

SPECIAL FOCUS REPERTOIRE



Christopher Mallett

Originally from San Diego, California, Christopher Mallett received his bachelor's degree from the Oberlin Conservatory of Music and his master's from the Yale School of Music, where he studied with Benjamin Verdery (among others). He is co-owner and teacher at the California Conservatory of Guitar, and performs both as a solo guitarist and as part of DuoSF with Robert Miller. His solo album, The Porcelain Tower, and DuoSF's Corta Jaca, are reviewed on page 83.

When I came up, going through school and the conservatory, you were required to play the standard pieces—Bach, some Fernando Sor, [Mauro] Giuliani; something from all the different eras, because what it's really about is making yourself more well-rounded as a musician, so you're ready for any situation as a professional. With my students, I try to make the repertoire very broad for them, so they're able to tackle a Bach sonata or one of the cello suites, and they're able to do a classical sonata as well, so they understand the form and can analyze the music, eventually without the teacher's help.

In competitions you'll run across guitarists who try to impress [the judges] by playing some really difficult piece, and [as a judge] it is nice to hear some things that are different from the usual pieces, but really what's most important is not what the piece is as much as if it's played well.

If it's a simple piece but they really handle it well—if they have all the dynamics and the phrasing down—compared to someone who plays some huge piece by [Johann Kaspar] Mertz, or something they obviously aren't ready to play, we'll choose the person who has control over the piece. It's important that players know their own limits.

[As for creating a program to play for a concert], I think it's important to have variety, and they should be thinking beyond the guitarists [in the audience], because our goal is to spread music to the general public. As an instrument that's not as big as the violin or the piano, I think we should be playing these pieces for an audience we have to expect has never heard them before, so if that means playing some of the more popular "warhorses," they will be new to some people and many of them are great pieces.

I also think in small doses you can throw in some modern pieces for any audience. I don't think you want to go in and play a full program of [Luciano] Berio and Milton Babbitt. But there are certain 20th-century composers audiences really like, such as Nikita Koshkin, Dusan Bogdanovic, Sergio Assad, and [Leo] Brouwer. You can program a couple of pieces like that and even an audience that's new to classical guitar will probably enjoy it. Like at Marcin Dylla's concert [in San Francisco in April 2015, reviewed in the Fall 2015 issue of *CG*—he

played a lot of new music, but he was able to convey it in a way that showed he was clearly in total control, so the audience felt comfortable and safe listening to it.

On the other side of that, I think some people in the audience like knowing that there is a pop influence in [some pieces], because now a lot of audiences that go to these concerts are people who don't strictly listen to classical music. They might have been raised on the Beatles and classic rock. So going to a classical-guitar concert and hearing a Beatles song is maybe nostalgic for them, but it can show them something new and different about these songs they know, because of the arrangements.

For my debut solo album [*The Porcelain Tower*], I didn't set out to play standard repertoire, but I did throw in a little Villa-Lobos. I wanted to play things I really enjoyed and which I felt inspired me as a musician. I thought, "If I love it, I can play it in a way that listeners will enjoy it." I knew it wasn't going to sell a million copies, so I wanted to have fun. I wasn't out to make something heavy that I was forcing upon people.

I was hoping people would hear it and, if they liked something, it might lead them to explore other genres and even explore beyond classical guitar—maybe look at more modern music and help them understand that all modern music isn't really crazy.