

# ADAM LEVIN

## ***American guitarist and NAXOS recording artist Adam Levin discusses his recent career highlights***

Interviewed By GUY TRAVISS

*YOUR INTRODUCTION to the guitar was marked by a very solid work ethic. How did you come to play the instrument and what drove you to work at it so much?*

I came to the guitar through my dad. He started playing violin at a young age and then with the onset of Beatle-mania, he threw away his violin and picked up the guitar, which was way 'cooler,' and has played ever since. He played blues, jazz, bluegrass and even classical. His inspirations were Andres Segovia, Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix, and Joe Pass. I remember listening to these greats with him and all of his commentaries on why they were so special. After suggesting that my sister and I start playing classical guitar, my dad returned to classical guitar as well, and over the years has played some of the most important pieces in the solo repertoire. I have fond memories growing up practising the works of the great Spanish masters, including Albéniz, Granados, Turina and De Falla, while my father sat across from me on the couch in the living room at 5:30 in the morning with his copy of the *Wall Street Journal* in hand, often blurting out comments from behind his newspaper. I could also hear my sister next door in the study playing through the Segovia scales and Sor studies. In middle school while most of my friends were still sleeping, my mornings were periods of time travel back to the old world, catching glimpses of a culture and spirit quite different from my own. I have to be honest. It was a struggle to find the energy or desire to practice, but my Dad was determined to instil the discipline necessary to reach mastery. I remember hearing my dad stomp down the hallway and opening the door to wake me up, and me complaining and whining about getting up so early, but I almost never won the battles. There were two arguments he had: one, there was sports, homework, social life and tiredness after school. His second rationale for getting us up early to practice was that farmers had to get up to milk the cows at the crack of dawn, so I had to get up to practice, and then I would get my glass of milk. I hated it back then, but laugh at it now! While it was a very tenuous relationship with the guitar growing up, I feel so fortunate that I had a father who was so interested in educating his children, imbuing a good work ethic in us, and passing along something that has been part of his entire life. And, it had a long-term impact on my desire to succeed in the music profession and my own maniacal work ethic. When I go home to give concerts in the Chicago-area as a professional guitarist today, my dad still sits on the couch with me as I practice, however I don't hear any commentary now, only the occasional, 'that's not right, play it a little slower.'



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*Becoming a NAXOS recording artist puts your recording work into a particular context since you are being featured alongside other guitarists on that label. Did this have an effect on how you wanted to design this disc?*

The NAXOS label's mission of cataloguing new repertoire and distributing it worldwide complemented my ambitions of getting new music into the ears of the masses. Over the years, many of my guitar colleagues have recorded important new music, inspiring me to map a Naxos recording that included a new body of serious guitar repertoire. With an eye for novelty and departure from the conventional, in 2008 I embarked on an adventure to discover the living Spanish composers of the last four generations who have made significant musical contributions to the evolution of Spanish composition. My project grew from a blueprinted Fulbright Scholarship proposal to the petition of 30 new virtuoso works for solo guitar. The project went far beyond my expectations and I needed an important platform to carry the weight of the project. Subsequently, I proposed a four volume recording project with NAXOS, and now I'm releasing the first



volume, *21st Century Spanish Guitar*, in May 2013. Three more volumes will follow.

*Spanish contemporary repertoire seems largely to have occupied your time in recent years. Why were you drawn to this particular area? What sequence of events led to the project that resulted?*

