

The Cavatina Duo: Eugenia Moliner & Denis Azabagic

By Michael Copley

A couple of years ago I had the great privilege of reviewing a recording of music for flute and guitar by the American composer David Leisner, performed by the Cavatina Duo, Eugenia Moliner and Denis Azabagic. Eugenia was born in Spain and Denis in what was then Yugoslavia. They met in Rotterdam where they were both studying in the early 1990s. I recently spoke to them from Belgrade where they were concluding a tour of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia. Our conversation lasted for nearly two hours and forms the basis of this article.

Valencia-born Eugenia started playing the flute at the relatively late age of fifteen and soon became invited to the summer meetings of the Spanish National Youth Orchestra.

Spanish flautist Jaime Martin, now first flute in the London Philharmonic Orchestra and professor of flute at the Royal College of Music, suggested to Eugenia the idea of studying abroad and she chose the Netherlands, certainly not for the sophistication of the food, the beauty of the language or the glorious weather, but instead for the opportunity to study with Jo Hagen, principal flute of the Rotterdam Philharmonic. Denis left Yugoslavia just before civil war erupted in his native Tuzla where his guitar teacher had been Predag Stankovic. Throughout the conversation, Eugenia stressed that unlike some flute and guitar duos, the Cavatina consists of two chamber musicians of



Photograph: Yolanda Camarillas.



equal accomplishment and musicianship, both soloists in their own right.

After completing their studies, they moved to the States, first of all to the University of Indiana and later to Chicago where they now based.

We agreed that very much of the conventional repertoire for flute and guitar is unexceptional, trivial or just dull. The Cavatina Duos solution to this problem is to commission pieces from a wide variety of contemporary composers and their latest recording, *The Balkan Project*, consists entirely of new works based on melodies from Bosnia, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Serbia and Croatia not arrangements but music inspired by the guitarist Balkan heritage. It is an unusual and haunting recording particularly the work by the American composer Michael Karmon, based on the famous old Macedonian 'Jovano Jovanke'. Much of this Balkan music shows a strong influence of the hundreds of years that the region spent as part of the Ottoman Empire. The melodies are often, in what seem to Western ears to be in unusual time signatures and the harmonic turns can be startling. The texts of the Bosnian form of vocal music known as 'Sevdah' or

'Sevdalinka' are full of old Turkish words, often incomprehensible to modern audiences in the region.

Having recorded Piazzolla's famous *Histoire du Tango* in 1999, another recent recording, *Cavatina Duo Plays Astor Piazzolla* (Bridge Records), was of very idiomatic arrangements of pieces originally written by the great Argentine composer for other instruments. Arrangements like this, in addition to the commissioned works, form a large part of their repertoire and are made with great sensitivity and musicality commissioned in the same way as the new compositions.

www.CavatinaDuo.com
www.Azabagic.com
www.EugeniaMoliner.com

Eugenia sees herself essentially as a chamber musician and teaches chamber music classes at the Chicago College of Performing Arts at the Roosevelt University there, where her colleagues include members of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. She is fierce in her desire that the flute and guitar duo should reach the same standards and be accorded the same respect as other chamber formations rather than as so often happens, being seen as a soloist with an agreeable accompaniment. She commented that when flute and guitar duos are mentioned, the immediate thought is background music at weddings!

The duo performs frequently throughout the States and Canada and Mexico. In Europe they have performed in Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark and the Balkans; in the Far East, China and Taiwan. In December they will play for the first time in Kolkata, India, followed by what must be the first tour made by a flute and guitar duo of the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan. They have yet to perform in Britain and look forward to making their debut here.

Their recent Balkan tour included performances in Tuzla with the Sarajevo Philharmonic of the Borne's Carmen Fantasy, Rodrigo's Concierto de Aranjuez and the concerto for flute and guitar written for them by the British-based American composer and guitarist Alan Thomas, as well as performances and teaching in the Belgrade Academy of Music. To the students' apparent amazement, Eugenia taught in fluent Serbo-Croat. She was enormously impressed by the high technical standards and the musicianship she encountered during several days she spent there. Eugenia herself plays a fourteen-carat gold Emanuel flute made in Boston by the Peruvian maker Emanuel Arista, but commented on the extremely low standard of instruments that music students in former Yugoslavia are obliged to play. There is a lack both of decent instruments and repairers, which seems however to do nothing to dampen the enthusiasm and high level of the students and their professor, Ljubisa Jovanovic.

The Belgrade Academy has a recently-formed and very impressive flute choir, and, according to Eugenia, despite problems both financial and bureaucratic, they would be an enormous hit at the next British Flute Society convention.

In addition to the Emanuel, Eugenia often uses a Murumatsu alto flute; her preferred piccolo is a Hammig. She does not at the moment play ethnic' woodwind instruments, but during her time in Serbia was so impressed by what could be achieved on the little pipe or 'frula' that she bought one.

Their next big project, based on Ladino music, will combine Eugenia's Spanish and Denis's Balkan roots. Ladino is an ancient form of Spanish spoken by Jews expelled from Spain in the sixteenth century. The Ottoman Empire welcomed them and they became an important element of Balkan culture until the arrival of the Nazis. The music that survives is a fascinating blend of Hispanic and Balkan and I am looking forward enormously to the Cavatina Duo's exploration of it.



Michael Copley is a member of two unusual groups, The Classic Buskers (formerly known as the Cambridge Buskers) and the Chucker-buttu Ocarina Quartet, both of which specialise in playing popular classical music at high speed on unconventional and often ludicrous instruments. He has a great interest in the Balkans, and is a regular visitor to Mostar in Bosnia-Herzegovina where he both teaches the flute and works with the children of the Special Needs School there.

