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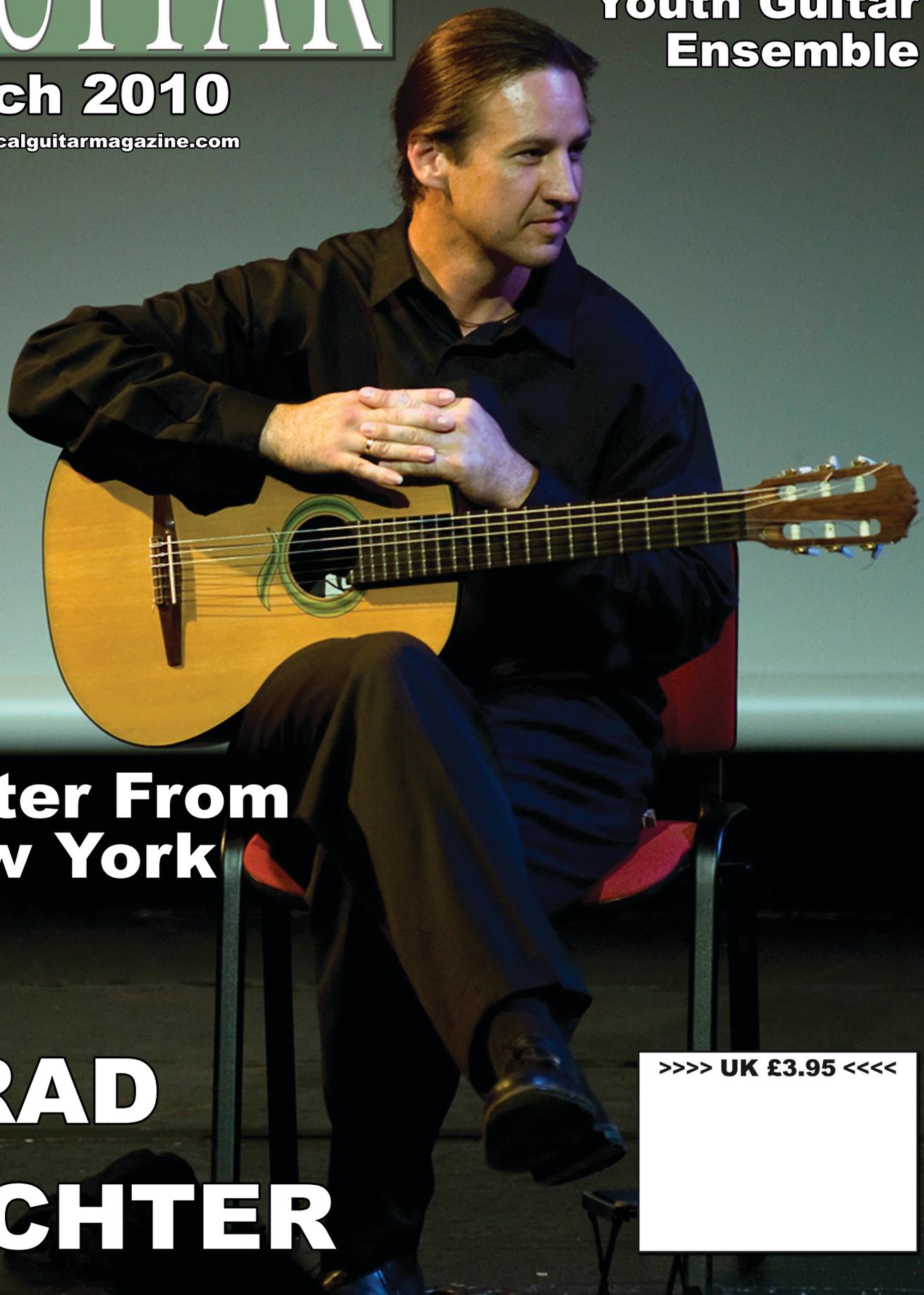
GUITAR

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2009 World Youth
Guitar Festival

2009 National
Youth Guitar
Ensemble



Letter From
New York

BRAD
RICHTER

>>>> UK £3.95 <<<<

BRAD RICHTER

Interviewed by GUY TRAVISS

AT THE AGE OF 12 Brad Richter started playing guitar by teaching himself to compose for the instrument. At 18, having had no formal training, he was awarded the Presidential Scholarship to the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago where he began performing, composing, and eventually teaching professionally. After completing his undergraduate degrees in performance and composition, Brad accepted a scholarship to the Royal College of Music in London where he studied with Carlos Bonell. He became the first guitarist in the college's history to win the coveted Thomas Morherr Prize, and went on to win the RCM's guitar competition before completing his Master's and returning to the US to continue his concert career.

