Interview with John Williams
Concerto: John Williams on His New Self-Released Disc

by Guy Traviss

John Williams’ latest disc, Concerto, is a collection of three pieces performed with orchestra. It includes works by Horacio Salinas (Danzas Peregrinas for three soloists and orchestra), Ross Edwards (Anafura Dances, a concerto for guitar and string orchestra), and Stephen Goss (Guitar Concerto). The compositions were recorded with the English Chamber and Royal Philharmonic orchestras, conducted by Paul Daniel and produced by John Williams himself. Following highly successful European and Australian releases, I spoke with John at his home in London to discover more of what was behind the project.

Only a couple of weeks had passed since I saw John play Stephen Goss’s concerto at a packed Royal Festival Hall in London. The performance was the climax of a tour marking both John’s semi-retirement and latest CD launch. The opportunity to interview John at this time could not have been more significant.

I begin by asking him about the move to release his work on his own label, JCW Recordings, and he offers a number of reasons for this. “I think it’s mainly personal,” says John. “I want to keep control and ownership of what I record and with the direction the recording industry has gone over the last few years, I don’t want them to be either deleted or chopped into bits for compilations or passed on by company takeovers! This is especially true of projects like this concerto recording which is the biggest I have ever undertaken.”

John’s first contract with CBS came in 1964: a three-year deal with the option of a two-year extension. He has always remained skeptical about long-term contracts, but says he was very lucky with that one because he loved working with all the people at CBS, in particular the producer Paul Myers. “But producers sometimes leave and companies change,” continues John, “and then the artists have to work with different people whom they may not get on with. I didn’t want to be caught like that. As it happened Paul Myers did leave in the 1970s to go to Decca — after that I worked with several different producers, especially for recordings with orchestra when a producer is usually necessary for the actual sessions: but CBS (later Sony) were happy for me to produce my solo recordings. In the early 80s I was fortunate to meet Mike Stavrou, who was then the top engineer at George Martin’s Air Studios. Mike has a great ear for sound and understood immediately what I wanted from the guitar, and, even after he moved to Australia (where we recorded the Baroque album) I managed to get him back to London for The Great Paraguayan and El Diablo Suelto. (Incidentally, we continued recording analog for ages — digital, apart from its convenience, has only recently caught up on quality).”

John acknowledges his productive period with Sony as the time overseen by Peter Gelb, former head of Sony Classical and now general manager of the Metropolitan Opera in New York. As time has caught up with the recording industry in general, John has also had to work through many of the changes. “I’m glad to have stuck with CBS over the years by choice, not contract — especially as (after the Sony takeover) Peter Gelb was appointed as Sony Classical boss and he was a great overseer of all my projects. When he left I think it was only a question of when, not if, I started my own label.”

The first CD on John’s own label was From a Bird. The disc, named after the suite of four pieces that appear on the recording, was in fact the byproduct of a project he was worked on for friend and fellow musician Richard Harvey. “I was asked to write some library music for one of Richard’s companies (West One Music). A lot of people aren’t familiar with the term library music,” explains John, “but it’s actually taken over half of what publishing did fifty years ago. Now for commercial music used in television and advertising, instead of companies having to fish around for bits of music they know, they use library music. At one time they would have had to get permission from the record company, and then go to the performer and composer to see whether they consent to it being used. The library music
All things considered, we find Concerto (JCW3) fits neatly into John's continued trajectory. But what was the motivation behind making the CD on this occasion? At the point John made his recordings independent, he felt he had recorded all the main existing repertoire he ever wanted to do. He's not a fanatic for every new piece that's written, but he is interested in new music—"I listen to a lot of composers that I already have an association with, like Peter Sculthorpe or Ross Edwards, and Stephen Dodgson here in England, but every now and then accidentally I come across something new."

John recounts first hearing Stephen Goss's music (Raise the Red Lantern) when seeing Xuefei Yang perform at London's Wigmore Hall. "Afterwards Steve sent me some of his CDs. I absolutely loved the piano interludes (Preludes and Interludes) and I loved the Garden of Cosmic Speculation (violin, cello, bass clarinet and piano), something which I think is a real masterpiece of chamber music. I went to hear Graham Roberts (U.K.) perform the premiere of Steve's Guitar Concerto and I was really knocked out with it. I love the music. It was wonderfully orchestrated, wonderfully integrated with the guitar—a whole lot of things that I thought were quite original. I don't know of any guitar concerto which is as consistently successful on all fronts. Obviously the slow movement of the Concierto de Aranjuez is great, but the outer movements are only just okay. There are other concertos that have highlights, but I think Steve's concerto is successful on all fronts." The Guitar Concerto is cast in the traditional three movements. The first alludes to the urban music of North America and the harmonic vocabulary of modern jazz: the "Finale" draws on Latin American influences and the concerto's heart is an elegiac slow movement, tinged with "English nostalgia," as the composer writes.

For recording itself, John always works at AIR Studios Lyndhurst, on this occasion with Geoff Foster in charge of engineering, editing, and mixing. John explained this was the only way he could do the project, and had used income from concerts to do "what it is I really want to do." I asked John what it was about this particular collection of pieces that caused him to invest in the idea of a CD: "Apart from ones I have already recorded, I haven't heard any concertos that I really like that much. There are some that I like enough maybe to go and hear other people play them, but not music I want to play."

