

Master Class Carlé Costa



Kulturhaus NIHZ in Nordhorn regularly organises courses and master classes in the field of music. For example, in June 2012 they offered an arrangement around the Uruguayan guitarist Carle Costa. The arrangement included a concert on the Saturday night and workshops and the master class on the Sunday. Stay and food were part of the deal, Kulturhaus NIHZ has a dormitory and skills in the kitchen!

I decided to subscribe, without the night's stay because I live just half an hour's drive from Nordhorn. Together with my wife Erna we made our way to the concert through villages full of football hysteria, because on that very night Holland would play against Denmark for the European Championship, and Germany would do the same against Portugal.

On the well-visited Saturday evening concert, I could get an impression of the musicality and personality of Carle Costa in advance.

He is a member of my generation (he was born in '59) and made his name as a guitarist, composer and ambassador for contemporary music already at a young age. In 1993, he escaped the cramped and crowded city and went through his ten years *Annees de Pelerinage* in the remote mountains of Argentina. This greatly influenced his music and life attitude. Presently he lives and works in Germany, in a city again, the German capital Berlin.

He played a mix of old and contemporary music. The first pieces were a number of old acquaintances, *5 Pavans* by Luis Milan (ca 1500 – ca 1560) from the Karl Scheit edition. The *Pavans* were followed by a piece of Luys de Narvaez (ca 1500 – ca 1560), the well-known *Cancion del Emperador (Mille Regretz)* and Alonso de Mudarra's *Fantasia on the Harp of Ludovico*.

Striking aspects of Costa's interpretation were his choice of tempo, voicing and dynamics. For instance, he played *Pavana 3* much slower than many players do. Yet he took the opportunity to emphasize the choral voicing of the piece. The same was valid for *Cancion del Emperador*.

The music by Heitor Villa Lobos (1887 - 1959) is in between old and contemporary. Carle Costa is busy with a project to breathe new life into the Villa Lobos Etudes. Under the influence of players like Andres Segovia and music publishers like Max Eschig many changes have been made to Villa Lobos' originals, at times even complete sections were discarded. Costa made a new and complete edition, based on recently discovered manuscripts.

After the evening concert with Frank Bungarten on the Twente Guitar Festival in 2010 - he played all twelve *Etudes* by Villa Lobos in a row at this occasion – I was completely fed up with Villa Lobos' study music. I heard his *Etudes* regularly on competitions, but they did not captivate me.

Carle Costa made a change to that. He did not merely *play* a few of them, he actually *clarified* them in a few ways. He showed which sections were discarded or changed by Segovia or the publisher, even though they were extremely important for the musical idea behind the piece. Additionally, he honoured the pieces by playing them as music in its own right and eloquence rather than a competition race circuit. Costa's approach concerning tempo and atmosphere greatly contributed to this.

As a conclusion, he played a set of pieces composed by himself. In his compositions, he transforms folk melodies to interesting and clearly contemporary music. The interesting aspect often lies in his techniques like a kind of two-way rasgueado that gives the impression of a tremolo and the use of harmonics on all strings and frets. Additionally, he showed a striking dynamic range, from almost complete silence up to a tone that filled the room and bounced against the walls. Sometimes the concert hall of Kulturhaus NIHZ looked almost too small to contain the sound.

His last piece – *Inipi*, the musical expression of a cleansing and spiritual initiation rite with the Indians – made a special impression, particularly on my wife Erna who is more open minded and less restricted towards contemporary music on the guitar. It is striking how this music touches strings in your mind indeed!

As an encore, he played an arpeggio study from the first series *Estudios Sencillos* by Leo Brouwer. Pleasantly his tempo was considerably lower than the race circuit that I am used for this piece. In this way, he preserved the details of the voicing much better, I liked this approach.

After the concert, we got into conversation about the cleansing ritual. The Lakota Indians use a kind of sauna hut for this ritual, it is a small tent, a cupola that is completely opaque. Inside there is a pile of red hot volcanic stones that are covered with some herbs. Pouring water on the stones, vapours emerge with various composition and effects, dependent on the herbs used. The setup resembles a womb, the final goal of the ritual is a spiritual rebirth. The initiate spends a number of phases in this environment.

The term *reborn* invokes some mixed feelings with me, particularly if it concerns some pietistic experiences of God in a religious background. That's caused by my reminiscence that being "reborn" for that matter sometimes changes reasonable people into fanatic proselytes with tunnel vision that all of a sudden consider you a member of the dark side. I am glad that this is not a universally valid effect

While describing this ritual, Costa did not express tunnel vision, he rather underlined gratitude. Every step in the ritual included an expression of gratitude towards the earth, the

cosmos and the souls that are part of it. It is no decoupling from or complete destruction of your ego, it rather is a confirmation of your connection with everything and everyone around you. It seems that you release what you don't need any more in the progress.

Costa had gone through such a ritual himself and he had experienced the gratitude for ordinary things like a deep breath of fresh air and very basic eating and drinking. Or just listening to the wind and the birds. All things we pass over in daily life, because they are so obvious that we do not see them anymore.

Yes, such an explanation really adds value to such a piece of music!

After a pleasant *après concert* we drove back home. In the streets, it was quite crowded because of German football supporters that were celebrating the first victory of Der Mannschaft. The Dutch team had not been so lucky this night.

