

Classical And Baroque Guitar's Dynamic Performer/Teacher

By Rick Gartner

WHEN THE MAESTRO Andrés Segovia says that his students "are not only carrying on my tradition, but they are also creating a tradition of their own," Michael Lorimer immediately comes to mind. Like Segovia, Lorimer is a consummate artist. Michael's performances in major concert halls throughout the world have inspired the accolades of both audiences and critics. Besides playing the main-traveled European and North American circuits, Lorimer was the first American classical guitarist to tour Russia (at the invitation of the Soviet government), a landmark concert trek that was chronicled in *Guitar Player* magazine (Dec. '75). He recently completed a ten-performance tour of Israel.

Also in keeping with the Segovian tradition, the 34-year-old guitarist has been adding much to the published repertoire for the classical guitar. Michael's transcriptions of standard and hitherto untranscribed works reflect the breadth of his musical acumen. The *Michael Lorimer Editions*, published by Charles Hansen Music (141 Kearny Street, San Francisco, CA 94108), contain music from such diverse sources as Renaissance lutenist John Dowland, baroque harpsichord composers Johann Froberger and Francois Couperin, baroque lutenist Sylvius Leopold Weiss, and J.S. Bach (including all of Bach's *Cello Suites*), among others. Each of the 15 volumes offers Lorimer's scholarly remarks on performance practices of the relevant historical periods, and some editions include reproductions of the original manuscripts from which the works were transcribed. Many of those transcriptions have been performed and recorded by eminent artists — Oscar Ghiglia recorded Lorimer's transcription of Dowland's "Fantasia," and Segovia recorded the Lorimer edition of Albéniz's "Capricho Catalan."

Lorimer's talents have been sought by several prominent modern composers, both as a consultant during the creative process, and as a soloist for premiering new compositions. Among the works premiered by Lorimer are: William Bolcom's *Seasons*, Takemitsu's *Folios*, and Frederico Moreno Torroba's *Diálogos*.

A commitment to teaching is also expected of Segovia's students, and that is a responsibility Lorimer enthusiastically accepts. Between Michael's 15-year affiliation with the San Francisco Conservatory

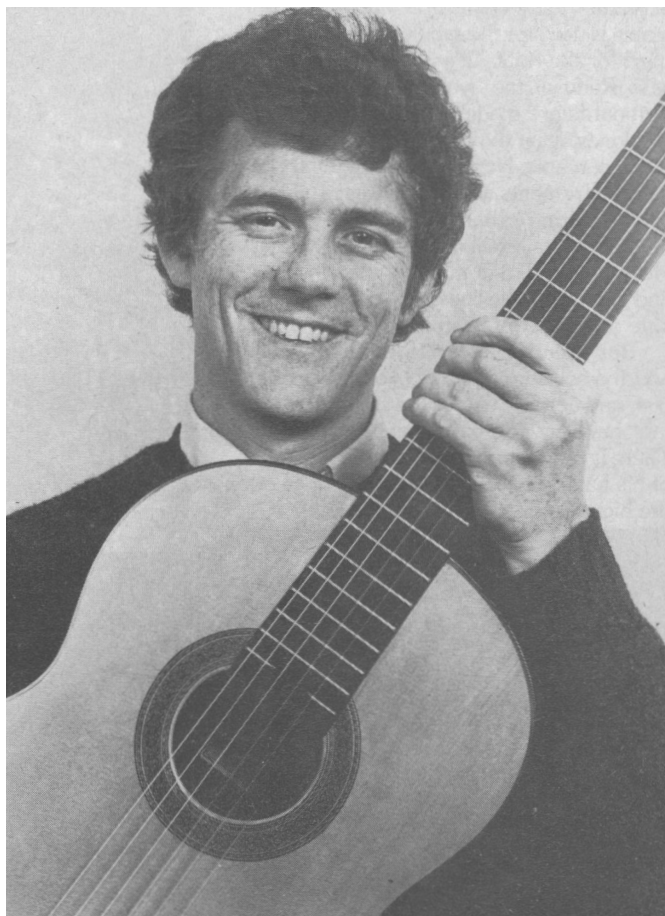
Of Music, and the master classes that he gives (whenever possible) the day after his concerts, Lorimer has personally assisted many talented classical guitarists. He will be spending the current academic year at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington as a visiting professor, the first endowment at the University for the classical guitar.

Lorimer's highly informative "Master Class" instructional column, which appears monthly in *Guitar Player* magazine, is now in its fifth year of publication. Michael's in-depth treatment of such topics as sitting position, tone production, tuning methods, damping techniques, nail care, and preparation for recitals contain invaluable pointers for both amateur and professional classical guitarists.

