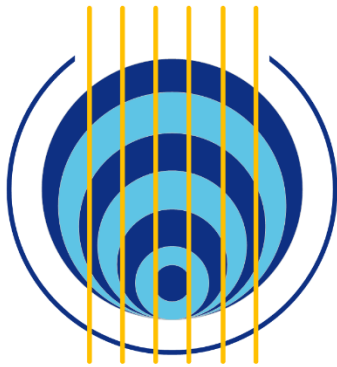


Amateur Competition 2015

Amateurconcours



Gitaarfestival Nordhorn 2015

After the less positive experience at the amateur competition at the Twente Guitar Festival, I decided to stick to the Nordhorn competition. At first, I started in good spirits.

Yet my competition urge was slowly wearing out, I had more difficulty to start detailed preparations. Some complacency crept in and I got overoptimistic about the contribution of my competition experiences to the future result.

In the end at the competition performance, I got overconcentrated and blacked out, leaving me with a lost race and quite some question marks if competition playing really adds to my experience and satisfaction.

Via the subjects in the menu you can read more about these developments!

March 2015: Subscribed

This year I decided to subscribe to the Nordhorn Guitar Festival only, and like wise to its amateur competition. I had noticed the past few years that two festivals within a short time span were a little too much, and last year I found out that this applied to two competitions too. So, this year I will skip the Twente Guitar Festival.

Another decision I made last year: I quit my guitar lessons. I just wanted to follow my own course for a while. Obviously, this affected my preparation for the competition of this year. Initially I was busy with practicing and execution of recordings. It was not before February that I started selecting pieces for the competition.

Last year I found a (simplified) arrangement of *Alfonsina y el Mar* van Ariel Ramirez (1921 – 2010). The well-known version by Cardoso is quite tricky, so for me this arrangement was a welcome compromise. That does not mean that it is so simple that you can play it right away! I really liked the tune, so I planned to play it on a competition.

Up till now it remained the only choice I made. However, besides *Alfonsina* I needed another two pieces to make a well-rounded programme.

Playing competitions, I have developed the habit to add something contemporary to the programme. In this way, I studied pieces by Leo Brouwer, Marlon Strauss and Stephan Rak. This year I selected one of the *Exotic Dances* by Pieter van der Staak, to be specific the *Hungarian Dance*. I do admit, this is a bit outdated contemporary, the piece was composed in 1967, but it is a nice one as a conclusion of the programme.

Remains a nice and joyful piece to start with. It was a happy coincidence that I have been busy with the repertoire by Jose Ferrer (1835 - 1916), because doing so I came across a cheerful *Gavotte*, titled *Belle*. The piece has an atmosphere that resembles *Les Clochettes* by Alfred Cottin that I played on the competition two years ago.

So, this will be the pieces I'll study to meet the challenge.

March 2015: About the Music

So, three pieces for the competition, *Belle* by Joser Ferrer, *Alfonsina y el Mar* by Ramirez and *Hungarian Dances* by Van der Staak

Jose Ferrer (1835 - 1916) was a Catalan guitarist and composer who taught guitar in Paris and Barcelona. Most of his compositions are in the style of the then popular *Musique de Salon*. This style is romantic and quite accessible for an audience. Ferrer's compositions often are strictly according to the "rules" and likewise structured. At times his compositions are predictable but that is compensated for by the nice melodies, even in the very short pieces.

Belle is a *Gavotte* that bears more relationship with a burlesque French dance than with the stylized movement in a Baroque suite. A brief introduction leads to a joyful and dansant piece that ends in a finale that provides room for a surprising end.

Alfonsina y el Mar is considered to be the unofficial anthem of Argentine. Ariel Ramirez composed the melody inspired by the legendary suicide of the poetess Alfonsina Storni (1892 - 1938) for which she wrote the poem *Voy a dormir* (I will go to sleep) as a goodbye letter. Besides being a poetess, Storni was an activist for women's' rights in a time that this subject met a lot of resistance in the male dominated society of South America. I found her life a special but also tragic history.

Ramirez composed the melody on Alfonsina Storni's goodbye poem *Voy a dormir* under the title *Alfonsina y el Mar* and the song became a hit in Argentine. The arrangement of this song for classical guitar by Jorge Cardoso is best known, but the arrangement by MM Alvarez Lopez that I play is quite faithful to Cardoso's, just the improvised solo is missing.

Pieter van der Staak (1930 - 2007) was one of the pioneer composers in Holland for the classical guitar. He composed for both guitar solo and guitar ensemble in various settings. He worked as the first guitar professor at the then Stedelijk Conservatorium in the town of Zwolle.

