

JOHN OLSON

Guitarist, Research Scientist and President of the
New York City Classical Guitar Society

Interview by LAWRENCE DEL CASALE

JOHN OLSON is an eclectic person with diverse talents all at a very high level. As a scientist, Olson has performed research in both the biotechnology and pharmaceutical industries for over fifteen years, and holds a Ph.D. from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Olson currently leads a research group focused on discovering new cancer therapies.

As a guitarist, Olson has performed throughout the US as a soloist and with his wife, soprano Gioia De Cari, as part of the Olson/De Cari Duo. The ensemble is dedicated to performing and expanding the repertoire for classical guitar and voice, and they have recently released their debut CD, *Quiet Songs*. The disc features the premiere recording of David Leisner's song cycle *Outdoor Shadows*, as well as the first American recordings of John W. Duarte's *Five Quiet Songs* and his arrangements of Gershwin songs. The Duo have blended their love for science and music by actively creating new music for voice and guitar through their Science/Music Commissioning Project. The project seeks to create music that will convey the beauty of science and highlight the human side of scientific enterprise. Noted composer Terry Champlin, faculty member at Mannes College of Music and Vassar College, wrote the Project's first commission: *Abyss of the Stars*, a mass for voice and guitar. Most recently, Frank Wallace, a prolific composer of music for voice and guitar, wrote a six-movement song cycle entitled *Men, Women and Molecules*, using poems by Roald Hoffmann, a Nobel Prize-winning chemist at Cornell University. The poems explore life, love, and human relationships with insight and humour, from the unique perspective of a scientist.

As President of the New York City Classical Guitar Society, John has revitalised the organisation and made it into a thriving and central part of the city's classical guitar community. Under his leadership, the Society has presented a diverse series of world-class guitarists and emerging artists in educational presentations at monthly forums, presented sold-out performances in one of New York City's major guitar concert series, and helped establish a new monthly series in an intimate salon venue.

How and when did your relationship with the New York City Classical Guitar Society [NYCCGS]



John Olson.

begin? And how did you ultimately become its president?

I initially got involved by attending the monthly meetings several years ago, when Andrew Dickenson was running the Society. Even now, with our significant growth in the past few years, and the addition of more concerts and other programmes, those monthly meetings remain the heart of the NYCCGS. What kept me coming in my early days were the interesting presentations and discussions, the camaraderie, and the chance to share music with other guitarists in a relaxed setting. After a while, I was asked to join the board, and a couple of years later became President. I'm now in my fourth season as President, and still having a great time in the job. The Society meant so much to me when I first became involved as a member, and it's gratifying to play a role in providing a positive experience for others.

Who came first, the guitarist or the research scientist?

I suppose they developed in parallel. I was always interested in science, and I think I was destined for a career in science. I started playing



Olson Duo.

the guitar early in high school, became serious about playing classical when I was in college, and then continued playing as much as I could throughout graduate school and my career so far. It's been important to me to have both science and music in my life; I think they serve as a good balance for each other. Lately, I've become interested in integrating the two a bit more, by exploring some of the intersections between science and music.

You performed an all Bach programme at a concert in San Francisco. You performed works on the organ as well as guitar. Can you talk about your skills as an organist?

I came to the organ quite late, long after I began the guitar. I was originally interested in learning the organ because I played a lot of Bach on guitar and was curious to learn to play Bach on an instrument that he actually played and composed for — in fact, the instrument he was most associated with during his lifetime. It was certainly a challenge, as it is a very difficult instrument and I came to it so late. But I did learn, and in the concert you mentioned I performed some music from the *Orgelbüchlein*, played some of the lute music on guitar, and accompanied my wife for some of Bach's vocal pieces. But most of the organ repertoire will always be beyond my reach. What's interesting, though, is that I found that learning another instrument helped my musicianship a great deal. In so many ways, the organ is the complete opposite of the guitar — in volume, sustain, tone colour, the ability to maintain independent musical lines,

and so on — but I think that dealing with those issues on the organ ultimately helped me in my guitar playing.

You perform with your wife, Gioia De Cari, as the Olson/De Cari Duo, an ensemble dedicated to performing and expanding repertoire for guitar and voice. Can you talk a bit about the Duo?