I was on the jury of a major international competition in Colorado and I heard almost 50 guitarists perform and the only Spanish composers performed by the contestants were Rodrigo, Granados, Turina, and Ascencio. Like myself, these guitarists stuck closely to the great Spanish masters of the 19th and 20th centuries. For years, I had been curious as to what came next. Did Spain stop producing great music? What's going on here? As a student, I learned Spanish music, but out of context, and far away from its origins and inspiration. The same went for the acquisition of the Spanish language. I had always learned the minimum in order to score the A in Spanish class, but nothing more. My interest in finally mastering a second language, getting in touch with the homeland where the 'Spanish sound' originated, and answering my curiosity about the direction of 20th and 21st century composition led to my application to become a candidate for the Fulbright Scholarship. Something that always interested me was sharing music and specifically the guitar in uncharted territories and to audiences unfamiliar with classical music. The work I had completed in the states as a music activist could be continued on a larger scale as a Fulbright Scholar, sharing music from America with people from different cultures around Europe and then upon my return share new music from Spain with American audiences. My Fulbright experience provided me with that opportunity. My original proposal was to study and perform 20th and 21st century Spanish guitar repertoire already written. The first two years in Spain I was enrolled at the Real Conservatorio Superior de Música in Madrid and studied with Spanish guitar virtuoso, Gabriel Estarellas. Maestro Estarellas was largely responsible for introducing me to the seminal works and composers of the last 80 years, including works by the generation of 1930: Anton García Abril, Xavier Montsalvatge, Leonardo Balada, Cristobal Halffter, Tomas Marco, and Luis de Pablo among others. So far in his career, Estarellas has premiered over 300 new works for the guitar. This was a huge inspiration for me, so much that it changed the course of my Fulbright project. It felt like an appropriate time in my career to begin to contribute to my field just as my mentors, Eliot Fisk, Oscar Ghiglia and then Gabriel Estarellas, had done. I embarked on a new

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voyage to find the most interesting composers of the last four generations and petition them to write new works for me. This was a fun venture because I got to wine and dine with many of the most important figures in the compositional world and many of them became close friends of mine and always extend their homes to me when I visit Spain. I spent a lot of time attending concerts and listening to music. Let's just say my iTunes bill got a bit out of hand. My friendship with two composers eventually led to two commercially released recordings, one called *Music from Out of Time*, and the other, *Fuego de la luna: Levin Plays Morales-Caso*. I wanted to commission works that represented the full diversity and spectrum of Spanish composition. During my second

year in Spain, I received a fellowship called the Program for Cultural Cooperation, in which I researched Spanish composers who had immigrated to the United States. I chose three composers in particular: Leonardo Balada, Ricardo Llorca and Octavio Vazquez. In engaging these composers in conversation about their careers, they all wrote me fantastic works for solo guitar. The project spun out of control really and one composition led to the next. Then my project became, in my mind, a natural extension of a body of the 30 short works that Colien Honegger commissioned in 1998 by contemporary Spanish composers and published in a single volume called *Album de Colien*.

During my third year in Spain as a Kate Neal Kinley Fellow, I spent a large part of the year performing many of the new works around Spain and Europe and commissioning more works for my project. When I returned to the United States in the summer of 2011, I wanted to find a home for these works, so I wrote to many of the large record labels in the United States and NAXOS was thrilled to house my project across four volumes. I have already completed the first volume and the second volume is underway. There will also be a seven-volume companion publication with all the works that I commissioned. They will be published with *Brotons and Mercadal Editions, Barcelona*. This project represents four generations of male and female Spanish composers and ranges from neo-baroque music to fractal compositions. The subsequent recordings are going to get a bit crazy!

*How do you think Spanish musical language has evolved? Does it still contain traces of the nationalist aesthetic used to great extent by Albéniz et al.?*

I discovered that Spanish composition had changed course once again and had entered, in my estimation, another renaissance. Whereas the epicentre





**Duo Sonidos with William Knuth.**

for many of the Spanish composers during the 19th and early 20th centuries was France, the Spanish contemporary masters of today are finding inspiration on a more global level and across centuries. Spanish composition is rich, varied and extremely cosmopolitan these days, a spectrum that spans neo-baroque and nationalist aesthetics to mind-blowing fractal compositions. While there are still vestiges of the Spanish nationalism 'sound' in today's Spanish music, the scope has broadened and diversified. Between 1930 and the present day, Spain has undergone impressive social, cultural and political change, from Franco's oppressive leadership and Spain's isolation, to democracy, increased immigration and capitalism. With this came a wealth of ideas, cultural exchange, innovation and global integration. I went to Spain expecting to see a homogenised, nationalist culture, but left with an entirely different image of Spain, one that is very regionalised, culturally diverse and progressive. These works also represent four generations of composition, which is another way of tracking the evolution of composition in the past 80 years.