His *Five Exotic Dances* from 1967 are explorations of folk dance forms in contemporary mood. For instance, *War Dance* and *Sword Dance* have interesting rhythms and *Hungarian*

Dance has the challenge to bring forward the quasi-Balkan style with passion and dynamic variation.

Belle by Jose Ferrer

Belle is recorded as Opus 24 of the Spanish/Catalan composer Jose Ferrer (1835 - 1916). It's a *Gavotte*, a French folk-dance form that made it to the stylized dance suites in the late Renaissance and Baroque eras. Later on, the form sporadically returned in Classical and Romantic compositions when the composer returned to older forms.

Ferrer wrote the *Gavotte* as a quasi-folk tune for entertainment in the Paris music salons in the nineteenth century. The name suggests that he dedicated the piece to a young lady, he did so in many cases.

The piece has three sections: *Introduction* (measure 1-16), the *Gavotte* (measure 17 – 95) and a brief *Finale* (measure 95 – 103). The larger part of the piece is in A major, for contrast the *Gavotte* has a little A minor section.

The *Introduction* provides some warming-up. The runs in measures 13 – 16 require attention to keep the bass line clear. Here Bobby's hint is applicable! After the announcement, keep quiet for a moment, take a breath, visualise the tempo and then start playing. I failed to do so during a performance and got some trouble to get started.

Faithful to its form, the *Gavotte* starts with an upbeat in measure 17. It develops into a merry theme. Here I try to find the balance between virtuosity and clarity. Measure 40 is a perfect spot for a *ritenuto* in the slide.

The A minor section offers a nice contrast indeed! I play it slightly slower with a lot of dynamic variation in the repeat to prepare for the surprise in the *Gavotte* that starts with measure 70. Attention is required in measure 72, because you have to cross strings in the run. A slur from G to A on the 6th string surprisingly provides time for this.

In measure 79 the *Gavotte* theme returns. Developing into a short finale in measure 95. I do not hurry this finale despite the seduction by the triplets. In that case, the repeat of a melody fragment in the bass line is more obvious.

This is the first piece of the programme. I must concentrate on a quiet start and refrain from hurry, even though the sixteenth note runs are seductive. Once you start hurrying, the remainder of the pieces are affected too.

Alfonsina y el Mar by Ariel Ramirez

Alfonsina y el Mar is a composition by Ariel Ramirez (1921 - 2010), inspired by the suicide of the feminist poetess Alfonsina Storni (1892 - 1938) who –according to the stories- swam into the sea far away in order to never return. The title of the piece reflects this. Ramirez composed the melody and Felix Luna (1925 - 2009) made the lyrics of the song, based on Storni's goodbye poem *Voy a dormir*.

Both gentlemen had a fruitful cooperation. Ramirez and Luna were the musician and poet behind the *Missa Criolla* as well, a well-known mass in Spanish, the folk language of Argentine rather than in Latin. The folk themes that formed the music made the mass famous in Argentine and abroad.

Also, *Alfonsina y el Mar* became immensely popular in Argentine and beyond. It's not surprising that Youtube offers a whole lot of versions of the song. A beautiful performance is

the one by Mercedes Sosa, she perfectly brings out the haunting emotion of the song. A great arrangement for guitar is the version by Roland Dyens, he plays the song in his personal at times jazzy way. The piece looks far too difficult for a casual study!

The piece is in the key of A minor, has 6/8 meter and is built up from two repeated sections (measure 1 – 33 and measure 33 – 57) that each have a clear phrasing. One of the challenges of this piece is keeping the tranquillity to perform this phrasing. Breathing is extremely important, contrast between the repeats is likewise important. To get a touch of it, I started listening to various versions of the piece.

Technically, the piece is not extremely simple, even though the tempo is relatively low. I will have to position the bar chords have to be positioned accurately without stress. Fortunately, the phrasing of the piece supports it in most cases. Measures 33 and 34 contain the trickiest passage of the piece, a floating barré on the seventh fret as a preparation for a firm barré on the eighth to be able to reach for the B on the second string with the fourth finger.

Practice items will be the tranquillity and peace, the phrasing and the emotional aspects of the melody.

Hungarian Dance

Hungarian Dance is one of the *Five Exotic Dances* by Pieter van der Staak (1930 - 2007). My wife found a copy of the original publication from 1967 in the Second-Hand Shop. It is a funny thought that in the year that the piece was published, I lost my recorder on the way to school as a ten-year-old. Consequently, it became end of story for my musical education! ;-)
Fortunately, I recovered on my guitar much later!

