



Artist Interview: Carlos Pérez

by [Stephen Rekas](#)

Carlos Pérez is a noteworthy Chilean guitarist who has won several international competitions including: X "Alirio Díaz", Venezuela 1996; XX "René Bartoli", France 1997; VI "Printemps de La Guitare", Belgium 1998; III "Forum Gitarre", Austria 2000; and XIV "Fundacion Guerrero", Spain 2000. Carlos is surprisingly open-minded and candid in this interview, as his response to my question regarding standard notation vs. tablature indicates. Decidedly Latin-American in his world view, Carlos performs a wide variety of music in concert tours encompassing more than thirty countries. He is one of a handful of artists performing Ernesto Cordero's *Concierto Antillano for Guitar and Orchestra*, the only guitar concerto currently published by Mel Bay Publications. I hope you enjoy this interview with Carlos Pérez, clearly one of the rising stars on the concert stage.

Stephen Rekas

Personal/Biographical

Guitar Sessions: *Who or what events inspired you to play the guitar? Was music or the classic guitar a part of your household when growing up?*

Carlos Perez: My father played guitar, so the instrument was always around at home. We shared beautiful moments playing and singing traditional Chilean music. Our popular musician friends often visited us. I think that period was one of great unconscious learning. I met him for the first time at the October 2004 Guitar Foundation of America convention and competition in Montreal.

How old were you when you began to play? Was there a competent teacher available to you when you first became interested in the guitar?

I suppose I was 4 or 5 years old. I remember very well the moment when I decided to study classical guitar, but can't remember when I picked up the guitar for the first time. I just remember imitating what my father did, and playing every moment at home with friends and at school. I did not have regular guitar classes then.

I started playing the classical guitar at age 13. On listening to most of the popular classic guitar repertoire like Asturias, Recuerdos de la Alhambra, and so on, I was amazed that the instrument could sound like this. I couldn't believe those pieces were being played by just one person. After a couple of years of trying to study on my own I entered the Fine Arts Faculty [Department] of the University of Chile. My teacher there was Ernesto Quezada.

Please describe your formal music training.

I did all of my musical studies at the University of Chile- theory, harmony, counterpoint, history and so on. The program there included five years at the basic level and five years at an advanced level. Musical education in Chile is quite good and my guitar teacher was excellent. During this period I took part in competitions and I played in some master

classes too. This gave me the opportunity to listen to guitarists from other countries and to evaluate the work I was doing in Chile. Fortunately, I won prizes and the outcome was good. It was very important to cross mountains and oceans to get to know other musicians and have new experiences.

Was there any method book or collection of studies that was particularly helpful, or did your teachers establish a regimen tailored just for you?

Where I studied, the program was based on the method and studies of Emilio Pujol plus traditional studies by Sor, Aguado, Carulli, Giuliani, etc. which each student had to play. The program included all musical styles from the Renaissance to the present, but the teacher adapted it to the capabilities of each individual student.

Do you play any other instruments besides the guitar?

I practiced early instruments related to the guitar, especially Renaissance lute, vihuela, and Baroque guitar- influenced by my guitar teacher who was a lutenist. The practice of these instruments is absolutely useful in getting a better sound on the modern guitar, because you get used to playing with more contact of your fingers with the string; you have to do that to achieve the desired sound from double-string instruments like those.

At one time I was motivated to study the harpsichord but after a while my hands began to feel very strange so regrettably, I had to give it up.

Is there any particular advantage or disadvantage to being a multi-instrumentalist?

In spite of a passion for music and other instruments, I would not recommend that students practice more than one instrument seriously. Of course, it is inspiring and commendable to know other instruments and their music, but I prefer to listen to them or look at them instead of practicing them for long periods.

Good composers provide interesting examples, as many times they don't play every instrument they write for, but they certainly know how each functions. I suggest you spend most of your time profoundly getting to know all of the possibilities of your chosen instrument. That means, not only learning to read notation and to play [with proper technique]. For example, it doesn't make sense to see guitarists doing their harmony and counterpoint exercises on the piano or even worse- only on paper, without being capable of doing them idiomatically on the guitar. You don't need to be Fernando Sor to create a good sequence of chords but usually, guitar students don't know how to do it.

What musical avenues do you wish to explore in the future?

Chamber music is a very interesting field and I hope to explore it more in the future. Sharing music with other players is very stimulating work. Each year, I prepare a new chamber music program. There are a lot of possibilities.

Have you ever had to weather a creative dry spell in your playing?

Fortunately, I have not experienced such periods. Normally, the hard work is to pick the best idea among many. For instance, choosing concert repertoire is always very hard work. There may be many pieces that you like, but they may not fit well in the same concert program. I have the same problem in choosing pieces for a recording; after the basic concept and the motivation comes the period to make it all work [together], which is really intensely passionate and difficult.

One's motivation in every aspect of playing the guitar is very important. Music in general is not a common type of work; all of one's life is involved with it, so at every moment we must be open to new ideas and stimulation.

Which of your albums would you recommend to someone buying one of your recordings for the first time?

Well...that is not an easy question as it would depend on the person asking. I have recorded four albums to date. Perhaps I would recommend the CD A Flor de Llanto with South American music for general audiences, and my latest one, Hechizos, featuring twentieth century Latin American music for more advanced listeners.

Technique

Do you teach or act as a musical mentor?

I don't teach in an institution, but I do teach master classes and in different courses or workshops.

What sort of practice routine would you recommend for the beginning player?