The next day I returned for the master class and the workshop. To my delight, I met my very first guitar teacher Thea van der Meer. In the near past, I had met her briefly on the guitar events in this region. Suddenly I realised how long I am following guitar lessons by now. I started lessons with her when I was 19, which is 36 years ago by now, and after her I have had several teachers (no, I did not wear them out). I am still attending lessons now! *Still crazy after all these years! ;-)* Which does not imply that I will never learn!

For reasons of organisation, the workshop and the master class were more or less combined.

The workshop covered playing posture and attitude. Keyword was "Balance".

For reasons of balance, Costa is an enthusiast advocate for playing aids like an Ergoplay. If you adjust an Ergoplay correctly, you can play with both feet on the ground –connected to earth- without twisting your spine and moving your back out of balance. With a foot stool this spine twist is inevitable. As a Tai-Chi master, Costa has some experience with body balance and he showed some aspects from this practice. Things like chair height adjustment reminded me of the current Health and Safety regulations for working behind a computer screen.

The primary goal of the correct spine position is a posture that enables energy to flow freely without blockades. It's a good aim, but not a simple one, considering the fact that many guitarists develop physical problems as a consequence of their playing posture.

I have played with an Egoplay for some years now. First, I had to experiment a bit for the adjustment of the device, because no user manual or procedure was included in the box. Doing so, involuntarily you try to restore the playing posture that you are used to all these years, of course discarding the foot stool. That might not lead to an optimal situation.

With me, Carle Costa made some adjustments to the Ergoplay that caused a different positioning of the guitar, it tilted more upwards and shifted a little to the left. Physically it felt right, but I lost coordination because strings and frets are all of a sudden on another spot. That's logical, I guess, because tilting and shifting the guitar with reference to the body changes your coordinate system. Consequently, this adjustment was too sudden for me. I'll have to look for a better position slowly.

A second aspect of balance is the breathing. Music is breathing for an important part. Unfortunately breathing is something that you are barely aware of, because it is so lethally obvious and automatic. Breathing without blockades is a process that requires practice and

time. I guess many sages from the East will endorse this. I already noticed with my logopaedic training at the moment. Breathing is such an ordinary thing that you are continuously puzzled once you are aware of a faulty or less optimal breathing technique.

A third aspect of balance is the ability to listen. According to Costa many players do play, but they do not listen. They do not listen to sound, they fail to listen to silence. Attentive listening is quite difficult if your head is full of ideas. Yet it is the key to good musicianship. Particularly during playing. Quite some material for contemplation with my first and only piece during the master class.

I had the *Nuevos Estudios Sencillos* by Leo Brouwer with me. A long time ago his first series *Estudios Sencillos* was for me the introduction to moderately contemporary music. I played the first set of five and one study from the second set. The remaining *Estudios Sencillos* were too academic for me.

The *Nuevos Estudios Sencillos* are conceived as homages to famous composers such as Debussy, Barrios, Sor and Tarrega. Already with the first piece *Ommagio a Debussy* I noticed that the titles of the pieces had little added value for me. Playing the piece, you try to find a connection with the music of the composer that is honoured by the homage. All too often it appeared that the pieces merely are a *Ommagio a Brouwer*.

Consequently, as a player you are challenged to find a suitable atmosphere yourself. In themselves the *Estudios* are nice to play, offering a not too avant-gardist style. They encourage me to play with atmosphere and mood, at the same time offering me some technical training that I neglected a bit for years.

Carle Costa was frankly in his opinion concerning these pieces. He considered them a weak reflection of the originality of the first series of five *Estudios Sencillos*. He agreed with my problems to make contact between *Estudio* and the subject of the *Ommagio*. He suggested what I felt myself, make your own choices and play your own atmosphere.

I did not completely agree with Costa's remarks about the quality of the pieces, because this set of *Estudios* offers an interesting project in atmospheres. As long as you dare to choose your own approach and do not stick to titles, because they generate wrong expectations.

So I got to work. I played the piece in various tempos and atmospheres. In the discussion, Costa dealt with many aspects of the approach of "minimal music" like this piece. Dynamics, breathing and contrast are of extreme importance to keep the attention of the audience (and the player too, via his listening ear).

Two issues in our discussion stood out, the moment where you turn from silence to music and the phase in which you surrender the music to silence again. That first moment, that sense of expectation before the creation takes place, the cosmic silence just before the *Big Bang*, it comes back with every piece you play. The return to the silence of the fulfilled expectation likewise is a spiritually charged moment. It was quite different to approach playing music from a spiritual point of view.

Listening to the master classes of the other participants took the remainder of the time. I heard some new and interesting things. One of the participants had just bought some of Costa's pieces and got performance and technical hints out of first hand. Particularly his rasgueado and harmonics technique required some clarification. It was interesting that music publishers have their own favourite notations for this, that are sometimes beside the truth.

The entire day, Kulturhaus NIHZ took care of organisation and catering. Soup with bread for lunch, a traditional Swiss cheese dish for dinner. Bobby and Sanna made a fine performance in the kitchen!

Moreover, the meals offered a nice opportunity for the discussion of some other subjects. In this way, we heard some more about the musical scene in Argentina, including all "small world" effects that you stumble across and that seem to be the same all over the world.

Of course, we mused about the fate of culture in "tolerating" Holland. How will things go if every musician has to become a self-employed person without personnel? Well, you keep talking on a day like this!

Conclusion: It was a nice guitar day at Kulturhaus NIHZ again!