

SPIRIT OF THE MAESTRO



*Eliot Fisk crafts a brilliant tribute to Segovia
while forging into the future of classical guitar*

By John Lehmann-Haupt

IN THE SUMMER OF 1971, THERE were several fine guitarists in Oscar Ghiglia's master class at the Aspen Music Festival. But the 16-year-old Eliot Fisk was clearly top dog. With his large, supple hands and powerfully retentive mind, he could tackle a big piece like Joaquín Rodrigo's *Fandango* and perform it from memory with only two or three days' work. This was some three years before his introduction to Andrés Segovia, with whom he studied and remained in close contact until the Maestro's death in 1987.

It's a truism of classical music that the performer should serve the intentions of the composer, conveying musical essence with clarity and balance. But times and tastes change, and performers today have largely abandoned the expressive accents (particularly in Baroque music) of yesterday's giants—violinist Jascha Heifetz, pianists Vladimir Horowitz and Artur Schnabel, cellist Pablo Casals, and Segovia himself, all of whom are generally regarded as part of the last wave of the 19th-century Romantic virtuoso tradition.

By these lights, Eliot Fisk is something of a paradox. Very much a musician of his generation, he's recorded everything from densely ornamented readings of Bach (informed by his study with Yale-based harpsichordist Ralph Kirkpatrick) to the thorny atonality of Luciano Berio's *Sequenza XI*, venturing far afield from the mellifluous Segovian aesthetic. Yet his latest CD, *Segovia: Canciones Populares*, is an unabashed celebration of the

Maestro on a number of levels. First, there's the program; there are a dozen pieces transcribed and originally recorded by Segovia himself, four preludes and études written by him, four works composed in his honor, and—as a special plum—the premier recording of 16 recently discovered folksong arrangements by the Maestro. And while you generally won't get far into a Fisk recording without noticing his turbocharged chops, the emphasis here is on sonority and lyricism. Fisk employs Segovia's rubato, portamento, and dramatic pauses in a way that is often very beautiful and never slavishly imitative.

I met with Fisk on a late fall afternoon in his publicist's New York City apartment as he was preparing to kick off his U.S. tour. Over the course of three hours, we discussed style, technique, and the evolution of an artist with a career that's about as international as you'll find; Fisk lives in Granada, Spain; tours worldwide; and holds teaching positions at both the Mozarteum in Salzburg, Austria, and Boston's New England Conservatory of Music.

When I asked Fisk about the apparent disparity between his obvious admiration of Segovia and the prevailing tastes (to which much of his work seems to adhere), he made it immediately clear that this wasn't exactly a new issue for him. "That's why I took so much heat for so many years," he said. "Within my generation, I've always been the bad boy. But of course things that are powerful and true will ultimately retain

their validity, and Segovia's was a powerful, true, honest utterance. It's ultimately my strength, because the young people love me; guitarists who are 19 or 20 want to play like this. They don't want to play that stiff, boring way, like all those classical guitarists who have played like typewriters and sewing machines, who are the reason that the audience for classical guitar has fallen off. You've got to communicate; you've got to sing! Trying to present this polished exterior that sounds like a recording—don't ever buzz the guitar, don't ever play a forte, have motionless hands—is a dreadful, utter, bloody bore!"

It's not hard to imagine such high-octane opinions ruffling a few feathers. But in my conversation with Fisk, it emerged that what might seem provocative or incongruous about him is in fact the true expression of a nature strongly accented by contrast. He's naturally athletic, for one thing, and is apt to liken fingerboard prowess to the skills of Michael Jordan. At the same time, the Yale-educated Fisk is a bona fide intellectual. He's fluent in Italian, Spanish, and German, gets by in French, and is working on Turkish (which he describes as a "glorious, complex language"). His conversation is studded with literary and philosophical allusions. He emanates an almost brash confidence, but he also displays an uncomplicated, friendly warmth and a genuine sense of community and service, stemming at least in part from his Quaker background.