Companies circumvent that by using composers specifically for the purpose, whose music has copyright permissions built in."

Although John does not consider himself a composer per se, he feels library music is particularly appropriate for those who haven't trained in formal composition. "It has its own rules, and it's amazing how much you can do with it, limited though it is. It suits someone like myself whose ideas are mainly connected to the resonances of the instrument." From A Bird was a later presentation of some of John's compositions. Owing to his earlier observations of the recording industry, and a sense of its future, John decided he didn't want Sony to have ownership of his work: "One of the ways the recording industry is changing is that they're increasingly recording for compilation. All my albums have tried to be like a good concert program, listening to forty-five to fifty minutes in sequence. But the recording companies are not really interested in that now. They’re interested in compilation. They want to get seventy minutes of as much music as possible, promote it for six months, and then put it on the back catalog. It may only be available for special order, it may be an export only, but they can use it mercilessly throughout the world in individual countries for compilations."

John released his second disc on JCW Records in 2011. Stepping Stones was once again the result of a quite personal situation. "My main reason for doing it was recording Stephen Dodgson's The Midst of Life, which I think is his best ever piece. It's a work I've played a lot, but never recorded, partly because I never knew what to put with it. I did find some pieces eventually, and I really wanted to record it before he passed away, which I just managed to do. I had the proof out a month before he died."
Before discovering Stephen Goss’s *Guitar Concerto* (published by Doberman-Yppan in September to coincide with the US release of the CD), John was also unsure how a recording would work using the material he had. “Both the Ross Edwards and the Horacio Salinas pieces, as different as they are—different from Steve’s music—are pieces I wanted to do sometime, but with what? The Ross Edwards is only seventeen minutes, the Salinas maybe only twenty-two or twenty-three. It was a very open question what to put with them. I probably could have recorded Ross Edward’s music earlier, but by the time I played it, I had already recorded *From Australia.*” In addition, *Arafura Dances* was a work in progress. “I had a little problem in the last movement,” admits John. “Ross felt it was a bit short, and had added a section which wasn’t entirely successful. We played it twice in Australia, and when I performed it here in the City of London Festival in 2011, I went back to more like his original version. As it turned out, it was perfect—he was happy and I wanted to record it!” *Arafura Dances* is set in the traditional three movements. Like Goss’s music, it draws on a number of stylistic and geographical associations, though Edwards chooses to reference the musical cultures of Australia and Southeast Asia and the instruments of traditional Spain.

Paradoxically, the unifying feature of *Concerto* is its variety. “Sort of the opposite of the saying two’s company, three’s a crowd,” as John puts it. The CD includes two silent tracks of thirty seconds placed between the three items. It was a decision John made to assist the listener in managing the musical contrasts. Anyone who has followed John’s career will be aware that this sort of decision is quite normal. He doesn’t subscribe to a Eurocentric view of music, and is prepared to let his artistic direction be decided by whatever comes his way. The inclusion of Salinas’s *Danzas Peregrinas* is typical of this approach. “I think what Salinas does is as important as anything else,” *Danzas Peregrinas* is a triple concerto featuring soloists Horacio Duran (*charango*) and Richard Harvey (clarinet, *kena, sicus*, mandolin, recorder) as well as John on guitar. In early 2004 Horacio Salinas, Inti-Illimani’s original music director and principle composer; Richard Harvey; and John were in the south of Chile together discussing the idea of “recreating” some of Horacio’s Inti pieces; the result was *Danzas Peregrinas*. The dances of popular rhythms and various origins were created between the years 1980 and 1986. All were originally part of the repertoire of the Intis, an ensemble John has performed with frequently over the years.

Concluding our conversation in London, I learn there is much more to John’s commitment to new music than he is credited with. “There was a myth around from time to time, that ‘Williams doesn’t do new music.’ In the sense that it was expressed at the time, it was partly true, in that I’m not interested in every little piece that someone writes for the guitar. For me a lot of it either falls into that trap of ‘the guitar needs a repertoire’ or 1960s avant-garde, which is not so much ‘avant’, but ‘passé’! But I was playing modern music before a lot of people who were criticizing me were even born! I gave the first performance of Stephen Dodgson’s first concerto in 1959, played in the premiere of Tippett’s *King Priam* (1963), the first performances of Henze’s opera *Elegy for Young Lovers*, and was involved in Boulez’s recordings of the complete Webern, for example.”

His pioneering recordings of music by Barrios and Lauro have had an immeasurable impact on the guitar’s late-twentieth-century canon. Throughout his career John has tirelessly promoted the new music he loves, rather than doing it out of a sense of duty. A previous collaboration with composer Stephen Goss is a case in point: *The Flower of Cities*, although commissioned for the fiftieth anniversary of the City of London Festival, was in fact initiated and funded by John himself. This example sheds an enormously positive light on John’s involvement with new music, but then none of this should come as a surprise. John has clearly never changed his reasons for wanting to do music, and, coming away from the conversation I had with him, there’s no reason to think that will ever change. It’s business as usual for John Williams.

**Interview with John Williams (continued)**

*Above:* John Williams during performance of *Guitar Concerto.*

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