But perhaps more than any other student of Segovia, Michael Lorimer is indeed establishing a tradition of his own. His search for a more authentic and aesthetic mode of performance for baroque guitar music led him to the delicate, lilting sounds of the baroque guitar, a 5-course cousin of the classical guitar. For the last five years, Lorimer has included the baroque guitar in virtually all of his performances, and he is recognized as the primary exponent of that instrument.

In contrast to most classical guitarists, Lorimer frequently offers his concert audiences brief, personable introductions to the music. When necessary, he is not averse to using sound support, provided that the amplification is faithful to the sound of his instrument.

Although Lorimer transcribes and performs standard concert repertoire with the virtuoso's touch, his interests also branch out into the frontiers of the classical guitar. His transcriptions of classic piano rags are



MICHAEL LORIMER

far more authentic (preserving more of the original harmonic details) than the alternating-bass versions that have been presented by folk guitarists over the past decade. Michael is also deeply involved with works on the cutting edge of contemporary music, and such modern composers as William Bolcom have dedicated compositions to Lorimer.

WHERE WERE YOU raised, and how did you get started in music?

I lived in the Los Angeles area until I was 17. I started playing when I was 10, but I'd always been attracted to the sounds of plucked string instruments. I think my earliest love was the harp, and then fingerstyle banjo playing caught my ear. My father used to get impulses — he'd bring home an instrument every once in a while, and one time he brought home a guitar. Then he brought home a record of Segovia, and that had all the sounds of plucked string instruments I liked so much; everything

about it appealed to me, so I wanted to play the classical guitar right from the start.

Did you begin taking lessons?

My parents had a hard time finding me a classical guitar teacher. After some false starts, we found a good teacher: Guy Horn. We were quite fortunate to find him, because in those days, most people didn't even know what classical guitar was, and there were very few good teachers.

Did you enjoy practicing?

Yes, and I was always able to enjoy just the point I was at.

You didn't feel an all-consuming desire to get to the next level, or an impatience to be able to play as well as someone else?

No, I never had a driving ambition that kept me out of the place I was. I always felt that where I was was interesting and rich enough. I just loved playing the classical guitar. I would practice before school, after school, and between classes. I had a long bus ride to school — about an hour each way — and a lot of times, I'd practice on the bus.

Did your parents push you?

No; as a matter of fact, later on, when I got serious about guitar, my parents were upset about it, because it wasn't practical in a career sense. At one point, they even took the guitar away from me except to play it on weekends — they felt that it was interfering with my schoolwork. That only went on for a short time, though.

You studied with Guy Horn until you were 14. When did you meet Segovia?

Dorothy de Goede, who had studied with Segovia, came to some of my first concerts, and she introduced me to Segovia when I was 16. I played for Segovia then, and he suggested that I come to Sienna, Italy, to study with him. So I went to Sienna the summer after I graduated from high school, when I was 17.

How long were those sessions?

We studied in Sienna for a month, and then Segovia went to Santiago de Compostela, Spain, and I went there to study also. The master classes ran every day for three hours. From then on, I got together with him whenever I could, and I was always granted a scholarship of some kind.

I'm sure there are a thousand stories you could tell about those classes. How about just one?

Well, I remember one time I played a piece for Segovia, the *Fantasia-Sonata* by J. Manen, which none of his students had ever worked on before. I put it on the music stand; he leaned over and looked at it; then he jumped back, put his finger on the page, and went "Whew," wiping his brow. Then he said, "Okay, let's hear it." So I played the first movement, and when I finished, I told the Maestro that it was all I'd prepared for that day. He pushed over the music stand, embraced me, and said, "That's quite enough. If you continue like this, you will be one of the greats." That sort of sums up one aspect of his personality. If someone came well prepared, the

'Maestro' was very supportive and patient. But he did come down pretty hard on people who weren't properly prepared, because he didn't have time to fool around.

Were you doing concerts during the seven years you studied with Segovia?

Yes, about 30 per year. Then I signed with Sol Hurok [Segovia's manager at that time], in 1970 after Segovia recommended me to Hurok. I continued doing concerts, and I started doing master classes in the early '70s. I started writing for *Guitar Player* in 1976.

In your columns for Guitar Player, you talk about "the spot," the right-hand point of string contact where the flesh and nail contact the string simultaneously, to eliminate the extraneous "clicking" sound. How can a player find the spot?

Of course, you need to have a good sitting position and properly filed nails. When you start out, you'll just be looking for a general idea of the spot, where the sound is pure and strong, and where it seems to require less effort to produce a good sound. It really helps to have a teacher assist you in finding the spot.

How do you help a student find the spot?