*Projects such as this generally spark new ventures. What might you be interested in exploring next?*

There are two projects that I want to pursue in the near future. The first is exploring American music, the other exploring my Jewish heritage. I remember giving a recital in Spain and performing Spanish music and the organisers commenting not only on how well the music was performed but how it would be intriguing for the audience to hear music from my own culture and heritage. So, I went back the next year and gave them just that, and they loved it. I would like to record an album representing American composers.

I am currently organising a programme that includes works by Jewish composers and non-Jewish composers who were inspired by Judaism. This programme will include works by the Jewish composers Ernst Bloch, Arnold Schoenberg, George Gershwin, and Robert Beaser, among others, and non-Jewish composers, Maurice Ravel and Lorenzo Palomo. This project will demonstrate the richness and variety of the works by

Jewish composers and how its culture and traditions inspired non-Jewish composers.

*One line of questioning that is popular with readers of this magazine is how players make a career in the arts in the 21st century. What does the guitar player of today need to do to make things happen?*

I believe that one must have a comprehensive approach to making it in music. The ingredients to success can seem nebulous and intangible, so it requires passion and discipline to define the chemistry necessary to boost a career in the performing arts. Many people ask me, what do you do all day? Many people have jobs with a fixed infrastructure to work within and a regimen to follow. Musicians have to organise our lives like the rest of the world and create a fixed schedule. We have to give ourselves boundaries or else laziness ensues. I know this because I get lazy when I don't have specific daily goals. I have learned to adapt to a daily ritual that keeps me on track.

This leads to my next point, one must have an entrepreneurial spirit and think outside the box, innovate, and pioneer the future of their field. If one is going to repeat what has already been done, then one must discover new possibilities and attempt to offer a fresh perspective. In my mind, new music is the next frontier. I see it like investing in the stock market. You research a stock, follow it over time and then make a call whether to buy it or not. You purchase a stock because you believe it will have a return on investment. I think the same is true for new music, you're investing in a new composition that you believe will take its place in the standard repertoire and lead to future performances and recordings. I think it's a smart investment.

One must be a jack-of-all-trades. The idea that one will win competitions and automatically have a career is deceptive. I think competitions are among many things one can do to build their portfolio. Competitions are great for refining technique, building confidence and making friends in the international guitar community, however, they are places where guitar playing can occasionally become homogenised. In addition to being a solo performer, one must explore the richness that the chamber music world has to offer. Chamber music offers a wonderful opportunity to escape the guitar bubble and enter the general classical music world. Performing with other musicians gives guitarists the opportunity to perform music by composers who didn't write for guitar. It is a gateway into different music circles and thus broadens our horizons and gives us more opportunities to perform.

Refining one's message is critical in creating a career. Playing is not merely enough. Communicating and dialoguing about music and one's intentions and ambitions is paramount in crafting an image and brand for oneself. Certainly those terms are not what any of us want to hear: branding, image, and marketing, but it's the reality of the musical environment we live in today, and we all must craft our personal voice. My long time



mentor and teacher, Eliot Fisk, was inspirational in helping me define a niche and become an advocate for the guitar and the music I perform.

Establishing a catalogue of recordings is one component of building a legacy. From self-produced albums to established record labels, recordings are an ongoing means of communicating with your audience and one never knows which piece(s) for which he/she will become the reference.

