

## US INTERVIEW

# A ROAM WITH A VIEAUX

Donald Rosenberg shares an ice with up-and-coming young guitarist Jason Vieaux

**T**alk about boundless enthusiasm. Could this have something to do with the banana gelato? Maybe. But between bites of creamy dessert, Jason Vieaux almost smacks his lips when mentioning such delicious terms as 'sonata form' and 'structure' and extolling the delights of living in so many different hotels during extended tours. Only someone deeply devoted to his art and to his career could find excitement in every aspect of professional life.

But that pretty much sums up this articulate, gifted and sunny American musician. Vieaux has good reason to be high on the real musical thing. He has won international competitions, travelled the world as a concert artist and made admired recordings that have placed him among the elite of today's classical guitarists. He can also bask in a degree of security and flexibility rare even to major performers of his six-stringed stripes: as head since 2001 of the guitar department at the Cleveland Institute of Music, his alma mater, he has the freedom to pass down wisdom to a new generation of players while taking off virtually whenever he desires to share his guitar zeal with audiences near and distant.

Refreshingly, in the solitary world that most guitarists appear to inhabit, the 31-year-old Vieaux never feels far from the madding crowd. 'I don't find it lonely,' he says, his cherubic smile and blond-haired boyishness on full display. 'I play a lot of chamber music. The tours have showed me that I enjoy the pressures of travelling and living in hotels alone. As far as talking with other musicians and hanging out, chamber music and concertos comprise a lot of my work. There's a lot of opportunity for musical and social interaction.'

Vieaux has been accustomed to communicating with audiences since he was a young man in his native Buffalo, where he took up the guitar at the age of eight. Soon after beginning studies with



After a CD flirtation with Naxos, Jason Vieaux is stepping out with US indie label Azica

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Jeremy Sparks, a member of the Buffalo Guitar Quartet, Vieaux realized he savoured the process of practising and exploring his adopted instrument for many hours a day. His first recital, at 12, was a seminal event. 'After that recital, I felt, "I'm good at this. I'm better at this than soccer!" I started doing two recitals a year and trying to learn new repertoire every year. By the time I was a senior in high school, I had a good 70-75 pieces under my belt.'

Graduating from high school at 16, Vieaux auditioned for John Holmquist, then head of the guitar department at the Cleveland Institute of Music. The two clicked instantly. The teacher helped the student improve his tone and learn how to convey the messages in the music directly to listeners.

'He gave me an awareness of what I was doing mechanically and about efficiency of technique. He talked about the structure of a piece of music. As a teenager, I would experience moments. He made me aware of how those moments have a hierarchy to

them and can be related. I was very excited to get to work on a piece like that – sonata form – and to see what I was doing to play through that structure.'

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In 1992, Vieaux took first prize in the Guitar Foundation of America International Competition, which gave him the opportunity to make a 53-city tour of the US and France. His win, he says, essentially jump-started his professional career. He later served as an artist-ambassador for the United States Information Agency, touring Southeast Asia for seven weeks, giving recitals and educational concerts.

Vieaux, who rates Manuel Barrueco, David Russell and Julian Bream as his heroes, made his first CD in 1993: a solo recital of Bach, Brouwer, Morel, Ponce and Regondi, recorded by colleagues at the Cleveland Institute and released on an independent label. Naxos, the voracious chronicler of music and artists of renown and neglect, soon took notice, engaging him to make recordings of Latin-American works in 1996 and sonatas by Fernando Sor in 1998. But while these discs were well-received critically, Vieaux didn't see a future with Naxos, which was hiring many other guitarists.

Cleveland-based Azica, which had observed Vieaux up close for years, knocked on his door in 2000. Their first project was a disc of Ponce sonatas released in 2002. The same year, Vieaux teamed with flautist Gary Schocker for 'Dream Travels', featuring music by Ravel, Villa-Lobos, Ibert, Bartók and Latin-American composers. The guitarist followed a year later with a sterling recital of Albéniz pieces. His newest Azica disc, 'Arioso,' a programme of Baroque duets with Schocker, is reviewed on page A14.

Vieaux's excitement level continues to ascend – no, it's not the gelato – when he discusses his next Azica endeavour, a disc of tunes by jazz guitarist Pat Metheny in arrangements partly by Vieaux himself. A jazz fan since he was a boy, Vieaux received Metheny's blessing for the project after they met and discussed guitar-related matters. 'When I was in college, I did a ton of Metheny. It sounds so good on the guitar. It's harmonically rich and good melodic stuff.'

Next up is more stuff equally rich in the harmonic and melodic department: solo works by Bach. And giddy guitarist Vieaux can't wait to get into the studio with large ensembles. 'I would like to record concertos. I'm ready. There are tons I can do.'

Gelato dispatched, Vieaux is on his way, in every sense of the phrase. ☺