Van der Staak used folk dance forms as vehicles for then contemporary music. He included some experiments with rhythm and harmony, but they were not extreme, it remained playable music and did not deteriorate into musical babble with weird effects like cutting the strings.

Hungarian Dance is one of the more conventional pieces from the collection. The piece is built up from melodic statements with an accompaniment pattern as answer. In this way the dance pattern seems to continue in the single melody lines. The piece is perfect for a brisk tempo and a lot of dynamic variation.

A brisk tempo requires an accurate fingering, because there is little time for superfluous movements. On various spots, it appeared wise to avoid open strings. Examples are measure 1 and 3 (1st and 2nd string, sliding pattern), measure 17 and 19 (2nd and 3rd string, sliding pattern) and measure 26 and 27 (3rd and 4th string, sliding pattern). The same applied for some runs like in measures 9 – 12.

I had to adapt the right-hand fingering too. Normally I tend to use *m a* for the small chord patterns, but in various situation *m i* was a better solution to prepare for the melody fragment that followed. In the other case, you lose speed in the transition and that sounds like hesitation.

It is important to bring out repeats in the structure, playing a bit with the dynamic contrast. For instance, the measures 9 – 12 more or less return twice in the measures 32 – 39.

In brief, *Hungarian Dance* is a fast piece with more substance that appears at first sight. Point of attention in this piece is the courage to go all out!

March 2015: A bit Late with the Preparations

Like I noted before, this year I started a bit late preparing my pieces for the competition. It's a month before the deadline, I made the final selection last week. Fortunately, that does not mean that all pieces are new to me.

I did play all material last season, but I did not put competition focus on them, I played other material as well. That's quite contrary to last years, I remember that I already started practicing with Christmas for my first competition in the next year. I must admit that this early start became later and later, last year I concentrated on the competition pieces two months before the date. So now it's a month later than last year.

I have no idea what caused this late start/ Lack of concentration or motivation to focus on a few pieces only? A bit of pride with the optimistic thought "I can make it"? Do I have little initiative to aim for the perfect performance? Or am I just too busy with other things besides guitar playing? Maybe that's the problem, at times I have trouble keeping up with all those concurrent jobs and intermediate meetings at work, causing a sense of being lived rather than living yourself. I guess I lack some energy at the moment. Personally, I do not see much improvement with the *Alternative Working Practices* and the *Flexible Office Space battle* each morning.

Whatever, I will have to do with the time that I have left. At the moment that's a little more than four weeks. I already performed one of the pieces before an audience, that yielded me some useful experience (a little pause and a deep breath before starting to play). I will write down the fingerings that would cause doubt without noting them. I will not over-focus on the pieces to prevent that I practice them to pieces. And I will make some recordings to find out how my performance actually is.

In the meantime, I will follow the good advice from the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*: *Don't Panic!*

April 2015: Bad Patch

It occurs every time again when I am preparing for a competition, the dreaded bad patch. The insecurity, will I be able to prepare my programme in such a way that it is competition worthy? At times, I experience a rehearsal that gives birth to mistakes that I had never heard before, causing surprise and irritation.

Moments of dissatisfaction. How much preparation do you need to be perfect? According to simple mathematics this is infinity, because perfection is an asymptote in time. How much time are you able to spend on rehearsal before the deadline? For me it's an hour a day if I have time for playing. Well, that's no infinity, that is fourteen hours at the most.

Yet these bad patches are stubborn. You would not believe it, but at those moments I have thoughts of withdrawal from the competition just to get over with it. They just happen, those fits of lassitude and despondency, and lately they do not limit themselves to playing music alone!

Back to the basics: Why do I join his competition? For winning? No, I guess not, it would frustrate me in advance and bring out the worst in me. That's no stuff for making music! No, my goal is to play my programme satisfactory for my audience and myself despite the awkward competition conditions. Playing comes first, evaluation is a later concern.

I guess it's a bit of a strife in myself too. A tension between a cautious and risk-free approach that just lacks a bit of brilliance and a secret wish and urge to be enthusiastic and spontaneous in public. Will I be able to or will I fail?

If I don't have the confidence that I am able to, I experience that bad patch.

April 2015: Intermittently Coudy

The preparation for the competition is more awkward to me than the previous years. I guess that is not due to the relatively short time (I have played all pieces before), I feel that it is caused by distraction. It's a bit of a concentration problem. To be honest, it's a bit of indecisiveness concerning what I should do and what not.