The element of contrast extends into the fabric of Fisk's family as well. While his gifts are obvious, his younger brother (and only sibling) has Down's syndrome, and it was this, oddly enough, that first brought the guitar into Fisk's hands. "My mother thought that singing songs to the accompaniment of the guitar was something we could all do together as a family," Fisk said. "This never materialized, but the

should study classical guitar because from there I could go and do anything. (By the way, that's not true.) But I did start with someone who had taken a few of Segovia's classes in Siena, Italy, in the summers of the 1950s. He was not a great guitarist or a great teacher, but at least he was basically classical."

Although Fisk is a thoroughly trained musician, his much-noted technique is at least partially self taught, developed

"When I came back from Sweden, I got a good teacher for the first time, William Viola; he still is in Philadelphia and teaches on the weekends. He was a great devotee of Segovia, and he would take his fingerings off the records. He was a very demanding teacher; he wouldn't tolerate any technical imperfection. He also made me make a list of all my pieces, and each week he'd go down at random and say, 'All right, next



A young Segovia, one of the last Romantics. Fisk (right page) was one of the Maestro's favorite students.

guitar did enter the household in this fashion. My father had played a little banjo in college, so he went out one day and came back with a \$40 banjo and a \$60 guitar. They were terrible instruments. I started out on the banjo and stuck with that a month, but it hurt my fingers too much—the action was so damn high! But I was still plunking around with the guitar three months later, and my mother offered me lessons. One of the members of my parents' [Quaker] meeting was the first double-bass player of the Philadelphia Orchestra, Roger Scott, and he said I

largely as a means to explore untapped areas of repertoire. "In the year 1965–66, my father had a sabbatical year in Sweden," Fisk continued. "He's a professor of marketing, interested in the question of how to make marketing socially and ecologically responsible. I was in elementary school that year, and when I came home from school, I didn't have my usual playmates. I could have been very lonely, but I began to practice the guitar for two or three hours each day, and that's when I really started to create my technique, from the time I was 11.

week *Fandanguillo* by Turina and *Tarantella* by Tedesco, and Prelude of the first [Bach] Lute Suite, and Sor variations. The next week it would be five other pieces. So he established very good study habits in me at an early age. He wasn't so good for the right hand, but for left-hand precision he was terrific. And then the contact with Oscar Ghiglia was a wonderful stimulus to my development, although he has never been one to talk much about technique; he's a musician first and foremost.

"When I was about 16 or 17, I started to do transcriptions. The early music

revolution was just starting to take hold, and the first records of [harpsichordist Gustav] Leonhardt were reaching our shores. I'd hear this stuff by Scarlatti and Froberger and Bach, and I was just dying to have this music under my fingers. The only way was to transcribe it myself, and that became a really important part of my approach to the guitar."

The harpsichord tradition has been a rich lode of information on Baroque performance practice for a number of guitarists. Sharon Isbin, for one, has worked extensively with Rosalyn Tureck, and Ben Verdery, for another, with Anthony Newman. Fisk described Ralph Kirkpatrick as "a profound influence" and spoke at length on the insights he provided Fisk into Baroque rhythms.

"Each of the Baroque dance movements has a characteristic rhythm carried through the piece," said Fisk.

ly differently now, and one of these days, I *will* do it on disc."

We talked about Segovia's Bach, which has been widely dismissed as Romantically skewed. I read Fisk a quote from the back of one of Segovia's Decca LPs: "There used to be an idea that Bach must be played very carefully, very stiffly, with all his dissonances made very harsh and mathematical. It was almost as if Bach, in his own lifetime, had merely been a statue of himself. I do not believe for one minute that Bach really meant his music to sound this way . . . I play him on my guitar so I can show the expressive side of his music, the noble, the serious, and the dignified. And, also, the beautiful."

"This could have been said by Leonhardt or Kirkpatrick,"

"All those classical guitarists who have played like typewriters and sewing machines are the reason that the audience for classical guitar has fallen off."