I usually take an aural/tactile approach in helping a student find the spot, rather than specifying a location for the student to find it. I may actually take a student's finger and guide it through a stroke on the spot. I ask the student to listen to the sound, and try to associate a tactile sensation with the good sound. A student should go for that feeling, the tactile sensation that goes with a good sound, rather than aiming for some particular location. When you start out, you'll probably be going for just a general idea of the spot, but when you become an expert, you find out that the spot changes for each note and every inflection; that's a much more sensitive level of the same idea.

How essential is sitting position in the development of technique?

Well, I think that sitting position is the basis of technique. The right sitting position is different for every person; each player must find the sitting position that's right for their own physique. The basis of good sitting position is good breathing. Everything that you can do to promote good breathing is connected with good sitting. Breathing and sitting are best when tension is eliminated, as much as possible, from your body. You'll find that breathing is best when the spine is relatively straight, in a column; any sort of twisting or hunching that people do is not good. If you try to dominate the instrument, you will have unnecessary tension; you should allow the guitar to be as free as possible.

Have you experimented with any cushions for holding the guitar?

I've used cushions to adapt the guitar to my own particular physique — I have a long torso and long arms, and I've had good success with the cushions in fitting the guitar to my body, raising the instrument to a good playing position.

Has there been any muting effect with the cushions?

Actually, it's the other way around. It's made the guitar louder and freer. There's less contact between the cushions and the guitar than there is between the body and the guitar without the cushions. There are only a few contact points with the cushions — mostly the sides of the guitar and very little on the back — and the face of the guitar is completely free of my leg.

Have you gotten any negative reactions from guitarists with more rigidly orthodox attitudes against such devices?

Well, that's an interesting thing. I was a little bit shy about using the cushions in concert because I don't like to see lots of gizmos and distractions in a performer. I thought the cushions might be a distraction, but they were all set up in advance of the performance, so I was able to just sit down and start playing, which is how I like to perform. A lot of guitarists came backstage to see me after the concert. They talked to me about the music and the performance, but not one of them asked me about the cushions. That indicated to me that the cushions were unobtrusive, and that the sitting position looked natural.

You've been known to interact with the audience quite a bit more than most classical guitarists. Is that something you consciously think of doing, or is it just the way you are?

Well, I like people to have a good time when they come to a concert, and I want them to appreciate the music as much as possible. So if there's anything I can do to bring that about, either in the way I play or in the way I present the music, I'll do it. Most of the time, my comments pertain to something new or unusual about the program. I usually don't see any need to comment about standard concert repertoire. Just recently, at the American String Teachers convention, I was doing a concert, and I introduced my baroque guitar with a Steve Martin line about how it's impossible to be unhappy playing the baroque guitar. It really loosened up the audience. Talking to the audience can either loosen up the audience or make the audience uptight, it just depends on how the performer does it.

Do you use any kind of sound amplification in concert?

If I'm playing in a hall where I know that people aren't going to be able to hear well, I do use amplification. That is in keeping with my philosophy of wanting everyone to enjoy the concert.

What do you use?

I use a high-quality microphone and a very clean amplifier, so that the people are surprised if I tell them that the guitar was amplified. The mikes I've used that were very good included the Sony ECM-50, and the AKG 451 — those two mikes were excellent. The ECM-50 has a special advantage in that it is very small, almost invisible. I can put it on a coat hanger or

LORIMER

some such fixture, within 12" of the guitar. The trick then is to have a very clean sound system with no hiss or edge in it, and then to equalize in accordance with the sound qualities of the hall. Some halls bring out certain sounds and push down other sounds, so you have to be very careful to equalize for that. If you then put it through some flat-response speakers, it sounds just like an unamplified guitar.

Do you think that amplification will be used more in the future?

I think that having high-quality sound support will be good for the classical guitar, because people will be able to hear the guitar much better in halls that are less than desirable acoustically. I really hate to hear people leave the hall and say, "I couldn't hear the guitar that well — it sounds better on my stereo at home." It's really too bad, because nothing can beat a live performance, provided that everyone can hear adequately. Right now I'm looking for a manufacturer who can develop a high-quality, easily portable sound system for the classical guitar.

Are there many halls where you would really never need amplification?

Yes, in many of the big cities. The Orchestra Hall in Chicago, Alice Tully Hall in New York — and the Hertz Hall at the University of California at Berkeley is a smaller hall that's fantastic for guitar. Segovia gave a master class there as well as a concert, and he thought it was an exceptionally fine hall.

You've been primarily responsible for the revival of the baroque guitar. What first got you interested in that instrument?

