, or any other combination in terms of music making. Dynamically speaking, Denis has a big round projecting sound for a classical guitarist, and I know that is not common. We are both aware of the ranges and possibilities of our instruments and work hard to balance the instruments.

“Because of the flute's timber and monophonic nature it tends to stand out more than a guitar, but when the guitar part is well written or well arranged, it is like playing with a piano for the flutist, without the volume perhaps, but with a perfect sound level for chamber music.

“The concert hall in which we are performing often determines our dynamics, especially for me. Sometimes we play in large concert halls with 1200-1500 seats, and on those occasions Denis might need to be amplified. The usual concert hall size we play in is between 250-500 seats.

“Although very different instruments in nature, the flute and the guitar complement each other immensely. Segovia described the guitar as ‘a miniature orchestra with so many colors and possibilities. We think that there is so much more the guitar can do than provide a simple accompaniment. To keep the balance between the two voices and play music that has substantial rich parts for both instruments is fundamental for the future of the flute and guitar duo.”

Rehearsing

Moliner and Azabagic prepare their parts separately before putting them together. When they are learning a new program or preparing for a planned recording project, they rehearse together every day. Their strong work ethic produces results as well as fiery opinions. Each practice session can be intense and heated with disagree-

ments, which are not always pretty. However, this is all part of what makes Cavatina Duo's interpretation of the repertoire so rare and passionate.

"I consider myself very lucky," comments Moliner, "I play with a fantastic musician and an over-the-top guitarist. Yes, he happens to be my husband, and that makes it even better, but don't come near when we are rehearsing." She adds laughing. "On top of his amazing guitar technique, Denis has an incredibly loud sound for a classical guitarist."

"I just enjoy playing with Eugenia so much," declares Denis. "Sometimes it strikes me how lucky I am to play with a great musician and flutist, to learn from her, to be inspired, moved, to share this world of music together, to be on the stage together, to travel together. She is my wife, and we are sharing something very special." When asked about the most difficult thing associated with being in a duo with your spouse, Denis playfully comments with "rehearsing!" and jokes that it is best to always respond with "Yes honey!"

Repertoire

When choosing repertoire for performance or recording, Cavatina Duo gravitates toward pieces that appeal to them personally. "We play all styles of music – Baroque, Classical, Romantic, contemporary, and world music. Our backgrounds influences our choices; we are Classical musicians and that is what we play. We learn music that we feel will be a good addition to our repertoire list and that we sense will have a good response from the audience. That there is not a great deal of existing repertoire written for flute and guitar is not a strong enough reason to learn everything that is already available."

Throughout the years, the pair have discovered many unknown flute and guitar pieces, transcriptions, and arrangements. Some of their favorite transcriptions are Borne's Carmen Fantasy, Mozart's piano sonatas, and Bach's flute sonatas. One of the first pieces that the duo took on was the Piazzolla's Histoire du Tango, the only original flute and guitar piece that Piazzolla wrote. They have also recorded pieces such as the unknown and challenging Edison Denisow Sonata for flute and guitar.

"Whenever possible we aim to program original music for our combination, although sometimes we choose from the transcription repertoire. It all depends upon the concert venue and audience expected. Still our goal, even if we have to compromise a bit, is to find a balance between the best transcriptions we can find and works written originally for flute and guitar."

Choosing repertoire to record is handled differently, however. "Record companies very often want music that has never been recorded before, as well as a thematic CD, so we propose programs with those things in mind."

To Sit or To Stand?

Duos handle this question in various ways. Moliner says, "I sit when I play with Denis. The reasons are simple, first: we strive for sound homogeneity. Because guitarists don't stand up (and shouldn't, unless they want to be considered folklore musicians forever), we look for the same acoustical source level. The guitar has a beautiful sound, but it is not as powerful and projecting as a piano. Second: we want to be seen as a chamber group with both instruments having substantial roles. If I stand, we feel that the perception changes to soloist and accompanist. Our message is clear: we are a duo, and both have an important part in it."

Another area of contention for any group is the subject of memorization. "Denis performs all of his solo concerts without music, but with the duo, he doesn't feel it is necessary." Eugenia explains, "I've asked him many times to play the concerts by heart, and we have done it on some occasions, but he believes it is fine to play from the score in chamber music."

Program Order

Moliner spoke at length about program order. “We met a presenter long ago, before we were even serious about the duo. He expressed a few programming concepts that we still keep in mind today when we choose repertoire for programs. He said, ‘How you open and close the concert is essential for the success of the whole event.’

“We feel there are three important moments in the concert: the beginning, the ending of the first half, and the ending of the concert. Variety is certainly something to pay attention to as well. Choosing carefully makes a big difference and can make audiences love you or forget about you in two seconds. We choose the repertoire and the order very carefully to create momentum and energy throughout the entire concert.”

Commissions

Expanding the existing repertoire is a vital part of what Moliner and Azabagic do. “Finding funds to commission is the toughest part,” says Moliner. “We were awarded the Encore Grant in 2004 and have also sponsored some commissions on our own. It is important to create a connection with composers and awaken their enthusiasm for writing for our combination. Composers need to know the huge range of possibilities that our ensemble can offer.

