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George Sakellariou

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George Sakellariou began playing the guitar at an early age in Athens, Greece. His first teacher was his brother, a talented composer of popular music. Sakellariou received his formal training from the Conservatoire of Music in Athens. After graduating with honors, he was invited to further his studies with the renowned guitarist Segovia when the great

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Early Years

I was born in Athens, Greece, May 2, 1944. I was the youngest of eight children. My older brothers all played an instrument – they played guitar, and accordion. I was raised in a very musical environment. My brothers also had a lot of friends who were musicians. So I was accustomed to listening to live music when I was very, very little. I remember the excitement that I felt every time I would hear an instrument – the accordion, or a saxophone, or a violin – live, would give me a certain thrill. So by the time I was five, one of my older brothers noticed that I was very interested in the guitar, that I would pick up the instrument and try to imitate the positions of other people playing the guitar. I started playing when I was about five, and since then I've never stopped.

I was fortunate that we had some very good teachers in Athens – in my neighborhood, as a matter of fact. So I was introduced to proper technique. I remember studying the Carulli method, and the studies of Aguado very early. That really gave me a very strong basis. Eventually I went to the Conservatory of Music in Athens, where I studied in my teen years. I had a wonderful teacher, Ch. Ekmetsoglou. I graduated when I was eighteen years old from the Conservatory.

California – Segovia Master Class

After that I really wanted to go to the States, and I had a brother who lived in San Francisco. Through him, I arrived in San Francisco in 1963. In 1964, the great master Andre Segovia gave a masterclass at the University of California, Berkeley. When I found out about it, I was very excited. I wanted to go to the class, but I found out about it very late. As a matter of fact, only about a day or two before the start of the class. I went to the very first session of the class, and during the intermission I approached the master Segovia, and I introduced myself. I told him who I was, and where I had studied. He invited me to his hotel – he said, “Come to my hotel at six o'clock.” So at six o'clock, having borrowed a guitar from a fellow guitarist I had just met, I went to his hotel. There were about four or five other guitarists with guitars ready to audition for Segovia! But I wasn't very nervous to play for Segovia, because really the only thing I wanted was to play for him. Not so much that he was going to accept me as a pupil, but I was so excited to be in his presence and to play for him. So I played – he was very gracious to me, very nice. After that, of course, he accepted me as a pupil. It was a very exciting time for me to be in his presence every day, and to hear him pick up the guitar and demonstrate something close up – where I could hear his beautiful tone qualities. Again, that was a very important point in my life as far as the guitar is concerned.

Andrés Segovia was quite an interesting individual. He, without any doubt, fought very hard to convince people that the guitar can be played in a large hall. Most people before Segovia thought it was a crazy idea to have the guitar in a large hall – including guitarists like Miguel Llobet, a

wonderful guitarist –

always felt that getting married to Margarita was a good move from a musical point of view. I remember when we were dating, my mother was living in California at that time – she had come from Greece. Everywhere we'd go, I would take my mother along. So everybody thought that I was a momma's boy! Of course I was a momma's boy, but my mother would love to go to my performances. She was so proud, and people would go up to her and congratulate her. So I would always bring her along, no matter what. We have four children, and now we have many grandchildren. Having a family and going through all that – I believe it's very good for the music, for your inner self, life and such. You have to be able to take the interruptions. You have to be flexible. I learned how to concentrate even if a lot of noise is going on – if a baby's crying, no problem! I can practice. It has worked very, very well. It's wonderful.

Performing

I believe that in order to play in a musical way, it's important to have an inner peace inside you. Not to have any type of negative feelings for individuals, or negative feelings about anybody. You just have to be positive, and look at the audience as people who are friends, who are music lovers –

That was about 1973. He asked me if I would be willing to perform for the Ballet. I said, "Let's meet." We got together at the Conservatory on 19th Avenue, and I played for him through both pieces. Immediately he was so excited, and I performed in 1974 and 1976 about eight performances of those two

Something is breaking the string. It was a new guitar. I was very upset. We came back to the hotel, and I didn't know what to do – what do I do? I was very upset about it, and when you're upset, you stop thinking. Margarita, in her very relaxed, sane approach, said, "I have an idea. Will you let me try it?" I said, "Sure, I'll try anything." She said, "I noticed that the string is breaking at the bridge. There's something there that's breaking the string." She said, "Can I borrow one of your bass strings – wound strings?" So I gave her a bass string, she fed the string through the little hole at the bridge. And she started to use it as a file. She said, "I can feel where it's sharp, I can feel it!" She started to file it, until it was smooth, put the nylon string on, it never broke again. That was it, she saved the day! She said to me afterwards, "George, when you had that problem before the concert, how much were you willing to spend to solve it?" I said, "Several thousand dollars." She said, "I don't want anything, but just remember it!" The important thing is to always be calm, and approach everything in a calm way.