Throughout North America and Europe Brad has performed as a soloist; with renowned chamber ensembles; and in duos with artists such as Grammy award winning cellist David Finckel of the *Emerson String Quartet*. His performances and compositions are frequently heard on national and international radio broadcasts, and he makes regular appearances on National Public Radio's *Performance Today*. As part of his compositional output Brad has also written and performed the score for the Emmy award winning PBS television series, *The Desert Speaks*. GSP, Mel Bay and Acoustic Music Records publish Brad's Scores, Books and recordings, and his new CD with cellist Viktor Uzur, *String Theory*, is available from Blue Griffin Recording. While at home in Tucson, Arizona, Brad is Artistic Director of *Lead Guitar!*, a non-profit organisation he co-founded in 2006 which establishes guitar programmes in schools around the United States with large populations of at-risk youths.

In the wake of a relatively recent emphasis on composition with an academic component at its core, what do you think is the significance of the composer-performer in our time?

This is one of the things that makes guitar very significant within the classical music world, more so now than ever before. There are more composer-performers associated with guitar than any other instrument. I'm not entirely sure why this is, but perhaps it has something to do with the guitar's improvisatory nature or with its relatively small library of recognisable classics as compared to other string instruments or the piano - especially prior to the 20th century. Some of the most exciting music in the history of our instrument is being written now by Leo Brouwer, Sergio Assad, Roland Dyens, Andrew York, Gary Ryan, Ben Verdery and many others. It's a very inspiring time to be a guitarist/composer.

Are we looking at a different thing from composer-performers of the 19th century?



Brad Richter.

I think there is a difference. We have certainly learnt from composer-performers of past generations, but we have also gained from the significant ranks of non-guitarist-composers such as Rodrigo, Britten, Walton, Henze and Ponce. We can borrow from both the developmental depth and scope of these composers as well as the more idiomatic writing that guitarists can offer.

What are your thoughts on the potential pitfalls associated with composer-performers?

It's easy for guitarist-composers to fall into the trap of writing music that fits well under the fingers but lacks development or depth. We're all susceptible to this, but it's a two-way street. It is as much a danger to compose with a limited understanding of the instrument for which you are writing. Some music can be interesting on paper or in one's head, but it will not necessarily sound the way it was imagined simply because it doesn't fit the instrument for which it was intended. I try to approach composition

from both directions. Some of my music is very guitaristic because I have written at the instrument; other pieces I primarily compose away from the guitar. This does produce two very different types of piece.

How are they different?

I feel my best compositions are those conceived primarily on the page, but I don't think audiences would agree. The music I write with the guitar in hand seems to be appreciated that little bit more. When I work at the instrument I try not to be completely idiomatic, trying not to let the guitar control everything I do. Still, even these pieces have a starting point in my head, which I then try to express on the guitar.

Why do listeners appreciate idiom do you think?

It spawns virtuosity that may be easier for non-players to appreciate. Also, because composer-performer music tends to fit the instrument well, it's often easier to create a bigger, fuller sound or sonority working in this way.

At which stage does your music crystallise into a score?

I have gone about this from almost every angle – composing pieces from beginning to end without ever having once played them (some movements from *A Whisper in the Desert* for example), to performing pieces without having made an attempt to score them out in any shape or form (*Elation* for instance). Ideally I like to develop a long phrase or perhaps an initial idea with the instrument, and then work with a score. At least this way I can make changes according to voice leading and other principles that might be less intuitive to me. Often I identify something that could be more interesting, but it appears the way it does because a shortcut has been taken to make it more playable. There can be quite a bit of back and forth but eventually this process gets me to where I want to go.

So the act of committing music to the page produces changes in itself?

Definitely; not necessarily in a way that's obvious to the listener but to some extent changes are always made. When I write music down I begin to question what I am playing, and sometimes things that originally sounded fine are revealed differently. Then there are times when you don't realise what you are playing until you attempt to score it out. I can become so caught up composing at the guitar that I neglect certain aspects, relationships or balances in the music. Writing music down helps to analyse these elements and bring them into line.

How do you arrive at the decisions you make?

Painstakingly. I am a relatively slow composer because I spend so much time exploring alternatives. I will continually work variations until I decide on something concrete. I do this more than is helpful probably; I can be very obsessive about things like that.

Do you aim for a definitive score?

I try to listen from many different perspectives; listening to the whole, the section, phrase and so on. I feel I get it right in the end. There aren't many pieces

for which I have a sense of having made an 'incorrect' decision or left something out. Once they are scored they rarely change. There are some musical and expressive indications I would change if I were to revisit old scores but not many notes.

Your identity as a musician resonates strongly with the composer-performer since your performance output is almost exclusive to your own music...