Gioia and I have been performing together for almost as long as we've known each other (which is a very long time!). I really enjoy the ensemble aspect of duo music, and it's fun to have something creative that we can work on together. Gioia is a professional actor, and so she prefers to approach every piece of music from a dramatic perspective. So most of the music we choose to play lends itself to a character-based performance. In the hands of a good actor, I think this greatly enhances the performance of the music.

Gioia also comes from an unusual background for a performer: she used to be a mathematician. Lately, she's been touring her hit solo show, *Truth Values*, which is based on her life in mathematics. Recently, we've been emphasising new music, and our science backgrounds have played a big part in that.

You created the Science/Music Commissioning Project that 'seeks, through new music commissions, to further the public understanding of science by exploring the process of scientific discovery, celebrating the insights of a science-informed worldview, and illuminating the human side of science through song'. Can you explain more about what this is exactly?

When I started thinking about asking composers to write for us, it occurred to me that this could be a way to bring together the two sides of my own life in a really interesting way. It also struck me that science just isn't often a subject for song, and virtually never is found in the realm of art song. There are science songs that seek to educate, but that's not what I was interested in doing. There's a great quote by the famous American physicist Richard Feynman, where he asks whether anyone is inspired, as they really should be, by the understanding of our universe that science has made possible. He goes on to say, 'The value of science remains unsung by singers: you are reduced to hearing not a song or poem, but an evening lecture about it'. I thought it would be great to help change that by creating songs based on science. I wanted to use music to explore and celebrate science, just as music is used to explore and celebrate so many other human endeavours.

Terry Champlin, a guitarist and composer who also studied theoretical physics in college, wrote the first piece for us, very interestingly set in the form of a Mass and called *Abyss of*

the Stars. He used a poem by Feynman himself, as well as texts by Einstein and Teilhard de Chardin. We're very excited about the most recent piece in the project, which had its beginning when I came across the wonderful poetry of Prof. Roald Hoffmann, a Nobel-prizewinning chemist who teaches at Cornell. He is himself very interested in connections between art and science, and he graciously agreed to let us use several of his poems for this project. We asked Frank Wallace, a very fine guitarist and composer, to write the music. The resulting song cycle, entitled *Men, Women and Molecules*, is a great addition to our repertoire. We'll be performing both of these pieces in April at Festival 21, the Boston Classical Guitar Society's annual festival of new music.

As President of the NYCCGS you have managed to present some of the hottest talent in the business as well as the very promising next generation of players. Can you talk a little about your seasonal programming and who we may look forward to hearing in the future?

In putting together our main concert series each year, we keep a few general guidelines in mind. Of course, we always seek to present guitarists who play at the very top level. We try, almost every season, to present at least one ensemble. We like to occasionally feature genres that are

connected to the classical guitar tradition, such as flamenco and jazz. And we try each year to have one performer that may not yet be known to New York audiences.

This year, we have a particular emphasis on ensemble guitar music. We'll have the Brasil Guitar Duo, the Vida Guitar Quartet for their New York debut, and Bill Kanengiser in a concert that will feature a performance of Shingo Fujii's *Concierto de Los Angeles* with a guitar orchestra comprising conservatory students from Manhattan School of Music and Mannes College of Music, conducted by Scott Jackson Wiley and featuring Bill as soloist. We'll round out the season with a solo recital by Scott Tennant.

We also have another series, which we present in collaboration with the Roger Smith Hotel, a great little hotel that is very unusual in its devotion to the arts. This is a monthly series where we present a lot of emerging artists. It's great to have the chance to present younger and lesser-known players like this on a regular basis. And despite all the competition for audiences in New York City, I'm happy to say that both series are doing very well.

For more information: www.nyccgs.com



4th INTERNATIONAL
COMPETITION 2012
AT STUTTGARTER MUSIKSCHULE

The meeting point
for young guitarists
Guitar solo
Saturday Feb. 11th 2012

Open to all nationalities. The number of participants is limited and the final date to register is February 11th, 2012.

Group I: up to 11 years old:

1st Price €2000, 2nd Price €1500, 3rd Price €1000

Group II: up to 14 years old:

1st Price €2000, 2nd Price €1500, 3rd Price €1000

for more information and a registration form:

www.rago-competition.com

rago-competition@email.de

STUTTGARTER
MUSIKSCHULE



Fender

GUITAR

STUTTGART