"It either represents a counterpoint with that rhythm or, at times, *against* that rhythm, and the interest derives from the contrast. Like the famous Gavotte [Fisk hummed the Gavotte from J. S. Bach's *E-Major Violin Partita*, also recast as the fourth *Lute Suite*, with strong emphases]—it's 3/4 1 2 3 4 1 2. Almost no Baroque pieces have a strong 1 with the exception of the minuet, which is 1 2 and 3. In the Gigue from the first Lute Suite, it's da-da-da-da-da-dum. He gives you the rhythmic template at the start, which will then characterize the whole piece. I practiced them that way, in little groups according to the rhythmic template."

The mention of Bach led to the question of why there isn't any on the new CD. Based on Fisk's earlier recordings, I had assumed that in this area his approach is simply too divergent from Segovia's. But it turned out that I was off the mark; at the mention of those recordings, Fisk interrupted me. "I don't agree with any of it anymore," he said. "I don't like any of those interpretations; I would do everything complete-

ly responded Fisk. "The people who want to turn Segovia into a silly Romantic are just stupid. Segovia was a brilliant man; he was extremely, extremely smart. His solutions to fingering problems are a perfect combination of choreography and interpretation. The criticisms about his Bach are very funny because, for example, he played the sarabandes pretty up-tempo, which all the early music people now tell us we should be doing. In the chaconne, he wasn't afraid to mix tempi in the variations; [cellist/conductor and early music specialist Nikolaus] Harnoncourt is always talking about that. Instinctively, Segovia came out not that far from the early music people."

I asked Fisk if he would ever play Bach the way Segovia did, and, again, he surprised me. "Oh, I always think I am playing it similarly to him in a lot of ways; I'm certainly trying for it," he answered. "Some of the fingerings he did I wouldn't do because I just have too many other things in my ear that

point me in another direction. In the same way, I wouldn't play the Loure from the E-Major Partita in the way that [violinist Henryk] Szeryng played it, as much as I love it. But there were things that Segovia did that I can't get out of my ear, they were so beautiful. There's that thing where he put in the flatted seventh [Fisk took up his guitar and played the final statement of the theme from the aforementioned Gavotte exact-

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ly as Segovia did, with a big, golden E7 hovering in the air before winding down to the final, majestic thumb-rolled cadence]. It's grand; it's grand! And now everybody does [he played a much more prim version with a very "correct" appoggiatura on the last chord]. I don't think I could purloin a Segovia effect in Baroque music, where I have such a different background. But I miss the beautiful sound of that stuff on the instrument."

Fisk articulated something that was becoming obvious. "It's very typical of me to disagree with my past self," he

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commented. "That's the one thing about records; they're nothing more than snapshots. Everything that you do is an approximation of something that you have in your soul, and you can only come but so close to it."

We then moved on to what *is* on the new disc. The largest block of material is the selection of Segovia's transcriptions, all of which appeared on one or another of his Decca LPs in the '50s and '60s. As Fisk notes in the CD booklet, his intent is "to imitate the effect (and affect!) of those old 33s," and he's largely successful. It's a lovely set, from the

16th-century *Canción del Emperador* of Spanish *vihuelist* Luys de Narváez through works by Schumann, Brahms, Mussorgsky, Debussy, and others.

I reminded Fisk of something he said some years back: that he would only play transcriptions of complete works (and not isolated movements like the Haydn Menuet and Trio on *Segovia*). Here, too, there's been change. "I now have a more mature view of what the role of the interpreter is," Fisk said. "I learned from Paganini, who said there were three categories of repertoire [*Fisk translated here from the Italian*]:

'One for the artists, one for my (female) admirers, and the third for the concert hall.' For the cognoscenti, I have my difficult transcriptions and modern stuff. Then there are pieces for the audience moderately interested in music. Then—really the most important—for the huge mass of people who don't have anything to do with music, whom you have to convince. Each of these three categories is valid, and I try to be active in all of them."

