

The Guitar without Boundaries of Ganesh Del Vescovo  
by Eleonora Negri

**Q:** An encounter with the personality of Ganesh Del Vescovo spontaneously brings to mind the idea of a “guitar without boundaries”. It is hard to fit this musician into any of the conventional categories of cultural, professional and musical genres, unless we refer to the concept which Quirino Principe calls “strong music”. This means music which transcends the context of traditional repertoires which have been defined by history and geography; music which thanks to its innate energy and essence that dwells at the source of man’s “raison d’être”, is capable of “transforming us” inside. It lies beyond the standardised labels of “classical”, “cultured”, “popular”, “folklore”, etc. The impact of Ganesh Del Vescovo’s music is strong and he associates it with the “happiness” found in his own artistic experience; an experience which he discovered at the age of 13 when he still answered to the name Giuseppe and came across a partly destroyed guitar, with only one string left, but which somehow managed to capture his curiosity, to enchant him and inspire his experimental nature.

[Ganesh Del Vescovo] I added five more strings to that one string, and then invented my own ways of tuning the instrument. This was before learning the traditional ways of tuning. At that time I chose the tuning according to my mood, without referring to any temperate system (I was not acquainted with any) and played microtones and intervals that do not correspond to any Western scales. I improvised all day and all night long, totally immersed in the sounds that I produced with techniques which for five or six years, were completely self-taught. I just enjoyed the pure happiness which that shattered instrument gave me. Even later on, my whole way of living music has always been like this: an inner pursuit which I later found in various musical cultures, both Western and Eastern, and above all Indian; but not only Indian, because I am also very much interested in the Iranian, Arab, and classical Japanese musical cultures.

**Q:** Who was it that Ganesh Del Vescovo met that most marked his artistic life?

[GDV] The meeting with Alvaro Company at the Accademia musicale in Pescara marked a real turning point in my life. The extraordinary musical and humane qualities of the Maestro had a deep influence even on the following development of my personality, not only as an artist. At the first audition Company asked me what I was going to play and I didn’t know what to answer. I had never seen sheet music before. I had always played freely, depending only on my inspiration. Company was impressed by the way I played and invited me to follow him to Florence. Since then he remained the key figure of my training. It was through him that I learnt about the great variety and sensitivity to colours and timbres in Segovia’s art. Company’s teaching built that up and expanded it because he always paid great attention to colours and the various ways to obtain them on the guitar. I think this is the most important aspect of the instrument. Unfortunately today in spite of the average high level of guitar techniques, this aspect is often forgotten,.

**Q:** Your experience as a performing artist goes hand in hand with your activities as a composer and a transcriber, as though one were the natural and necessary continuity of the others. This makes you one of the most interesting personalities on today’s musical scene, not only in Italy. To date, your compositions include works for: guitar; flute and guitar; harpsichord and guitar; string quartet and guitar; guitar and orchestra. In Ganesh Del Vescovo’s opinion, which of these represent his works the most?

[GDV] It is hard for me to say which piece or pieces “represent me” most. Each period of composing corresponds to a style which I sooner or later go back to. However I can

mention one piece which represents a complete phase of my activity as a composer. It is *Schegge di luce* ("Splinters of Light"), a short piece which contains a whole world. Another work which corresponds to a very recent creative period is *Suoni nella notte* ("Sounds in the Night"), which I will play as a first world performance, in the concert which I will hold next 23 November at 8.30 P.M. at the Lyceum Club Internazionale in Florence. I cherish this location very much because it is where I have presented many of my "experiments" and first world performances. Straight from the start it has always been an important place to "test" my works, when great critics like Leonardo Pinzauti came to hear me play and review the concerts. It was at the Lyceum that I performed my own compositions and Indian music for the very first time in public. This was a big surprise for my teacher, Company!

In the concert that I will perform in November I will play many works that I am recording on CD for EMA Vinci: *Etereo*; *Sette frammenti*; *Dhyana, nuova versione*; *Scherzo*; *Suoni nella notte seconda*; *Fluttuazione*; *Guru Purnima*.

I consider *Suoni nella notte* a good example of my music which shows an aspect which many people do not know. Most people think of the Oriental aspect of my being a musician. Actually what they are doing is labelling some particular sound qualities that they are not used to as "Indian music", and mistaking them for my pursuit as a composer, which often has nothing at all to do with Indian music.

**Q:** However the inspiration of Indian music is easy to identify in some of your compositions. At the Lyceum of Florence some of your concerts are remembered with great emotion by people who attended them, and in one of these concerts, held on 4 February 2008, the programme included works inspired by that musical culture: *Cinque risonanze* for Chikari Guitar (2006); *Advaita Ananda* for Sarod Guitar (2006); in first world performance the *Fantasia n° 7 sopra melodie indiane*, for six string guitar (2007); *Raga mia Ki Sarang* for Sarod (2007). When does this deep immersion in Indian music date back to?