There is no one method to creating a successful career. I am still figuring it out myself, but I do know that taking a multi-faceted approach has had success so far. Constantly re-evaluating ones conception of music, applying discipline, having a strong work ethic and yes, some luck, and you're good to go!

*Duo Sonidos is central to your activities as a musician. Why have you placed so much career emphasis on this particular ensemble?*

Duo Sonidos is my primary chamber music partnership with violinist William Knuth. We have been playing as a duo for almost seven years now, after meeting in graduate school at New England Conservatory in Boston. Will had just returned from Vienna, Austria where he completed two years as a Fulbright Scholar. I had just completed my undergraduate programme at Northwestern University outside of Chicago. Will was looking for something different than the traditional quartet experience and I was looking to gain access to the string world. Our introduction to the violin and guitar literature came through works by De Falla, Paganini, Piazzolla and contemporary Israeli composer Jan Freidlin. With encouragement from Eliot Fisk, Nicholas Kitchen, Paul Biss, and Lucy Chapman, we finally decided to go professional. This collaboration has elevated the guitar out of the guitar world and into the larger string and chamber music world. At the same time, it demonstrates the violin in its various capacities. We have made great strides to establish ourselves as a long-term, adventurous chamber music partnership. This has been accomplished in part through new commissions, outstanding critical response to our debut recording from *BBC Music Magazine*, *American Record Guide*, *Classical Guitar Magazine*, and *Fanfare* as well as a growing international performance schedule. We are successfully advancing our mission, generating exciting invitations from major concert series around the country. Although many serious chamber music series around the United States can have rather conservative programming, only including trios, quartets and the occasional solo pianist, we have persuaded many important presenters that we are an exciting and pioneering group whose image and programming of new works mixed in with fresh settings of masterworks will appeal to the public and subscription members. We are harnessing both the popular and classic images of each

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instrument to garner interest in our combination. When programming a concert, we feature works that really demonstrate the collaborative nature of the instruments, in which both the guitar and violin perform together on equal footing. At the same time, we select certain works that showcase the virtuosity of each performer. Good examples are the *Mountain Songs* by Robert Beaser, which demands great technical facility on the guitar, or Fritz Kreisler's showpieces for violin.

At the moment we are touring with a Baroque-Folk programme. The first half explores works originally for violin and continuo, such as Handel's *Sonata No.4 in D Major*, which is absolutely sublime, Corelli's famous *Sonata No.12 'La Follia'*, which uses a Portuguese dance motif ingeniously in a theme and variations, and Fritz Kreisler's *Variations on a Theme by Corelli*, which Kreisler presented as if it were a

work by Corelli. Only later did Kreisler reveal that it was indeed a work by himself. The realisation of the figured bass was a challenge but a great exercise for me. As our concert schedule has become more hectic, we have enlisted a wonderful composer and guitarist, Allen Krantz, to transcribe works that I don't have time to transcribe myself. One work we enjoy performing is Bach's B-minor Partita for solo violin or guitar, however, not in its usual

format as a solo work! Each movement in this suite is followed by a *double* variation, so we superimpose one movement over the other and play them at the same time. It works amazingly well, which is not surprising since the *doubles* are embellishments of the previous movement. We were a bit tentative at first presenting such a well-known work in such an unconventional way, but once we performed it, we were convinced it was worthwhile! We think Bach would have enjoyed it this way as well.

We also perform works that draw from different folk traditions around the world, including Cuba, Spain and the United States, by composers Eduardo Morales-Caso, Xavier Montsalvatge and Robert Beaser. Our next recording project, which we hope to release early next year, will include works inspired primarily by folk music from around the world: Hungary, Spain, Poland, Cuba, and America. Through innovative transcriptions, our intent is to present a fresh perspective of fine chamber music of the last century written for voice and piano, or violin and piano, as well as to advance our mission to expand the repertoire for violin and guitar duos through new works. This project will include works by Lukas Foss, Karol Szymanowski, Béla Bartók, David del Puerto, and Xavier Montsalvatge.