This unrest originates from my current work environment lately, many things come up or emerge, everything has to be ready yesterday and time and time the dilemma occurs "what to do now, what to postpone, what to leave and what to work on". This continuous switching is exhausting, particularly because choices you did not make keep nagging once you decided to tackle a particular issue.

Consequently, the result of my rehearsals is unclear, at times I am pessimistic, at times I am moderately optimistic. Not a sense of *Yesss, I am so totally ready for it!* I guess it's time to reconsider that result with three days to go before the festival starts!

Technical progress is hardly feasible in three days. So, I will concentrate on performance. Joyfulness and elegance with *Belle*, the serene sound of the endless breakers and the resignation of Alfonsina's deliberate choice to step out of her life in *Alfonsina y el Mar* and excited fervour in a not so very high tempo in *Hungarian Dance*.

But first I will re-string my guitar, because the current ones are a little worn out in the progress of my rehearsals. At least I made the effort for a good result!

April 2015: Preparations Completed

In the few days before the clouds drifted away a little. I complemented my pieces with an announcement in writing, so I could practice the complete performance.

With an announcement, it's just like the pieces that you play, you have to play (=say) it a few times and consider how it sounds. It takes a few versions before you have written a smooth announcement and practiced performing. A clear hint appeared: Keep sentences short and do not lose yourself in tricky rhetoric and subtle jokes. In that way, I recount some things about the composer and the background story of *Alfonsina y el Mar*.

I took a place in the middle of my attic to play on another spot than usual. That was a hint from my former teacher Ed Westerik, in this way you can concentrate on playing and leave

behind the study atmosphere of your normal practice spot. Because studying is no playing for performance!

Doing so, I noticed that the other sound impression and balance of what you hear yourself at times distracted me. A clear hint to keep concentrated on these spots of distraction. I noted down my breathing moments on the announcement and the scores, so that I will not forget them. You do need oxygen under stress conditions!

Including breathing moments and excluding announcement the full programme too nine minutes, which is slightly longer than the reglementary eight minutes. ;-) Well, usually you tend to play faster under stress conditions, so I guess I'll leave it that way. I hope that the jury is lenient on that point. Last year I did shorten my programme last minute out of fear of exceeding the time. I must admit that it affected my programme, so I'll remain faithful to my original intention this year.

Tomorrow the festival takes off with a welcome party and the day after tomorrow the train starts running. Then I will only be able to practice in Master classes. In brief, for the moment I am ready and I have to do it with what I've got. I do have a bit more confidence now!

April 2015: Master Class Pavel Steidl: Modesty

My very first activity at the Guitar Festival Nordhorn –the scene of the competition- was a master class with Pavel Steidl. Steidl's specialty is music from the Classical and Romantic eras. I took *Belle* by Joseph Ferrer, my first competition piece, with me as the subject of the hour.

Pavel Steidl browsed the score and promptly played the piece a prima vista at twice the speed that I had achieved in the way I ever hope to play the piece with humour and a joyful blink! Unbelievable!

Something weird happened when I attempted to play the piece myself after his convincing demonstration. It looked like that I tried to reach his level of performance while in fact I was not able to by far. I did realize this tension during playing and the effect was failure of the piece. It did demoralize me indeed!

Such a weird effect! A tendency to prove yourself willy nilly and even foolishly! A kind of insurgence of my ego. An effect that does not help the learning at all.

In this situation modesty is appropriate. The consciousness that my own ability or quality is inferior but acceptable for this moment, a sense that enables an open mind that is able to learn without the urge of a competition. For a moment, I had lost this mind-set!

Fortunately for me, Pavel quickly switched to the essence, reaching your audience with your music. Communicating the emotion of the piece, in this case joyfulness and surprise. It did lift the clouds with me a lot.

Besides the necessary and appropriate modesty, I learnt another lesson: Do not take competition pieces to a master class just prior to a competition. It is better to correct your approach afterwards and stay on your own course that to hastily implement suggestions that you have not been able to digest yet!

April 2015: D-day: The Competition

The day of the amateur competition finally had arrived on the second day of the Guitar Festival Nordhorn. I drove towards Nordhorn at my usual time in the morning, because the best remedy against (performance) stress is to follow your daily routine. So, I had a nice coffee (Thanks, Fred!) and a friendly good morning for everyone that arrived early like me.

I did notice a certain tension with me. It is quite difficult to ignore the feeling that you did not do enough during the preparation and that it is going to cost now! Unfortunately, yesterday's master class did not have the effect of zipping up my self-confidence. ;-)) Well, a known challenge with me!

