



Hucky Eichelmann

FACING THE MUSIC

By Anne Cuthbertson
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For an international artist of the highest calibre, there is still something of a wandering minstrel about Hucky Eichelmann. Waiting for him in the living room of his Sukhumvit Road house, surrounded by relics, rugs and treasures from the far reaches of Asia, I can hear him lightly padding down the stairs. He appears, head tilted, cradling a guitar like a proud father with his newborn. And with a flurry of notes he both announces himself and greets me.

At well over six foot tall, broad and with a mop of shaggy hair, he is a giant in this part of the world, albeit a gentle one. The guitar, which he appears reluctant to let go of, was purchased on a recent recording trip in California. After seeing the instrument, like an infatuated lover, he had sleepless nights until giving in to his heart's desire, he flew all the way to Las Vegas to buy it. He plucks the strings tenderly, testing the resonance of each note. To my uneducated ear it sounds marvellously rich, but Hucky is the perfectionist. With a ripple of his fingers, a Spanish flamenco dances off the frets. He shrugs. "In about a year this will sound good."

The California trip put the seal on his main project for the year: the arrangement of his friend Ravi Shankar's sitar concerto for guitar and orchestra. Hucky stayed with the legendary Indian musician and his daughter Anouska, who herself plays the sitar and piano and is cutting her first album. The concerto, which promises to be a major work in the guitar world, is scheduled to be performed for the first time in Shanghai next year.

Shanghai, California. One thing is for sure: he is a globe-trotting existence. And yet Thailand is still, after 15 years, his home. Early this year, he proved to doubters that

recession was no obstacle to drawing top performers such as Grammy-award winning pianist George Winston and Les Ballets Jazz de Montreal to packed Bangkok theatres for the second Thailand Arts Festival. "Everyone thought we must be crazy because of the economic downturn, but I thought exactly the opposite," Hucky says. He was backed by solid sponsors and his own faith in the arts as a healer of troubled minds in hard times. "I get very sad when people shoot themselves,

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or throw themselves out of windows just because they have a salary cut or they can't make their house payments," he says. "There is something missing. Maybe these people are lost. As part of society I feel responsible to do something."

This is not just talk. Hucky, alongside his own concerts, masterclasses and recordings, was the organiser of Bangkok's first music festival in 1981, a guitar festival, which went on to run for five years. Many people have asked him to start up the festival again, a venture he is contemplating. In addition, he co-ordinates regular musical extravaganzas in Darwin, Australia and in the Black Forest, in his native Germany.

But my next question is burning in my mind. Will there be an arts festival in 1999? Can it be done in these bleak economic times?

"It's definitely going to happen," Hucky confirms with a nod. "The only question is in what format." George Winston has promised to return for a second year. The flamenco dancer Nina Corti and the comedian Michel Lauzier are listed as possibles and – if sponsorship is forthcoming – Ravi and Anouska Shankar may make an appearance again in Thailand. Hucky looks determined: "People need it."

Ironically, a playground fight and a punch in the face brought the guitar into Hucky's life. His front tooth was knocked out, bringing a promising trumpet career to an abrupt end. Aged 13, he looked for an alternative instrument and chose the guitar.

After a few years strumming electric guitar in a schoolboy band, he heard for the first time a recording by the godfather of classical guitar, Segovia. "Jesus Christ this is unbelievable," he remembers thinking, "it said one guitar on the cover but it sounded like a whole orchestra". Soon after, armed with a scruffy second-hand guitar plastered in peace stickers, he presented himself at Stuttgart State Academy of Music and Drama.

Classical, folk, Spanish, South American, late romantic, contemporary, jazz – for eight years, practising up to 10 hours daily he revelled in it all. But he soon felt frustration at the inflexibility of the music scene. "In Germany, it's so narrow the thinking about music," he explains. "There are little drawers where you put A music, B music, serious music, not-so-serious music, jazz... it's not what I want, it's not where I can be."

Coming to Asia changed all that. After he finished his masters, Hucky – who had developed what was to be a lifelong interest in Chinese medicine – came to the Philippines for acupuncture with a faith healer. It was in Manila where he wandered into a music shop

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and picked up an eight-string guitar. The showponer urged him to play on and ran to call his brother, the president of the Philippine Music Society. They invited him on a tour with the university’s musicians and offered him a professorship. He knew it was a decision which would alter the rest of his life. “I could go back to Germany and become an assistant professor at Stuttgart University or I could come out here and start at zero.” But he was feeling stifled in Germany. “I respect tradition very much. But if you get stuck with it, it’s like having an iron on your leg your whole life,” he says.