This is where I feel most comfortable. I spend most of my time either composing or learning pieces I have written. It feels a bit like a calling really, it's what comes naturally and it brings me the greatest joy musically. Also, having spent so much time composing, I just feel there are other players who can perform the guitar's repertoire better than I can. I would rather share with my audiences the thing I do best.

Learning guitar through your own compositions evidently brought you to where you are today. Do you see any other advantage to that situation?

Perhaps there were some advantages. I tend to be good at exploring the instrument and finding new sounds. Relying on an aural approach to an instrument changes the way you play and write. For me the downside was not learning to read music or play much of the repertoire until I was nineteen years old. Although I could play my own pieces well, in order to establish a real technique I had to start over with the Carcassi Etudes and the like at a late age – when I started at the Conservatory. I grew up in small town in Oklahoma, a relatively isolated place at the time. There was no teacher to study classical guitar with that I knew of, but I had an independent streak and was very keen to be my own teacher. There's a saying in the US about representing one's self in court that applies: 'He who serves as his own attorney has a fool for a client!'

Do you feel you have links to popular culture because you fit that model of an individual who is responsible



Brad Richter and Viktor Uzur.

for their entire musical output rather than just a part of it?

I do, and I like to be one of those performers who can draw people into classical music - a sort of bridge performer if you like. One of my strong points is getting an audience who may not be interested in classical guitar to enjoy a classical guitar concert. Much of the music I play crosses boundaries between various stylistic genres. Maybe then, because of that, people who watch my concerts might go on to enjoy a more traditional guitar recital, since they will have an understanding of the instrument and the concert format. It's a way for them to access it I suppose.

Do you think this makes you more adaptable to a changing audience?

Let's take clapping between movements as an example of how audiences are changing. We see more and more of that now. If someone wants to clap I have no problem with that! However, if I'm going to perform a piece that for some reason works better with silences in between the movements - a piece where these silences are part of the music and interrupting them breaks the spell - then I will say something explaining that. But most of the time it's fine. I see a lot of performers in other instrumental genres getting a little critical of their listeners for responding in this way, which really only serves to reinforce a negative stereotype. It shouldn't be about making audiences love music the way we do; performance is a two-way communication. Audiences for the fine arts are shrinking, along with their attention spans. Meeting them half way is good for the longevity of classical music. Right now I think guitarists are better at that than any other instrumentalist.

You tend to maintain a dialogue with your audience during concerts. Do you consider this a feature of your performances?

Often people comment on the stories I tell about the pieces I play; in a sense they have become part of the performance, along with a bit of banter in reaction to a particular audience or setting. I have been talking to audiences in this way since my first concert. I think it was frowned upon in the very beginning, but now it is almost a requirement and people have come to expect it. It's great to see players are becoming very good at talking with their listeners; If you can do that then it allows people to have a break from their focus which they will appreciate. It also allows audiences to feel like they are getting to know a performer on a personal level.

How do you use these opportunities?

I feel it's another way for an audience to connect with the music. For example, I have a suite called *The*

Harvest. If I were to call it a sonata, which it essentially is, and take away the description that accompanies the piece in concert, it becomes a lot less accessible for the average listener. I don't want to imply that this is for 'uneducated audiences', but there are always people who need something to help bring them into the music. That's how I was first attracted to the guitar as a child - at a Michael Hedges concert; he was a great story teller. Sometimes having programmatic titles can draw people into the music more effectively, even though the music itself clearly isn't any better for having a different label.

Do you feel your compositions have very strong extramusical characteristics?

My best pieces tend to be those that began with a concept before the first note. For example, I wanted to write a suite of five movements about the Colorado River - a picture of five different spots along its path. I picked the areas I wanted to describe musically and spent a lot of time thinking about sounds and settings before writing anything at all. This implied a structure over the entire piece and assisted in the transition from one movement to the next. *Four Native Tales* is a similar example - four songs each based on a Native-American origin story. For a good month before I wrote any music I would visit the library and research Native-American stories. After reading hundreds I decided on four I felt were both interesting and contrasting, and composed music using those stories as a foundation. Again this offered a cohesive

structure ruling the entire work. Using material like this as a framework can offer new ways of imposing structure on music, and it helps with variety. I also enjoy developing new sounds and idiomatic techniques that will help me express the story I'm trying to tell - such as the sound of dripping icicles in *Snowmelt* or the sound of a rattle snake in *How Death Came*.

Your role as a composer-performer has also extended into your ensemble work...

