

A Conversation with Jorge Morel

by Ana Maria Rosado

ARGENTINEAN GUITARIST and composer Jorge Morel has been delighting audiences throughout the world for over four decades. Born on May 9, 1931, Morel has arrived at a point where the dreams and ambitions of his youth have materialized into a successful career, and he continues to set new goals for himself. In his compositions, Morel combines the rhythms and formal structures of Argentinean and Latin-American folk music with a harmonic language derived from jazz. Indeed, jazz was as much a part of Jorge Morel's upbringing as was the folk music and tango of his native Buenos Aires.

Early on, Morel created his own kind of career combining classical training with a passion for popular music. After his arrival in the U.S. in 1961 he regularly performed as a soloist in New York City jazz clubs, often sharing the bill with such jazz greats as Errol Garner, Dizzie Gillespie, Stan Kenton and Herbie Mann. During this same period he made his successful Carnegie Hall debut. Morel has written an extensive array of works for solo guitar and for guitar with other instruments. In addition, his arrangements of the music of George Gershwin, Leonard Bernstein, and the Beatles, among others, are highly regarded by guitarists, and are among the most effective and idiomatic for the classical guitar.

This past spring Morel performed a recital and conducted a masterclass on the interpretation of Latin-American music at Jersey City State College. It was my privilege to share the stage with Jorge Morel in a performance of his *Fantasia de la danza* for two guitars, and to interview him for GR.

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AMR: Tell us about your musical background. Was your interest in arranging and composing a result of your early training?

JM: Not really. My first teacher was a woman named Amparo Alvariza, and then I switched to Pablo Escobar, with whom I also performed a great deal. He wanted to help me develop a career as a classical

guitarist, and took me to perform for a local radio station in 1950. I studied all of the traditional repertoire with him until I graduated at the age of 18. It was soon after that I developed an interest in composing and arranging; even though I could perform the traditional repertoire I felt I wanted to do something of my own. I would have loved to be another Segovia but I never thought I could play like him, so I had to develop my own "something."

During this time I listened to a lot of jazz—Benny Goodman, for example—but I did not want to become a jazz guitarist. The American music I enjoyed most, like Gershwin for instance, was written for the piano, and I loved the guitar so much that I felt I had to give up the idea of playing that music. Another important influence was the Argentinean folk music that was in my blood—is in my blood! I listened to this music from an early age, and also played it when I was very young.

AMR: Do you still consider yourself an Argentinean composer, given your thirty years of residence in the U.S.?

JM: Yes, of course. I want to be considered an Argentinean composer, but I have lost some authenticity. I was never very genuine anyway, because although Argentinean folklore is very beautiful, it is limited. So what I did unconsciously was to forget about the formal structure of that music and concentrate instead on the rhythmic patterns of a particular dance. (However, I do not want people to dance to my music!) And, again, mixed with my heritage from Argentina is my interest in jazz. I have absorbed so much of the music of the great American composers—Gershwin and Duke Ellington, among others—that all of a sudden in the middle of one of my compositions some blues might appear. And it does belong to the piece because that's me, that's the way I feel it. After all I'm part American, part Argentinean, having lived here half of my life!

AMR: Did you ever consider devoting yourself entirely to playing jazz?

JM: No, I never thought I would do that. Working at the clubs sometimes I thought I could play jazz, but then I never learned how to improvise!

AMR: *In what direction do you think the classical guitar should move to increase its audience?*

JM: That's a tough question. I think that music has to be more understandable to audiences. Many of the new pieces being performed today, usually long pieces, are not accessible (although I like some very much). That is probably one of the reasons why audiences started to stay away from guitar recitals.

AMR: *Your third guitar concerto features a great deal of complex orchestral writing, with long passages in which the guitar is silent. In addition, your recent recording with a jazz ensemble seems to indicate a desire to write for other combinations without the guitar. Is this so?*

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is in or out of fashion.”

JM: I don't think so. I don't know how much time I have left in my life, but for the present my wish is to continue writing for the guitar with orchestra, or maybe with string quartet, which I have done in the past. The recording with the jazz ensemble came about because for years my producer, Tony Acosta, had wanted me to arrange some of my solo pieces for an ensemble. We got a great group of players together and little by little I began arranging the pieces, and I tell you, it took me longer to arrange these pieces than to write the entire concerto! When writing for orchestra you know what the sound will be, but with this instrumentation (guitar with keyboard, electric or acoustic bass, drums and congas) I had to modify the textures so that the bass, for instance, would not interfere with the guitar.

AMR: *How do you approach composing and arranging, and how would you characterize your compositions?*

JM: At the premiere of my new concerto in Poland, people said that it sounded like Broadway or Hollywood music. And it does: it could be the theme from a movie. I am a romantic and I will always be, whether romanticism is in or out of fashion, or whether we are in a period of neo-this or neo-that. I was never interested in composing atonal music. I think of the guitar as much as the music itself. In arranging, the goal is to make the piece idiomatic. The *West Side Story Suite*, for instance, is guitaristic—otherwise, I wouldn't play it. In composing, I like to use two part counterpoint because it is perfect for the guitar. I choose harmonies

that go along with the melody without distorting or confusing it. I also try not to make the music too difficult: it is unnecessary to write a passage that is unplayable.

AMR: *Your compositions have been performed and recorded by such artists as David Russell, Raphaëlla Smits, and the Prague Guitar Quartet, to mention a few. Would you consider giving up performing to devote yourself to composition?*

JM: No. Even though I feel that the pressure of performing does sometimes interfere with my composing, I do not want to give up performing.

AMR: *More and more performers around the world are recognizing the importance of Latin-American music and are including it in their programs. You were among the first to apply the highest standards to this music. Was this an accident or foresight on your part?*

JM: A little of both. I always hoped for a time when Latin-American music would be more recognized and respected. I feel that my time is now—what I wished for twenty years ago has arrived. There were many moments in my career when I thought that I was wasting time. But I kept going because I believed in the music—not only my own, but that of other composers in Argentina and other Latin-American countries. I'm lucky that I perform my own pieces and people are exposed to them that way. If nobody else plays my pieces, audiences can still hear me!

AMR: *What are your future plans?*

JM: Mainly to continue composing—I want to write as much as I can and the best that I can. And to play, of course. I do not want to give that up! □

Ana Maria Rosado is a concert guitarist from Puerto Rico. She is Assistant Professor of guitar at Jersey City State College.

SELECTED WORKS

Solo

Little Rhapsody
Prelude and Gigue

Introduction and Dance

With Orchestra

Romance
Suite Del Sur

Fantasia de la Danza
Guitar Concerto

Arrangements

Variations on I Got Rhythm (G. Gershwin)
Three Preludes (G. Gershwin)
Holiday for Strings (David Rose)
Sleigh Ride (Leroy Anderson)
Themes from “Dances with Wolves” (John Barry)

Other

Berceuse (guitar & voice)
Fantasia de la Danza (arr. for two guitars)
Suite Del Sur (arr. for guitar quartet)