He chose Asia and its rich musical diversity. “There were so many stringed instruments and such a huge resource you didn’t have to be ashamed to like rhythm or melody here,” he says. He travelled to Japan, Korea, Indonesia and in 1978, he played his first concert in Thailand. “Nobody knew the sound of the classical guitar in those days,” he recalls. When he played Bach, the Thai audience just stared at him. “Music is like a language, it’s like telling a story. So if you speak a language nobody understands it becomes very difficult to communicate.” So Hucky found a way to get his message across by playing the music of Thailand’s most famous composer – His Majesty the King.

It is testament to his dedication and affection for these songs that 17 years after he

first recorded His Majesty’s music, Hucky continues to introduce it to the world. An Australian record company is currently interested in releasing the sheet music for guitarists in every continent to play and enjoy.

It was back in 1981 that Thai composer and guitarist Kate-Arun Lertpipatana arranged His Majesty’s songs for Hucky who put together a special recording in time for the King of Belgium’s visit. Hucky found it both an honour and a pleasure. “I really liked it. It’s kind of a very light jazz, easy listening. It has very nice melodies. I thought it worked really well on the guitar. Now I play all over the world and people think I’m joking when I say I’m playing the music of the King. And then when you play it, they really like it.”

The record of His Majesty’s music, Kuen Nueng (One Night), sold over half a million copies, bringing Hucky fame and pressure. He began to be recognised in the street and approached in restaurants. “I felt like shampoo, a product,” he recalls with a shudder. He began taking tranquillisers and decided he wanted a break from big-bucks record labels. “The big part of music they are selling is nothing more than a product. I can understand the hype. I just don’t want to be a part of that.”

Hucky stopped recording for five years, instead turning his attention to organising the Bangkok Guitar Festival. He continued study-

ing Asian music as a professor at Bangkok’s St Cecilia Academy of Music for 10 years and took the sounds of the East on tour to the West. “For a long time I was playing only Asian music which was a bit extreme in Europe,” he says. His friends in Europe advised him to mix it; to throw in a bit of flamenco, to spice it up with jazz. “This was really good advice,” he says, offering to demonstrate and reaching for his guitar (one is never very far away from Hucky). He plays a medley of global music, evoking hot dusty Spanish nights with flamenco, then slipping into the tranquil tones of a Japanese garden. Isan folk, a Vivaldi concerto, rich Korean chords, samba, blues, ragtime and acoustic disco. Here is a musician of the world.

Hucky’s enthusiasm for his work – “it doesn’t feel like work to me” he says – extends to every other area of his life. During the course of the interview, he has leapt up to show me a beautiful painting he picked up in Bali, flicked through photos of his recent visit to the Grand Canyon and of his baby godson and put on two CDs he wants me to hear. Employing his experience of Chinese acupuncture, he has even taken my pulse and diagnosed me with an acid stomach. (True, I was drinking his German coffee on a painfully empty stomach.) He practises meditation and swears, “I would be dead without it.” With the amount of travel he does – in excess of 20 overseas trips a year – he is very conscious of his health and is careful to keep a sense of balance in his life.

But with all the travel, it is still Thailand he calls home, even if he spends as little as three months a year here. He remains one of the country’s best-loved expat figures, known not only for his music but through acting appearances in Channel 3’s prime time soap operas. For children, he conducted guitar classes on Channel 5’s popular Pueng Noy programme and he has explored his “not-so-serious” musical side with Thai singing buddies “Bird” Thongchai McIntyre, “Add” Carabao, Butterfly, Nuvo and Nga Caravan with whom he has recorded under Grammy. He is currently planning a new album with his Thai friends: the singer Marisa Nunbhakdi and possibly Thai jazz guitarist Cherapan Angsawananda.

He confesses to a love/hate relationship with Bangkok, but adores covering thousands of kilometres upcountry. Asked what his favourite part of the country is, he immediately answers, “Road 12” (Phitsanulok to Phetchabun, “the Switzerland of Thailand”). As for Germany, he loves spending time at his house in the Black Forest, but often feels like a stranger in his homeland. “It’s changed ... all these machines they are using, even to cut the top off your boiled egg!”

It is too precise, too clinical for the man lounging on an Oriental rug, surrounded by Burmese puppets and Thai cushions eating chunks of Swiss cheese. He frowns: “If you cut that egg so cleanly it just doesn’t taste the same anymore.” ■



Hucky with George Winston