For beginning players, particularly if they are children, the most important thing is to have fun with the instrument. The teacher must avoid projecting any restrictive attitude that would interfere with the child's fantasy and the joy in playing the guitar. I would just pay attention to the position of the body. I think is better to start with the instrument and developing the ear, more than with a musical lecture. That's why I think it's good for children to learn songs and playing in duets or trios. If the beginner is older I would put emphasis on the musical lecture and on more specific technical aspects- like movement of fingers, hand positions, sound quality, and so on.

Please describe your own practice routine.

I like to study in the morning, doing some exercises for each hand and then practicing my repertoire. I love to study with calm- slowly, without thinking about time. That is why vacations, especially with the calming effect of nature, are very productive. Unfortunately, normal life is not like that and I have accepted it without complaint.

Do you recommend any particular teaching/learning techniques, such as maintaining a log of practice time?

That might be useful for people who are just beginning to study, but more than paying a lot of attention to the clock, I would pay attention to quality use of the time. Many times students waste time with the instrument in their hands. They practice 6 or 7 hours a day but making so many mistakes and with such poor concentration that the time is really squandered. I like to practice slowly and without mistakes, and when mistakes occur, I try to fix them immediately. We have to study as much with the head as with the fingers.

In your role as a teacher, what areas do you emphasize with your students?

Every student needs something different. Normally in master classes, you can't go as deep as you would like because of time restrictions, so the motivational aspect is very important there. In general, I try to accentuate clarity of expression with the instrument, but this involves many elements that work together, beginning with the desire to perform.

How do you approach the teaching of interpretation?

This question is similar to the last question because there is no difference between interpretation and technique; they are interconnected.

Can you offer any suggestions on forming a concert repertoire or overcoming stage fright?

It's always very important to be honest with yourself, and that's not easy for everyone. I know students who use the stage or any public performance as a boxing ring, where they have to fight at the limit of their capabilities. That is one of the negative influences of guitar competitions.

What is your opinion of tablature vs. notation?

Why should there be any conflict between them? The guitarist has to know both. That way, you have access to the early repertoire which is wonderful and many times, as with most Renaissance lute repertoire, it doesn't need to be transcribed. Besides, tablature is a good method to diffuse the guitar repertoire among amateurs and not only classical players. While one system won't replace the other, notation must be the standard system for guitar students and professionals because it would be strange to use a system different from other instruments.

What do you do to keep your repertoire sounding fresh?

I don't have an exact plan for everything. I can say that I honestly enjoy every musical moment whether it's practicing, playing for fun, or listening to concerts. Often, I do it just for fun; I mean, I play my repertoire because it is a pleasure; I don't call this practice, or perhaps it's a different kind of practice.

What areas of the standard repertoire you would like to explore?

Right now, I am interested in Romantic composers like Mertz, Coste, Arcas, etc., but I enjoy playing every style. The only thing I am sure of is that I would like to know all areas of the guitar repertoire. I hope I live long enough to do that!

Current

Do you have any upcoming performance dates or tours?

This year (2005) I will be very busy with concerts in Europe (Spain, Portugal and France), USA in July and November, and in South America. I will participate in the Classical Guitar Workshop at the University of Cincinnati from July 25 to 31. I am very excited about an interesting program I'm developing in Chile- a concert tour from north to south of the country in combination with pedagogical concerts to stimulate young people in playing the classic guitar.

What is the state of the classic guitar in Chile today?

In Chile, the guitar is very popular and the classical guitar is the instrument most often studied in music schools. But there is still a need for more diffusion of the classical repertoire, especially outside of Santiago. I feel motivated performing in the countryside, and it is amazing how you encounter talented kids in some of the smallest and most charming villages.

Are there any particular techniques or pieces you would recommend for warming up or becoming a better sight reader?

To become a better sight reader I think we have to practice the melodic and harmonic aspects of our instrument. In terms of reading melodies, it's a good idea to read flute or violin repertoire or simply melodies without fingerings. To better learn the harmonic possibilities of the guitar, I honestly recommend practicing everything that you learn in theory classes at school on the guitar, including intervals, scales, cadences, counterpoint motion and so on.

How did participation in competitions influence your career or musical choices?

Competitions gave me possibilities to play concerts and then to receive even more invitations to perform. In terms of musical choices, they did not influence me at all. I stopped competing when I was 24 because I wanted to study new repertoire and do new things. When I realized that many players performed the same repertoire for years and years just to win competitions, it was not attractive to me at all.

Did you adopt any particular competition strategy?

I remember having to study hard, but I always tried to live my own life during the event. It was strange because at the same time, I wanted to win competitions. I was very curious about the performances of the other players. Competing required a very long trip every time, so I tried to benefit from those experiences as much as possible.

How did you learn of Ernesto Cordero's Concierto Antillano for Guitar and Orchestra? Did you ever meet him?

I met Ernesto Cordero for the first time in 1997 in Venezuela. I listened to his music and asked him for some scores; among them, his Concierto Antillano immediately attracted to me. It is very fresh and spontaneous. Besides, it is a good challenge for the soloist and the orchestra to deliver the real flavor and accents of the piece, especially the third movement.

Have you recorded the piece for commercial distribution?

No, I have not, but I have played it many times in Europe and South America. I am very glad that Ernesto was in Chile when I premiered it there with the Chilean Symphony.

Apart from music, what are your interests?

I love literature and the natural environment. I love the countryside, rivers, trees and flowers and would like to know the traditions of every country. Nowadays, communications are a wonderful tool, but I feel sad realizing that cultural traditions and particular characteristics of a given people are not regarded as important, and that such a small minority respects them.

Thank you, Carlos. You've provided some very insightful responses.

My pleasure, Stephen.

To learn more about Carlos Pérez please see his website at:
<http://www.carlosperez.cl/>.