I have always enjoyed writing chamber music. Right now that energy is focused on The Richter Uzur Duo. Viktor Uzur and I started playing together in 2005 after I was commissioned to write a chamber piece for Weber State University in Utah where he is Professor of Cello. We have been composing and arranging together since, which seems a fairly unusual practice within the classical music world. Because we live 1,000 miles apart we do a lot of collaborating by phone and internet. We sculpt the general shape of the piece to begin with, and then write our individual parts separately; leaving space for the other in due course. He may write some of my part and I may write some of his, but we are surprisingly

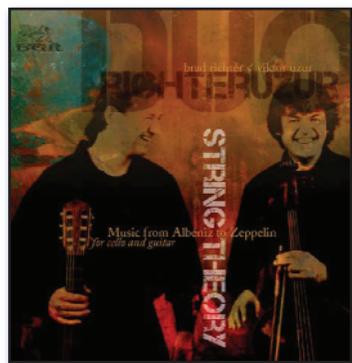
"One of my strong points is getting an audience who may not be interested in classical guitar to enjoy a classical guitar concert."

good at working without stepping on each other's toes. When we come together, usually on tour, we have a pretty good idea of the direction a piece is going to take, and there may already be a structure in place for us to fix things onto. A lot of time is spent sitting and writing together, and we challenge ourselves to write and premiere new work each time we travel. It can be great fun. It's a very healthy challenge for me as well. Viktor is a very good improviser and has several other strengths, so it's good exercise keeping up with him.

You have also worked with cellist David Finckel...
David represents something quite different. He is an amazing cellist in a different way, an absolute master of the repertoire. He has won six Grammys with the Emerson String Quartet and is the artistic director at The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Centre, so he is very well established. In 2003 he commissioned me to write a piece for us to play together. I was impressed with him as a musician, person and music entrepreneur, and he was so successful that it made me want to move up to his level. I worked extremely hard on that composition for the better part of a year, even hiring a cellist to play parts so I could hear it more accurately and make changes before presenting the piece to David. I think that experience propelled me forward in several ways.

As a separate branch of your teaching you are founder and artistic director of Lead Guitar! Can you tell me more about how this was established?

Lead Guitar! is a charity whose mission is to set up guitar programmes in schools where students may be at risk of failing or becoming involved in substance abuse or crime. Currently we have thirteen programmes running in schools throughout the southwest US. I do a lot of the teaching but I also have some very good co-teachers that are helping the programme grow. This all began around ten years ago after I gave a concert in Page, Arizona – a small town on the Navajo Indian reservation. After the concert I was asked if I would be interested in visiting the high school there, because they supposedly had some talented guitarists. I honestly wasn't sure at the time; this place was really in the middle of nowhere. As it turned out, guitar was a cultural staple on the reservation, and they really did have some amazing young musicians. One player had learnt part of a Bach lute suite and several other things by



ear - with horrible fingerings and bad technique, but he could play them (a lot like myself at that age). I arranged to return the following year for two weeks so I could spend a decent amount of time with these students. The

Classical Guitar Magazine



Brad Richter.

visits became longer and longer each year. Around year five we decided to take six to twelve students on a week-long backpacking trip into some very remote locations, with their guitars. The school councillor came too and it allowed these kids a chance to heal a couple of things and do something different. PBS heard about it and decided to make a documentary based on what we were doing. A philanthropist and guitarist named Marc Sandroff saw the film and contacted me with the aim of developing the guitar programme in Page into a national programme, now called *Lead Guitar!* That was maybe four years ago; it's taking off beautifully now.

Complete Works and Discography

Compositions solo guitar

title	published or commissioned by	year
Song of the Wild (32 mvmts)	Acoustic Music Book	2008
Angular Tango (2 mvmts)	Mel Bay	2003
Hard Times	Mel Bay	2002
Three Little Nightmares (3 mvmts)	Mel Bay	2001
A Whisper in the Desert (4 mvmts)	Mel Bay	2000
Four Native Tales (4 mvmts)	Guitar Solo Publications	1998
Fractal Reflections	Guitar Solo Publications	1995
Eight Preludes (8 mvmts)	Guitar Solo Publications	1994
The Harvest (3 mvmts)	Guitar Solo Publications	1992

Chamber music

La Folia	Blue Griffin Recording	2009
Go Ask the Little Horned Toad,	Chamber Music Plus/Tucson Museum of Art	2008
Navigating Lake Bonneville	Weber State University	2006
Fragments Transcending David Finckel	(Emerson Strg. Qrt./Lincoln Center)	2003
Frost Songs	Lathkill Music Publishers	1996
When the Caged Bird Sings	Lathkill Music Publishers	1995

Recordings (of original compositions)

String Theory (guitar, cello)	Blue Griffin Recording	2009
Navigating Lake Bonneville	(soprano, choir, perc., cello, guitar, narrator)	2007
A Whisper in the Desert (guitar)	Acoustic Music Records	2004
Fractal Reflections		1997

Awaiting Publication (solo guitar)

Child's Play		2009
Frying Pan		2008
Celebration Day		2008
Straelener Wald (2 mvmts)		2007
River Songs (5mvmts)		2004