

FROM ARCHETYPAL ALBENIZ TO ARRANGEMENTS OF JAZZ, GUITARIST JASON VIEAUX IS AS VERSATILE AS THEY COME. **MUSO** CAUGHT UP WITH HIM AS HE WAS FINISHING HIS LATEST SOLO RECORDING

BIG NOISE

Plectrum spectrum



It's difficult to know where to begin with Jason Vieaux. How about his acclaimed recordings, two of which have shifted more than 40,000 copies. Or his appointment as an artist ambassador for the United States Information Agency. Or his competition successes. Maybe we should start with his appointment as chair of the Cleveland Institute of Music's guitar department, making him the youngest department head to serve at the conservatory. It's an action-packed and diverse life.

When *Muso* spoke to the *New Yorker*, he'd just stepped out of the studio and wrapped up his latest solo recording: 'It's actually something outside of the normal classical music pantheon. When I was in college I was very heavily into jazz of all kinds of styles and the musician I really gravitated towards was Pat Metheny. Ten years ago, I started doing all these solo arrangements of his music and I've finally been persuaded to put them down on disc.'

It's a big musical leap from Vieaux's last recording of music by Albéniz but in a way there's a close connection between the two: Metheny's music, like Albéniz's, is concerned above all with melody and harmonic colour.

'There's a certain portion of Metheny's music that really speaks to me,' Vieaux suggests. 'It has an uplifting, sort of comforting quality. It doesn't seem processed or produced and it's driven by a fantastic sense of melody with a rich harmonic background underneath it.'

Vieaux's interest in sound and colour is reflected in his championing of new guitar works. While his concerto repertoire includes the

usual suspects – Vivaldi, Ponce and the inevitable Rodrigo – it's notable for its concentration on more modern material. John Corigliano's 'Troubadours' Guitar Concerto features, as does Allen Krantz's *Songs of Innocence and Experience* and the concerto for flute and guitar by Augusta Read-Thomas. He's even given the world premieres of concertos by Bernard Rands (in March this year) and by Fazil Say, the maverick Turkish pianist-composer.

Vieaux would like to do more: 'I have only just turned 30 and I haven't yet had the opportunity to get some of the composers I like to write for me. I play *Synchronisms No. 10* by the Argentine composer Mario Davidovsky for guitar and tape and that's the sort of piece I relish. There's a certain sound he conjures – I'm fascinated by what composers are able to hear.

'It doesn't even have to music that I feel will be super-important a hundred years from now,' he insists. 'What matters to me is that it has a unique sound vision. Corigliano, for instance, really has something and I think he's one of the finest orchestrators we have ever seen. Again, I'm drawn to his music because it has many colours. But I don't consider myself in the vanguard of modern music. My appetite is pretty varied.'

Such eclecticism goes some way to explaining his admiration for British guitarist Julian Bream. Now retired, Bream did more than anyone to bring the guitar into classical respectability. An advocate of new music as well as a champion of 16th-century lute music, Bream commissioned many composers.

'In terms of his approach to using the instrument, I don't think anybody had a stronger sense

of conviction than Bream,' Vieaux states. 'He was a god to me. He wasn't necessarily always the most consistent player – there were some amazing performances and others less so – but in the end he was a true artist. Interpretatively, there was always a gigantic picture going on in his head. That's an aspect of performing that a lot of guitarists miss but that's very important.'

'Cellist Yo-Yo Ma has that kind of vision too. So does a pianist like Richard Goode. Music isn't merely impulsive with these guys. It's highly intelligent – they don't just play the first thing that comes into their minds. I've had to really think about how to articulate my own music-making,' Vieaux admits. 'I guess I really am a slave in one respect to the form and structure of a piece. I have a natural desire to convey that. Maybe I'm an idealist but I believe, with the right approach, you can get the intricacies of form across to people even if they're not themselves so musically aware.'

Vieaux is now investing some of his musical passion in the next generation of guitarists thanks to his role as head of department at Cleveland. It's a home from home – he studied there himself with John Holmquist.

'John not only helped me with my technique but instilled in me a sense of musical listening. For him, it was about being as selfless as possible by using the music alone to get the message across. Today, the proficiency on the instrument is at a level that's never been seen. I'm still working on my own technique but, as a teacher, I'd like to think I can give something back.' ■

For more on the artist, surf www.jasonvieaux.com

Photo: Robin Holland