The programme reflects our sense of pride in our individual heritages. William is of Polish descent, and I am of Jewish descent. We chose chamber works for this album that draw inspiration from



these two vibrant cultures. First are three transcriptions from the violin and piano catalogue of Karol Szymanowski: *The Dawn and Wild Dance* (jointly composed with Polish violinist Paul Kochanski) and Szymanowski's own adaptation of *Kurpian Song*, all which reference traditional Polish music and folklore. Lukas Foss' *Three American Pieces* is a profound work that captures the essence of America through its virtuosity, expansiveness and lyrical character. While this work draws from our common American background, the work also represents American music from the hand of a Jewish composer that William has personally worked with in the past.

We are especially delighted with our recent adaptation of Xavier Montsalvatge's masterpiece, *Cinco Canciones Negras*, originally for mezzo-soprano and piano, based on the evocative lyricism of music from Cuba and the West Indies. The songs posed a great challenge and opportunity as we worked to capture the essence of the vocal and piano parts idiomatically on the guitar and violin. Just as Manuel De Falla's *Siete Canciones Populares Españolas* became a staple for just about every combination of instrumentalists, we anticipate a bright future for this transcription in chamber music circles.

*You are also involved in a number of projects to do with music and community. How did you become involved in these things and what value do you think they have?*

Music activism is part of my broader music entrepreneurial vision and a core portion of my career plan. For centuries classical music has been exclusive, expensive and distant from the masses. It has been typically available to the wealthy elite and only those who could afford to provide their children with a music education. As the political, cultural and social landscape of the world has changed in the 20th and 21st centuries, globalisation has expanded worldwide networks and brought people from different backgrounds together. The Internet has radically transformed the exchange of information and ideas and informed people of different cultures and traditions. As a musician, I believe it is my responsibility to contribute in breaking down the cultural, social, and economic barriers barring people from access to a music education. It has given me the opportunity to broaden my humanitarian scope by introducing classical music to the lives of people who have either been cut off from the cultural mainstream owing to crisis, unforeseen misfortune or have been denied access to it owing to economic or educational constraints. The guitar is an instrument with which many people in America share some affinity and affection, though not enough have had exposure to classical guitar. People who would rarely think of attending a recital of string players or an orchestra concert are charmed by the guitar and curious to hear almost any style of music being



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played on it. It is, in other words, an ideal 'gateway instrument' into the world of Bach, Albéniz, and Walton.

My classroom performances have allowed students to listen and respond to a form of music they may have never encountered before, and that may have inspired a student to pursue a creative pursuit outside the classroom. The therapeutic effect of music in the treatment of mental illness and for a variety of physical ailments is well documented and has been an essential adjunct to hospital programmes since its formal introduction as a health-care discipline at the University of Michigan some 60 years ago. Music produces a range of palliative and enduring health and cognitive learning effects; it provides a basis for social effect; it provides a basis for social relatedness between others in disconnected or alienated groups, and it provides a voice for the heart, a medium of emotional expression, exchange and mastery.

My mission, stated plainly, is to take the guitar into uncharted territories: new music, novel pedagogical methodologies, broader community exposure and participation. As a Boston Albert Schweitzer Fellow, I designed and implemented a multidimensional outreach programme, encompassing healthcare, education and community welfare. In Madrid as a Fulbright Scholar, I collaborated with the US Embassy in creating educational programmes offering broad exposure to world music for students at bilingual schools. Music outreach has allowed me to become a community leader while offering members of the community a glimpse of an art form that has brought peace, unity and integrity to my family and to my life.

Whenever I mentor young people about a career in music (which I am still figuring out myself!), I emphasise the word dynamic. Performance outreach is a unique opportunity to cultivate your artistic message, gain performance experience, contribute to the community, educate the next generation of young learners and build future music audiences. Coupled with a broader performance and teaching career, we begin to develop a concept for the 21st century musician.