



NORTHERN LIGHTS

The Aalborg International Guitar Festival continues to shine on Denmark's guitar scene

by Paul Fowles

Although Denmark is a prosperous country that looks kindly on the arts, projects such as the Aalborg International Guitar Festival require much time and toil to keep them afloat. In 2013, AGIF music director Finn Svit's "day job" as director of the Mariagerfjord School of the Arts placed such demands on his time that he reluctantly resolved to pull the plug on the guitar fest, only to decide a few

months later that he couldn't bring himself to kill off a creation that has become so close to his heart.

Thus, between November 23 and 30, 2014, the AIGF was duly reinstated with Marcin Dylla and Irina Kulikova as principal guests.

An annual gathering launched in 1996, the AIGF is a relatively small-scale event that nonetheless fields some big



MARCIN DYLLA (L) AND IRINA KULIVOA

names. Over the decade that I've been reporting on proceedings in this compact industrial city in the north of Denmark, guests have included Pepe Romero, Carlo Marchione, Craig Ogden, Göran Söllscher, the Katona Twins, and Pavel Steidl. On the non classical side, Australian guitar legend and showman par excellence Tommy Emmanuel has visited, as has veteran Nordic rock icon Mikkel Nordso.

Although it doesn't have a competition, Aalborg boasts a long tradition of showcasing rising young performers using the twin categories of Danish Talent and International Talent. It was under the latter flag that the then-unknown Alberto Mesirca flew to Aalborg in 2006,

his subsequent output of world-class recordings and publications (CGs passim) proving this early patronage was justified.

This retrospective roll call establishes Aalborg as a fairly typical example of the mixed-genre event with a classical bias, an unsurprising situation given that its founder and artistic director, Finn Svit, is a classical guitarist by trade. Heading a team of volunteers from within and beyond the music profession, it is Svit's responsibility to put together a package that, although not intended to yield a profit, must at least cover its costs. In addition to registration fees and box office takings, the AIGF receives local and national government funding, to-

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gether with private sponsorship mostly from businesses with links to the event. Of these, the Prinsen Hotel, with its wonderfully preserved elevator installed in 1926, is a key player. This is where the artists stay, as do overseas journalists. Breakfast-time musical discussions are lively, especially when U.S. guitarist, pedagogue, and Aalborg stalwart Bernard Hebb joins us.

A component in the AIGF mix that's central to its financial well-being is the didactic program. In this respect, the AIGF is possibly unique in that teaching only takes place over the final weekend. This is because the majority of its three dozen registrants are kids of school age, mostly teenagers but some much younger. This has the desirable consequence of producing a packed and energetic finale to the festival, with youthful soloists and ensembles presenting the fruits of their labors under the guidance of such outstanding music educators as Søren Bodker Madsen, who's also a stylish and versatile guitarist in his own right. The downside is that performances held earlier in the week tend to be sparsely attended, the youngsters and their parents having not yet arrived.

With this thought in mind, I checked in at the Prinsen Hotel and set out for the Thursday evening recital by Timo Korhonen hoping I wouldn't be just one of a faithful few. The mood was also one of anticipation, Korhonen being a player whose worthy and sometimes weighty recordings have often come my way, but whose live offerings I was yet to experience.

Although the number present was in no danger of breaking the three-figure barrier, turnout was a marked increase from previous years. The quiet and attentive clutch of people was amply rewarded by a substantial and colorful program in which Korhonen presented the music of his native Finland, including an impressive mixed bag of Sibelius arrangements, in the company of the

mighty Bach Chaconne and some equally familiar Albeniz and Turina. Of particular interest was the rather lengthy scale passage preceding that triumphant recap in the Turina "Sevillana," Korhonen's campanella fingerings adding shape and direction to what can often seem a weak spot in this otherwise compelling middleweight of the Segovia era.

One of the local sponsors is the Klaverstemmeren piano showroom, which provides the venue for the long-standing AIGF tradition of an early evening guitar and piano recital. This year, former International Talent beneficiary Leandro Riva made a welcome

ic heritage alluded to in his name, is a recent Danish Talent and Aalborg regular. Fielding an agenda in which Giuliani was the only composer born before 1900, Pedersen proved himself a worthy exponent of the recent and contemporary repertoire—with "Voices" by Lars Hegaard (b.1950), being billed as a premiere.

In the closing student concert, Madsen's team weighed in with a highly polished Beatles medley, followed by the senior youth ensemble under the baton of Frederik Munk Larsen, whose widely praised AIGF solo recital had taken place before my arrival. One key figure who,

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return to Aalborg in the company of pianist Martin Torres Godoy. Their spirited and superbly executed agenda of tangos and milongas contained an added bonus for this writer insofar as the works of Piazzolla were kept out of the frame until a relatively late stage. The warmth of the audience response was further illustrated by the presence of several familiar faces when the program was repeated in an extended form at the AIGF's main venue on the following evening.

In the meantime, Polish guitarist Krzysztof Pelech was in dazzling form in a program that raised the double challenge of being both technically demanding and mostly well-known. "Asturias" by Albeniz shone anew, as did an almost turbocharged take on Brouwer's setting of "Danza del Altiplano."

Also in excellent form was Tim McVeigh Pedersen who, despite the Celt-

to my eternal shame, hasn't been mentioned in past Aalborg reports, is senior Danish guitar pedagogue Anette Wandel. In addition to providing a sizeable number of players for the student ensembles past and present, Wandel's wide inventory of successful former pupils includes none other than Finn Svit.

Finally, I was informed by a reliable source that, a couple of weeks before curtain-up, the 2014 AIGF was in mortal danger of being axed due to disappointing advance bookings. But all went ahead as planned, the final head count appearing to be a modest increase on past figures. I hope the AIGF continues to thrive as one of the Scandinavian guitar scene's true survivors. **CG**

Paul Fowles is the co-author of The Classical Guitar: A Complete History.