[GDV] My first encounter with Indian music dates back to when I came to Florence to follow Company's lessons. At that time, nearly by chance, I met the Biswas family (with whom I still live). They told me about the fundamental pursuit of Indian classical music and I immediately recognised my own approach to sound. This is when my connection to traditional oriental music began. However this is a very different thing from my personal way of composing. When I play Indian music I do it on the *sarod*. My connection with the Indian musical tradition is fundamentally with the inner pursuit, and with the various inner moods that make me feel at home with the spirit of the *Ragas* and with their depth and complexity. Most certainly the knowledge of Indian music led me to understand my inner pursuit. But I never denied the Western musical tradition. I have studied it in depth, and am more and more convinced that music is "one", from Bach to the *Ragas*. I never felt closer to Bach than when I plunge into the depths of Indian music. They both have the same inner dimension.

**Q:** What works would you suggest are most necessary for a guitarist who wishes to approach and know your music?

[GDV] The publication of my works unwillingly came about in a peculiarly inverted order which began with the label "very difficult to perform". In fact I began by publishing *Sei studi*, which are difficult because I use unconventional techniques. Then the publisher asked me to write some other pieces which would technically prepare people to face the performance level of the *Sei studi*. So I wrote *12 Studi di transizione*. Then I was asked to write something still easier than these, so I composed *10 Impromptus in forma di studio*, A guitarist wishing to approach my music and my technique could begin with the latter and then go on to *Studi di transizione*, and land up with the more difficult *Sei studi*. The latter is actually part of a group of 24 studies. The ones published are only the first

series. They were published by the publishing house *Sinfonica (Nuova Carisch)* of Milan thanks to Maestro Bruno Giuffredi who had heard me and proposed to publish them. This obviously made me happy, but I made one indispensable condition; a CD with my performance of the pieces would have to be attached. This was necessary in order to completely understand the *Sei studi*. Today it is normal to publish sheet music with an attached CD of the performance, but I believe that it was a novelty in the year 2000. Then I published the second series of these studies (from n° 7 to n° 12), and I slowly intend to reach the publication of all 24.

**Q:** What other works would you recommend to guitarists who wish to know your personality? I mean to say, in addition to this important didactic work that confirms the name of Ganesh Del Vescovo as one of the most interesting composers of “Studies” for the guitar, and forms a valuable repertoire capable of transmitting a whole technical and virtuosistic heritage to young guitarists; a heritage which has been “field tested” by the composer?

[GDV] *Tre reminiscenze* for guitar (published by *Sinfonica*) are amongst my most accessible pieces. Then there are many other works. To me the *Otto fantasie sopra melodie indiane* (published in Canada by the famous *Doberman/Les Productions d'Oz*), are important and represent still another aspect of my music. At the moment I am making a choice of works to be published in three volumes to complete my total works (published by *Sinfonica*) with an audio CD attached to each volume.

**Q:** Are you composing something new at the moment?

[GVD] Yes, I am writing a piece called *Etereo*, in which I am experimenting a way of tuning the strings of the guitar that is different from the traditional way. I will make the first world performance in the concert on the 23rd of November at the Lyceum Club Internazionale of Florence.

**Q:** Can you tell us something about this new way of tuning the strings?

[GDV] Certainly I can. The first string is in E flat, the second is in B flat, the third remains in G, the fourth remains in D, the fifth is in A sharp and the sixth remains in E: it is not an “open string” tuning, and strange as it may seem, it is functional to the expression that I want to give to *Etereo*.

**Q:** Can you tell us something about your teaching experience and your ways of teaching?

[GDV] I don't use a standard method with any of my pupils. Each one of them is a world in themselves. I try to understand their taste through studying their reactions while they are listening and try to bring out their inner musical nature. So my teaching is highly personalised. In my opinion the dependence on scales must be broken. Scales are useful, but it is not compulsory to play them regularly every day. Another thing which I firmly believe in, both as performer and teacher, is that it is not compulsory to perform by heart. My opinion is the same as that of Sviatoslav Richter, namely that performing by heart carries the risk of becoming an effort that can lead to losing the meaning of the music, therefore increasing the danger of routine automatisms. This danger could distance the performer from the music itself.

**Q:** You came to discover your musical vocation through experimenting directly with the instrument. We find the same talent for experiments in your craftsmanship in designing and creating new forms of guitars, in the materials you use, as well as your actual inventions in the art of luthier. You got interested in traditional Indian instruments such as the *sarod* and the *tabla*, (which you play and for which you compose). So then you

modified the classical guitar not only by increasing the number of strings (up to 13) but also by “merging” it with instruments of Indian origin. You thus obtained the *chikari guitar* and designed the *sarod guitar*. Can you tell us about this passion of yours?

[GDV] My passion for transforming guitars began while I was still at Ronzano in the Abruzzo when I added six strings to that broken guitar. Then, when I played the *sarod*, I needed to feel the guitar and an Indian instrument merging together “under my fingers”. This led me to invent the *sarod guitar*, an instrument which has half a fingerboard of a classical guitar and the other half in metal. Before this I was fascinated by the *chikari guitar*, which I made by adding two metal strings on a mobile bridge. This instrument offers some unbelievable qualities of sound so I wrote five *Risonanze* especially for it. They are not at all Indian music, though some people perceive them as such because of the metal timbre of the two strings that I added. Instead *Advaita Ananda*, my piece for the *sarod guitar* (which can be heard on Youtube) represents music that I purposely conceived as a meeting between the East and the West.