I'd always enjoyed baroque guitar music, and played a lot of it on the classical guitar. But in the late '60s I started getting a little discouraged by the sound I was getting. I'd been listening to baroque music played by harpsichordist Gustav Leonhardt, and the baroque guitar music I was playing on the classical guitar just didn't sound like it was written in the same historical period as the harpsichord music. I started playing the music more according to the conventions of baroque style. Still, it didn't quite hit the mark, so I dropped baroque guitar music from my repertoire. Then around 1970, I played [guitarist/lutenist] Robert Strizich's baroque guitar, and right away, I was able to do things on that instrument that I could never do on the classical guitar. The sound of baroque guitar music played on the baroque guitar was just so right, and so enchanting — that's what got me going.

Did you have a baroque guitar built?

Yes, several in fact, but none of them were anywhere near the quality of my concert classical guitar, so I felt that I couldn't present it in concert at that time. Finally, I commissioned Nico van der Waals, who lives in Holland, to build me one, a copy of an instrument that was built by one of the members of the Voboam family [a seventeenth-century family of baroque guitar

builders] for one of the daughters of Louis XIV. Anyway, Nico made the guitar, and it was by far the best I'd ever played. So for the last five years, I've included that guitar in all my concerts.



Lorimer's right-hand attack on the baroque guitar utilizes more flesh than the attack he uses for the classical guitar.



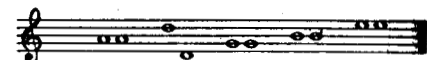
On the classical guitar, Lorimer plucks the string in the traditional manner: a combination of nail and flesh.

How does the technique of baroque guitar differ from lute music of the Renaissance, and how specific are the existing manuscripts from composers of the baroque guitar?

Lute and vihuela music of the sixteenth century was very contrapuntal, whereas seventeenth century music for the baroque guitar is very chordal, with a lot of strumming, like today's folk guitar. As the style developed, plucked notes were added, and a very sophisticated mixture of plucking and strumming evolved. In the de Visée books that were published in 1682 and 1686, all of the strumming and plucking is indicated in detail, including the right-hand patterns. The baroque guitar style of strumming is also a direct contrast to early classical guitar music of Sor and Giuliani, in which there is almost no strumming.

There are five double courses on the Baroque guitar. How are they tuned?

There are different tunings, depending on the country and the time. But the tuning used by de Visée, is a re-entrant tuning, similar in concept to that of a 5-string banjo, where there are high notes on one side and low notes in the middle.



The tuning of the baroque guitar.

How does the tuning affect sound and technique?

It gives a special flavor to the chords, and it allows you to do scales in a different way than on the modern guitar. Instead of playing several notes on one string, and then shifting to another string, a very common way of doing scales on the baroque guitar is to play every note on a different string.

Sort of like a banjo roll?

Right, like an arpeggiated chord. You shoot back and forth across the courses to get a scale.

In your edition of Bach's Prelude, Fugue, and Allegro, you introduce the

baroque performance concept of style brisé [broken-chord style]. How did that influence your decisions on fingering?

Style brisé came to its peak in the seventeenth century, and is idiomatic to plucked string instruments. It's a way of enriching the sonority by spinning out the chords over several voices rather than presenting them as blocks. Instead of fingering the chord as a line, I finger the chords across different strings. For example, if I have the notes B, D and G, I place each of the notes on separate strings — third, second, and first — rather than placing two notes on the second string and one note on the first string. Placing the notes on different strings allows the individual voices of the harmonies to ring as long as possible.

By the time you started your studies with Segovia, what kind of classical guitar did you have?

I played a Hermann Hauser guitar for a while, and then a José Ramirez; I played either a Hauser or a Ramirez for quite a few years. The classical guitars I play in concert now were made by Nico van der Waals and Miguel Rodriguez.

Playing two different instruments, do the tunings and fingerings get to be a bit confusing at times?

Playing two instruments is like speaking two languages. I disassociate the two instruments in my mind, and I really don't have a problem with mental crossover.

What are your preferences in string brands?

I use Augustine red label strings on my classical guitar. I use Pyramid strings on my baroque guitar — I haven't had to change those strings since I bought the instrument five years ago. They're all plain except for the low D, which is wound. It's a special Pyramid lute string. They're made in Germany and distributed by Donna Curry Music (Box 194, Topanga, CA 90290).

Have you seen a general improvement in the quality of classical guitar playing in the 20 years that you've been teaching?

Yes, definitely, a constant improvement. The level of skill of the players in most of my classes is generally very high, although I do teach some classes with students who are at a beginning level. From the beginning level to the advanced level, the problems are fairly similar. Listening to one's own playing is the key, and that's what I stress.

What's one thing that people don't listen to closely enough?

There are many of course, but one important thing that players don't pay enough attention to is the control and balance of the voices. You have to bring out the most important notes and keep the supporting harmonies in balance.

Would you say that many of the better players in your recent classes are at the same level as the players in the Segovia master classes of the '60s?

Oh, the level of the best players in my recent classes is better than it was at those Segovia classes. The level of guitar playing has really gone up in recent years. ■