I also performed many times for the Carmel Bach Festival, I was a regular there for many years. That was also a lot of fun. Of course I performed for many guitar festivals – the Toronto Festival, the Carmel Festival, and others. Every performance, whether it is at the Kennedy Center, where I played, or a small town in Challis, Idaho and Custer County – the whole town came to my performance! I approach every performance, whether it is for a small group of people to a large group of people, the same way. You do your very best, and you try to play everything the best way possible. I do enjoy performing, but you have to be prepared properly and you have to accept that we are human beings, and sometimes your level of tension can be different. You wake up one day, and you feel completely relaxed ... other times you feel a little bit more tense. Margarita noticed that sometimes after I would drink two or three espressos I would be a little jittery, so I never, ever drink coffee before a performance – absolutely not!

Also, since I was a teenager, I knew deep inside that I should avoid any type of alcohol, or anything that would affect my concentration and the ability to be in control of all of these notes that we have to play. From that point of view, I have to be thankful to my family, because my

keeping a record with a metronome, as to how fast I would go the week before, the month before, and I believe that helped very much. I do have a series of exercises that strengthen the hands – bar exercises, slur exercises, and I work very hard – but not for many hours. I can practice exercises for about fifteen minutes and they give great results. The other thing is that I don't like to practice anything that I don't like. Sometimes there are situations where people say that a particular piece is a “masterpiece”! Written by this famous composer – maybe that's the only piece he wrote for guitar – but if it doesn't touch me, if I don't feel anything playing it, I might dedicate a certain amount of time but it won't be enough to master that piece, unless you really love it. So for me, choosing the repertoire is very important; to always be true to yourself, always choose pieces that you enjoy practicing, that you can practice day after day, knowing that the amount of time it will take to master that piece, it won't drive you nuts! That's very important. And at all times, keeping the certain basic principles of music – keeping the rhythm strong, keeping a good balance – make sure that the basses come out. Sometimes people overlook the basses, I like to hear a rich bass when I play – so to train your ear while you're playing to listen to the melodic line, the middle line, everything – you have to be in total control. And that takes practice, to get your ear to be so thorough while you play. Sometimes, including myself, it's easy to get so involved in your practice where there's a little weakness in the piece, you can make it up in your mind and it takes somebody like Margarita to say, “Well, that note wasn't loud enough.” ... “Oh! Thank you!” We have to learn to carefully listen objectively to our playing while we play, and that is not easy at times.

Another thing is that the guitar is a very sensitive instrument, and at times the strings can make a lot of noise. Nowadays, with recordings and microphones, you can often hear whistling, and noises that shouldn't be there. You hear it, and the way I always try to reduce that noise, is during the process of learning a piece – the early, early stages – I try to put the proper fingerings on it. If I hear anything that sounds like a squeaky noise, or a string noise, I stop and investigate – which finger is actually doing that? I correct it right there and then. I do not wait until I know the piece well to do it. That has to be part of the early learning process of a piece.

Looking Back

Having reached this wonderful age of becoming a septuagenarian, it is something kind of magical. When I was nineteen, twenty years old, the idea of reaching this age was almost a frightening thing. But it's wonderful because, first of all, having accomplished what I've accomplished with a wonderful family and a wonderful home – the children, grandchildren, all the dogs that we've had – the beautiful thing about reaching this age is that you can look back at all the different stages of development and maturity. Even though I've always enjoyed playing, and I listen to myself playing recordings that I did thirty years ago –

enjoy and that Margarita enjoys. For me, if I do something that my wife likes, I am perfectly satisfied! I do recordings still, I do videos. The main reason is that our grandchildren love it! They go, and listen to it, and they're proud and can show off to their friends – "That's my