Then there is the research connected to the performance of early music, which I love very much. I think it can be very limiting to play on a guitar with only six strings music which was conceived for the instruments that they were composed for. For example Kapsperger increased the number of the strings of the lute to 14, 15 and 16 strings. To play such music on a six string guitar is like removing its soul. This is why I added five strings to a magnificent guitar which originally had 8 strings, which Maestro Company had given me as a gift after my fifth year exam at the Conservatory. This instrument allows me to play the entire early music repertoire satisfactorily. Even Alvaro Company was very happy when he heard it after the modifications! Another example are Bach’s works for the lute beginning with the *Prelude of Suite n° 1*. If we remove the bass notes, such as the *pedale* which is so full and gratifying in the *Prelude of Suite BWW 995*, these pages completely lose their “soul”. Instead with a modified guitar, as with the cello, the same *Suite* can be played beautifully and remain faithful to the original score.

**Q:** This intense kind of research involves both technical and musical creativity, which continues in the form of your fervent activity of transcriber, especially for the guitar. Whoever has heard your concert performances of these splendid transcriptions knows how much they reveal of the apparently “untranslatable”, idiomatic qualities of masterpieces such as the *Preludes* by Chopin, *Children’s Corner* by Debussy and piano Sonatas by Mozart. Can you tell us something about your relationship with transcribing?

[GDV] Transcribing for the guitar is extremely important for me. Even more so than composing because it taught me the knowledge of my instrument. It obliges me to expand the limitations, to discover new positions on the guitar, new solutions and new worlds of sound which otherwise remain hidden within the instrument. Transcribing has been very important for my growth as a guitarist. I began by ear and then I developed it with more awareness. In fact transcribing trains the ear a lot. A few years ago I was asked to transcribe a piece of Ravi Shankar originally composed for flute and guitar. I did it without any trouble. While I was studying at the Conservatory I often wondered why we had to study the *setticlavio*. Except for composition, it seemed useless. Then I found it was very useful for transcribing, in order to transport a piece into a tonality which plays better on the guitar. My concept of transcription implies understanding the “spirit” of the work which is being transcribed and the pursuit of what the composer wanted to obtain. I do this through reconstructing the result given by the sound rather than a literal transcription, which often distorts the original musical “gesture” of the composer. What I mean to do is to reconstruct the work by remaining faithful to its meaning and the result given by the sound, without having to force uncomfortable positions in the attempt to play all the notes, or to keep the original tonality in which it was written.

**Q:** So, as far as Ganesh Del Vescovo is concerned, a transcription is actually a reinterpretation which aims at being faithful to the spirit of the original work, right?

[GDV] Exactly. This often means introducing special effects with the guitar, as for example in my transcription (published by *Sinfonica*) of Mozart's *Sonata n° KV 331*, in which the use of certain harmonics creates a feeling of magic that makes the piece particularly faithful to the sound of the original masterpiece. And so it is with *Children's Corner* by Debussy (published by *Sinfonica*). It is hard to imagine that this work could be performed on a solo guitar. Yet, I think that the way I transcribed it makes it sound as though it were written for the guitar instead of for the piano.

**Q:** Are these the transcriptions that you are most proud of?

[GDV] Yes, together with *Momenti musicali* op. 94 by Schubert, transcribed by me and published in Japan by Gendai.

**Q:** Can you tell us something about the monographic "booklet" that "GUITART" has commissioned you for 2016?

[GDV] The booklet which will be published by GUITART in 2016 will include illustrations, music scores and audio examples on CD. It tells about my experiences as a composer and a guitarist, and also includes suggestions about techniques which I use. I had already been asked several times to make this kind of a publication, but I never felt ready to do so. Now, I think I have enough experience to be able to give some useful suggestions.

Ideally this work is not only addressed to guitarists who are interested in my style of performing, but is also intended for composers who wish to write for the guitar and, in order to do this are in need of tools to enhance their knowledge of the instrument. This includes knowing the contexts in which certain techniques do or do not function. In order to compose I myself have always felt the need to "understand" the instrument in order to compose. The guitar fascinates composers because of its infinite possibilities, but at the same time it inhibits them because they do not have full knowledge of the instrument. This was also recently confirmed to me by Salvatore Sciarrino, one of the great composers of our times, after hearing me perform in *Le stagioni artificiali*, at the latest Maggio Musicale Fiorentino. Unfortunately he has never dedicated a work to solo guitar for this very reason. In this "booklet" I try to give useful indications about how to obtain the less conventional sound qualities on the guitar. Then there is a bit about my experience in modifying the guitar.

*This important synthesis of your experiences as performer, composer and experimenter on the guitar, will be a real gift of Ganesh Del Vescovo to the music world. It will be issued in 2016 with the subscriptions to GUITART.*