

## “ACOUSTIC RHAPSODY”

Pop & rock hits in classical guitar arrangements by Juan Manuel Ruiz Pardo

I've recently realized that the path to become the guitarist and musician that I am today was that long for a reason. The love I felt for the classical guitar when I was very young seemed to demand a separate attention regarding all those other musical interests I had. As time went by, it became gradually clearer to me that I wanted to do more things in music than just being a classical player. But I kept things apart for many years.

The turning point was the release of “Rara Avis”, my 2<sup>nd</sup> CD. For some reason, that I believed anecdotal back then, I decided to complete a record dedicated to my own compositions with... my solo guitar arrangement of Billie Jean.

Up to that point, I had transcribed a lot of classical music (in fact, my previous CD was an all – Chopin program); but my attempts on arranging music of other styles felt like some sort of secret hobby (with the exception of the Beatles, who have always been present in my concert programs, somewhere between Bach and Barrios). This particular Michael Jackson song had been a challenge for some time: I had tried to arrange it in the past; but it seemed impossible to maintain the progressive entrances from Quincy Jones' iconic original arrangement; and doing it without being able to maintain that effect was out of the question for me. Finally, at some point, I managed to work it out. Strikingly, the joy it brought me was a brand-new feeling: all those musical needs that I had - and eventually found in other musical contexts - were together for the very first time; and proved fully compatible with my guitarist approach. A new direction for my creativity had just appeared, and at that point I couldn't still foresee to what an extent would it be crucial to me.

Accidentally (or not?), two significant changes occurred shortly afterwards

When practicing, I had begun to alternate a standing position with sitting down, in order to relieve my back pain. I soon realized that when I played standing up I was able to relax all my body. When I experienced it live, the result was that I could also react to the music and accompany my expression with the movement of my whole body. It felt so natural that my only regret was not having started before.

Although I discovered a great device to keep the classical guitar close to my body when standing, the first stage was to do the standing practice with my Chey Atkins nylon amplified guitar (which already had a strap). I was soon to discover that the sound and qualities of this instrument (its incredible dynamic response, its versatility in combining strength and sweetness) fitted the live performance of my new repertoire of pop and rock arrangements perfectly.

Everything started to fit in.

In the course of a few years, I was fully devoted to arranging and performing this repertoire. In using the popular music of my time, I felt I was following a very instituted historic practice since the vihuela books of the 15th Century. But there was much more to it. Not only did I feel that I was culturally/emotionally closer to that music and, consequently, able to serve it more effectively, but I also noticed that the audience (even those who were not particularly into guitar) connected much better with my performance and reacted more spontaneously to it.

I find the implied psychological events of this really exciting: your listener knows that music, and feels very close to it cultural and emotionally; but his memory has it stored in its original version (performed by a full band). So, when he listens to a solo guitar arrangement, two contrary processes take place in his mind: he enjoys the recognition of that familiar music; and at the same time, he is able to perceive the contrast with the “new” element: the way in which you have managed to encapsulate all those familiar melodies, rhythms and arrangements he knows so well in just a guitar. They can almost taste the differences between both versions. Trying to take the polyphonic capacities of the instrument to the limit in my arrangements has become one of my hallmarks since.

The degree of enjoyment I find with this formula is far beyond what I ever experienced as a classical performer. And so is the conviction that I have finally found my spot: here is where I really show who I am as a musician. Performing, arranging, improvising, dealing with spontaneity and emotions and, above all, communicating with the audience is what I had always wanted to do. It just took me some time to reach that peak. When I am on stage today, I know that what I am showing is the real me. It’s a feeling I had never had: peaceful and empowering at the same time.

Acoustic Rhapsody was the name I chose back then to present this live concept. No wonder the album’s title, since it honours the repertoire, I have been arranging and performing for the last 10 years. Ranging from The Beatles (always!!), to different snapshots in the history of black music (blues, ragtime, soul), a disco jewel from the eighties (Video Killed the radio Star), classic rock hits (Police, Toto)... and, of course, I’ve included three Queen songs. I can’t remember when I last wrote a setlist without including at least one of his works of genius.

For the very first time, I have used my Gibson “Chet Atkins” guitar for a record. I was a bit reluctant at first; but, given that it has become my only instrument for live performances, I decided to give the idea a try. And so glad I did. I think it has an ideal tone and a beautiful sound for this kind of music.

Rara Avis offered a repertoire of my own compositions, with the only exception of one arrangement. Acoustic Rhapsody offers a repertoire of my own arrangements, with the only exception of one composition. Unintentional but beautiful symmetry that, I feel, comes to close the cycle of my musical search.

I wish to thank my good friend Gianriccardo Pera for the commission of this album. Following the initial surprise, my second feeling was also of amazement: “How

come I have not done this before"? His longstanding interest in my work and confidence in me have always been a great spur to me.

I also have a lifetime debt of gratitude with my dear friend José Luis Martínez. In addition to his condition of incredibly talented guitarist, to me he is simply the best when it comes to recording plucked instruments. He has been involved in all my records, and has always treated me with endless love and generosity.

Ruth Chiles has improved my playing and my life in a way I could never have imagined. Her work is called to release musicians from a long-suffered condition: the focal dystonia.

Chema Sáiz helped me escape the modal dead end I was in with "A hard day's night", and continues to be a constant source of inspiration and friendship.

My kids were the ones who patiently had to deal with me during all the process or recording and mastering. Thanks for your patience and understanding.

Mariola Martínez Zamora is the inspiration and inner light behind all my projects. I cannot put in words how lucky I am to have her sharing her immense talents with me. Thank you for accompanying and guiding each one of my steps. This work owes you more than I can express.

Juan