

From Bach to Buddhism via Table Hockey: An Interview with Guitarist Lou Marinoff

By Colin Clarke

from: Fanfare Magazine Archive of CD Reviews
<http://fanfarearchive.com/ntbm/articles/marinoff-int-rev.html>

The disc begins with a selection of Bach pieces, recorded 1976 (the Prelude from the First Cello Suite) and 2006–09 (the Bourée, the Sinfonias, and the Invention). How close is this music to your heart? And what about playing it on the guitar (not a purist’s dream!)? Am I right in thinking the first two pieces are not transcriptions but performances from the score, and what would you like to tell us about Moshe Denburg’s Bach arrangements of the Sinfonias and Inventions?

Yes, J. S. Bach is my favorite composer, and my appreciation of his music only increases over time. One can always discover something new in Bach, even in pieces played 10,000 times. Playing Bach on guitar is fraught with complications, from transcribing to tuning to interpreting to fingering. To me his music is most beautiful to hear, and most difficult to play. I am not the only guitarist to say this. If we’re talking Bach, purism is out the window. To begin with, he composed for Baroque instruments such as lute and harpsichord, not guitar and piano. But that’s of little moment, since much of his music simply transcends instrumentation. His Chaconne, for example, is played on violin, harpsichord, piano, organ, lute, guitar, and bassoon, among other instruments, plus orchestral arrangements.

Every Bach piece played on guitar is necessarily a transcription. Tárrega transcribed Bach in the 19th century, as did Segovia (followed by many others) in the 20th. The first two pieces on *Classical Journey*, the Prelude from the First Cello Suite and the Bourrée from the Violin Partita in B Minor, are themselves adaptations of transcriptions.

And thanks for asking about Moshe Denburg’s arrangements of the *Sinfonia* and *Inventio*. Being enamored of Bach’s Two- and Three-Part Inventions, almost to the point of “keyboard envy,” I thought that some of them sounded guitaristic enough to be attempted. So I approached Moshe, who liked the idea. He worked assiduously on this, not only studying the piano scores but also listening to Glenn Gould (at my suggestion) and Angela Hewitt (on his initiative). Denburg is also a guitarist, which certainly helped. We worked closely together in finalizing his transcriptions and my fingerings. I am absolutely thrilled to premiere the first four of these fruits, and we are preparing more. Moshe’s thoughtfulness is also evident in his annotations on tempos, ornaments, and other matters, which are included in the published sheet music, available via my web site.

This is the same Denburg who arranged the Mascagni Intermezzo from Cavalleria Rusticana and the Barcarolle from Silvano, isn’t it? Aren’t they the themes featured in the film Raging Bull? It’s a stunningly beautiful arrangement.

Yes, the Mascagni arrangements are by the inimitable Denburg. I had been touched by the tragic beauty of Martin Scorsese’s 1980 film *Raging Bull*, for which Robert de Niro deservedly won an Academy Award for his portrayal of Jake LaMotta. Scorsese also won my admiration for his tasteful choice of Mascagni’s themes for the soundtrack: They were perfect! I wondered whether they could be rendered on guitar, and Denburg waxed enthusiastic at the prospect. So I commissioned him, and am happy to include the piece on this CD—a live recording at philosopher Jan Narveson’s Waterloo Chamber Music Society. Denburg will be deservedly delighted by your appreciation of his arrangement, with which I concur! He also includes illuminating annotations, along with the “back story” of the piece, in the published sheet music.

I know that you met Denburg in the 1970s. Would you please elaborate on how this flowered into a longstanding collaborative relationship? [Marinoff describes on his web site these arrangements as highlights of his journey to date].

Florence Brown introduced us in the mid-1970s, expressing optimism at the prospect of some kind of collaboration. At our first encounter, Moshe pitched up with his guitar and sang *Driving Me Wild*—an inevitable Number One pop hit if produced in a studio with a rock band. It would still be a hit today! For some reason, it has yet to be recorded. Moshe came across like a Jewish John Lennon/Jim Morrison/James Taylor. I had recently released a folk-rock album of my own compositions, influenced by the likes of Bob Dylan/Paul Simon/Leonard Cohen, backed by terrific budding musicians whom Moshe and I knew in common, from the same Montreal underground. During the 1970s, we all played together in various permutations, combinations, and genres. Moshe's path led to advanced musical studies in India, and in Japan, where he lived for some time. He then studied Western composition at the University of Victoria, and his Vancouver-based career has blossomed. Our matured collaboration was renewed there, during 1991–94, when I taught philosophy at the University of British Columbia. Moshe and I have communed every year or two since, on one coast or the other, and that's how the Bach and Mascagni evolved. This all came full circle when Florence and I reunited for lunch in Montreal, in September—after a hiatus of 40 years. I gave her the disc, and if I told you it made her day that would be a British understatement. It was a wonderful surprise for her—better late than never!—and the most fitting way for Moshe and I to thank her for having introduced us in the first place.