I remarked on Fisk's highly effective use of Segovia's expressive devices on the new disc and asked how he came to incorporate them into his playing. "I didn't do anything consciously," he answered. "It's all instinctive. I've been listening to Segovia for 35 years; he's so internalized in my case that when I played the pieces for Emilita [Madame Segovia, who granted Fisk first performance and recording rights to the newly found works], she said, 'This is perfectly in style. You've completely captured their essence.'"

Fisk thus touched on something I'd been wanting to talk about. There's a notion among nonmusicians that there's something intrinsically more spontaneous in improvising than in playing a composed work. It's a double-edged misconception; improvisers almost always draw on a much-practiced repertoire of melodic devices, while classical players will often play with nuances of rhythm, accent, and tone.

"No matter how much I might think about a piece before I play it, in the moment of playing I lose my cognitive planning side," said Fisk. "When I start, I have 100 possibilities in my head; we'll see which one I'm going to go with."

"I have to perform to learn; I can't learn until I take the piece out on the road in an unfamiliar circumstance and put myself in the position of being, in a way, a cornered animal. The cornered animal becomes very, very creative in finding solutions and ways out. There's always going to be something that surprises you when you're out playing, either a mistake in a place you don't expect, or some noise in the hall."

"Sometimes there are these moments of grace, when there's a very special feeling in a room. I can remember some concerts in Istanbul that were like that. Roma was almost always like that. Korea this time was like that. But for something absolutely tremendous to happen, you need the grace of God or whatever it is that enables something special to pass through you and reach

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people. No matter how well prepared you are, you cannot create grace. But if you *are* well prepared, it has a better chance of happening."

Fisk sees his technique as part and parcel of the process. "I use the virtuosity to get in the door with people," he continued. "I use it because I want them to listen to the other stuff, and because it's exciting. I didn't set out to develop technique; I set out to play some pieces that I was interested in playing. In order to do that, I had to develop a certain technique, and people said, 'Oh, wow, technique' and all that. The speed thing is a matter of metabolism—if you have a fast metabolism, as I do, it's perhaps not a surprise that you have fast fingers. But playing fast is not particularly important. There are dozens of young flamenco guitarists who can zip around the guitar, but they will never grab the audience the way Paco de Lucía does. Why? Because Paco has this smoldering emotional intensity, and that's what he communicates."

I asked Fisk for an example of his technical innovation. He turned again to Paganini, which is perhaps not surprising: Fisk's 1992 recording of Paganini's 24 Caprices (originally for solo violin) is a tour de force of unparalleled expressive and virtuosic range. He began to play the sixth Caprice for me, its melody and bass pacing somberly over an ostinato figure, a sort of rapid fluttering of extraordinary delicacy on adjacent strings. When he slowed it down, I could see that it was achieved through an alternating string *p-a i-m* fingering (thumb on lower string, ring finger on upper, index on lower, middle on upper). At first I assumed it was a mutated tremolo technique, but Fisk explained that it's actually derived from his way of playing fast thirds in triplets in the first Caprice: *p-a i-m i-m* (try this one at home!).

Fisk takes the long view in surveying the shape of his career, which hasn't been attained without a certain cost. He's rarely home with his wife and family for more than two weeks in a row, and lugging suitcase and guitar from city to city isn't something he wants to do forever. At the same time, he now feels poised to achieve certain goals.

"I think quite apart from its intrinsic merit, music has the possibility to humanize society from within, to touch what's best in the human race," said Fisk. "I have an international group of students that I hope will be a force for

societal change. Apart from any beauty I might have been able to bring into the world through the guitar, I would hope to have contributed to that process of improving the planet in my own small way. I think we're all building this pyramid—you put a stone in, I put a stone in—and the pyramid rises."

Just as a live performance can illuminate nuances unnoticed on a recording, so too can spending time with an artist off stage transform one's perception of his art. The day after my visit with Fisk, I put on his recording of the Paganini Caprices, and something had changed. What struck me before as a minor flaw in his playing—an occasional edge to his attack—sounded somehow different. What I heard instead was the effervescence of a tremendously exciting energy. ■

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