I retired to the deserted concert hall and adjusted my Ergoplay to the correct height, the chairs in the Kulturhaus are a bit lower than my piano bench at home. When I last played here, I noticed that the small difference did affect comfortable playing, so I made a mental note to avoid this problem by adjustment next time. Finally, I sanded my nails, taking care not to remove too much. In stress conditions my fingertips swell, which makes the nails effectively shorter. That increases the chance of a miss-stroke.

I went through my pieces. I could play *Alfonsina y el Mar* by heart. That was a benefit to the performance, but I did not have the courage to take the chance to leave my scores at home. Apparently after all these years I still remember the trauma of a black-out playing by heart on a performance of the then Granados Duo, I have the sheet music with me ever since. In fact, it is risky, reading a piece from score that you practically know by heart. What do you concentrate on? Reading or memorizing? I have to make choices at last!

The morning before the competition I had a master class. Just for sure I took another piece than the ones I would play on the competition. That was a benefit to the master class indeed, so next time I'll do the same. I did not have time to worry. 'Use your imagination!' was one of the suggestions of teacher Christian Lavernier.

At one hand time seemed to fly, but on the other, the hands of the clock seemed to slow down as soon as they approached the time I should report for playing-in. I guess I took a look at the clock to many times. To pass time, I stabilized my centre of gravity with one of Fred's unsurpassed meat balls with mayo.

My 'adversaries' (amongst the amateurs that come here, this term is more or less inappropriate because we are all in the same boat) arrived, so I had a little chat, some of them appeared last year too.

Playing-in time! I tossed up to play as the second, so I would play my bits and still have time to listen to the others after me. I liked the idea, because I do not like waiting in the trenches.

I tuned my guitar again and played a few passages from my pieces. I actually used my imagination with *Hungarian Dance*, causing quite a different performance than I studied at home. Maybe this is not smart in the tactical sense!

The competition leader picked me up and escorted me to the concert hall. I straightened my back, walked the hall and climbed the stage. I put a few aspects from Bobby's stage presentation course into practice. Bowing, giving the audience a quick look and sitting down quietly. I set up my papers on the music stand and corrected the guitar tuning.

Time for my announcement! I had written down and rehearsed my story. It took me a bit of effort to keep looking at the audience in the progress of my announcement, but it worked out fine. It is better for the sound of your voice too, because reading aloud you bow your head to the paper, which leaves less air to rise your voice.

I took Bobby's hint concerning the breathing pause seriously: Just a moment of silence. Then I started my first piece, *Belle* by Jose Ferrer. It looked like that I implemented a few things that I had learned in Pavel Steidl's master class. The piece kept going and I succeeded in adding dynamics and to ignore the irritation about a few missing details. The start was made quite well and I felt relatively secure.

Alfonsina y el Mar! Technically the most difficult piece. Two repeated sections that resemble each other on paper. I took a deep breath. The beginning of the piece was OK, I kept running. Section one was successful without miss. Suddenly, however, during the repeat of section one, I lost my way. I could not trace where I was, reading the score, let alone how I should continue. Unfortunately, I did not trace this thread before it started to be conspicuous. I broke out in sweat right away! I had the impression that I was looking into a tunnel and failed to see anything outside.

I found my way back somehow. Finding back the courage to recover, however, took a few measures. Nevertheless, I was back on course after a while. At least that was what I heard later when someone complimented me that I had recovered so well. At the very moment, I did not experience it that way. I was in a mode that was aimed at damage reduction. The effort to do so yielded some half-slips here and there. I was glad that the awkward passage around the twelfth fret was not affected!

Somewhere in the back of my mind I realized that this slip would cost me in the sense of competition result. Because the last piece was up, I did not have time to think about that, let alone worrying.

Hungarian Dance was affected a little bit by my shock. At home, at least I did practice the transition between pieces, because they have a considerable tempo difference. I found that it is not easy to make the switch with the motto 'new piece, new chances'. I had the advantage that instinctively I took a lower tempo, which minimized the chance of slips.

Ready, applause and away through the front door! I had made it again! I should not worry about the result; my play was just not sufficient for the prizes. At least that would have been my judgment if I had been a jury member.

Of course, I did fret some about the slip of *Alfonsina* (no *double entendre* intended). It was a weird phenomenon that I had not experienced during my last four competitions. A kind of tunnel vision, I guess that it was caused by over-concentration, because I was not so nervous that my hands trembled! Maybe next time I should attempt playing by heart!

The result turned out to be as I expected, at least as far as I could assess, because I had not heard the first candidate (she got the third prize) and the one right after me. No prize this year!

Still I learnt some things that might come in handy next time!