“We commission pieces from composers whose work we like and then collaborate with them during the composition process. They also know our playing, our musical inclination and taste, all of which guides them in their work. The guitar is a demanding instrument to compose for. We want the guitar parts to be much more than purely accompanimental, so that is one of our demands. It’s also in composers’ interests to hear our ideas and concerns, so they can create a piece that we like. That way they end up in our repertoire.” Both Moliner and Azabagic feel most connected to composers such as Sergio and Clarice Assad, David Leisner, Alan Thomas, Carlos Rivera, Michael Karmon, Vojislav Ivanovic, and Alejandro Yague. Most of the music Moliner and Azabagic have commissioned is by composers from around the world, who have arranged dances and songs from Bulgaria, Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia, and Rumania.

Touring

Moliner and Azabagic know first hand the importance of introducing audiences around the world to great flute and guitar music. “There are many advances in technology, but nothing compares to a live performance. The electrifying moments that can occur during performances in a concert hall can’t be explained. They are the gift that we as musicians can give to the audience. We try to do just that to develop faithful followers. Play good music and create a kind of magic in the process.”

They also know about difficult situations that performers can encounter. In 2004 they performed at the Chiang Kai-shek National Hall in Tai Pei (Taiwan) for the first time. The country was in an outrage when they arrived because the Prime Minister had been shot the day before. “A half a million people were protesting outside the cultural center, which also houses the Music Hall and the Theater Hall, and we were caught in the middle of the protestors on our way to the concert. It was a bit frightening but we relaxed after we got into the building. The audience was great and very responsive. They invited us to tour Taiwan two years later – when the political climate was a bit calmer.”

Recording

Cavatino Duo has recorded five CDs, the most recent being the April 2010 release of *The Balkan Project* (Cedille Records). Later this year, they will also release an all-Piazzolla CD (Bridge Records) that will feature

The Six Tango Etudes. Written originally for solo flute, it will be presented on the CD with a new guitar part composed exclusively for Cavatina Duo by the three time Grammy Award winning guitarist and composer, Sergio Assad.

They always record in the same room together, as opposed to laying down separate tracks in separate rooms, as is often done. They describe the process as “playing a concert, just that there are only two or three people on the other side of the glass. They are our audience and recording engineers and producers at the same time.”

Promotion

Moliner admits that it is important to have a booking agent and a record label, but many groups start with neither. “We were lucky with our first CD, recording for a small Spanish label, Opera Tres. They paid everything, and they have great distribution, which is the most important thing. Now we are very happy with Cedille Records, a label that puts all its energy behind every release, and we are also very happy with our agent, Lisa Sapinkopf.

“I think it’s important to promote yourselves and eventually an agent will happen. Prepare good repertoire and make a demo, then send it to presenters as well as agents. Do showcases to get known around the country, and most important – be persistent. Things will start going sooner than you imagine!”

Flute and Guitar Ensemble

Creating awareness of the possibilities of the flute and guitar duo is a key part of what they want to accomplish. Their desire is for the guitar to always have intrinsic and complex harmonic lines, equal to the flute. The duo has already added almost a dozen challenging pieces to the flute and guitar repertoire, but this is just the tip of the iceberg for them. Moliner comments, “First of all we want to be seen as an established chamber music ensemble that can create unique programs and attract wide enthusiastic audiences, who love the combination of our sounds and expressive instruments. We would like the flute and guitar duo to be seen with the same eyes as other ensembles, such as the string quartet, piano trio, and wind quintet.”

The Cavatina Duo remains optimistic when discussing the diminutive perception of the flute and guitar duo that they sometimes encounter. “There are some disheartening moments when presenters perceive the duo as a lesser group than other established ensembles, and choose not to hire us, or even consider us, but those moments are not important at all. These are just bumps in the road. The good moments outweigh them by far.”

Moliner believes that it is just a matter of time before the flute and guitar duo gains notoriety. With more and more duos being recognized at the forefront of classical music, the outlook is promising. She encourages others to “Believe in yourself, enjoy making music together, and be strong when people are negative about the future of flute and guitar ensemble. “It is hard in the beginning, as it is with any enterprise that you start, believe in, and pursue. You must follow your convictions and things will develop with time.

“We are always very happy when we see other duos doing well. Just look how many string quartets there are. There are even some agents who only deal with string quartets. So, if string quartets with all of their good repertoire can establish successful careers, we will also do that in time. Flute and guitar has the potential to become a respected ensemble – we just need more of us to make it happen. Sometimes when we suffer setbacks, we comfort ourselves with the thought that, in a way, we are pioneers. It is difficult breaking ice, but it is also fulfilling. We are doing what we love and paving the way for future generations who will follow.”

When asked what the recipe is for a great flute and guitar duo, Eugenia and Denis humbly respond, “We enjoy playing together, work hard at it, and take very seriously what we do. If that makes us great, we’ll let others say it.”