

On the Genesis of this Memorial Issue for Patrick O'Brien

BY DOUGLAS ALTON SMITH

A teacher of the stature of Patrick O'Brien appears perhaps once in a century or more. I have concluded that he is one of the greatest teachers in the history of the lute and guitar. Only after rereading his brief autobiography in *The Hand*, and my transcriptions of the lessons he gave me, as well as reports written by students whose seriously impaired performance ability was restored by his therapeutic guidance, did I begin to comprehend the magnitude of his research and pedagogical achievement. How astonishing that a nearly entirely self-taught musician could research and discover on his own the anatomical and physiological principles of plucked-string performance technique which would cure the most common hand pathologies of guitarists and serve as a basis for healthy and efficient guitar and lute pedagogy. His knowledge was so advanced that neurologist Dr. Frank Wilson, director of a clinic specialized in treating musicians at the hospital of the University of California, San Francisco, would consult him repeatedly for guidance over a period of more than two decades. Patrick was that far ahead of us all.

I first met Patrick O'Brien at the LSA Seminar at Barrington College in 1976, for which I acted as co-director and leader of a workshop on Silvius Leopold Weiss. One of the participants in that workshop was a bearded guitar and lute player who I later discovered should have been my mentor, not my student. Being then in the process of researching and writing a doctoral dissertation on Weiss's works, I had acquired advanced knowledge of the composer and his compositions, but Patrick was leagues ahead of me in knowledge of how to play them. Already forty years ago he was an expert on the anatomy and physiology of the hands, as well as the pathologies that some musicians including himself had encountered, and on the application of this knowledge to performing plucked-string instruments in a way that will maximize efficiency and avoid injury.

Alas, since I lived thousands of miles distant from Patrick, I had no opportunity to study with him until May of 2012, when I made a cross-country trip for an unrelated reason. Never having been given a thorough technical foundation for lute or guitar playing by any teacher and being thus handicapped as a performer, I determined to take some

lessons at last with Maestro O'Brien. He graciously found three hours for me in his teaching schedule, and permitted me to record the sessions with the video feature of my compact digital camera, mounted on a mini-tripod. I set the format for only 320 x 240 pixels, since the resulting .mov files would be very large at higher resolution, and I did not wish inadvertently to lose a single minute because of storage issues. In this low-resolution format and without a cameraman monitoring to select the perspective and zoom in on details periodically, the videorecordings are hardly ideal from a publication standpoint.

But thankfully, the audio is perfectly adequate, and the recordings therefore preserve a unique synopsis of Patrick's pedagogical system. He states at the outset that because I would only be in front of him briefly, he would condense his material and try to offer me as much as possible its full scope in two abbreviated afternoons, rather than parceling out bits over months or years of lessons as he would for a local student. With the aid of the recordings, I could then absorb the teachings at my leisure.

Attempting later to organize professional-caliber videorecordings of Patrick at work, I arranged with a recording studio on the Case Western Reserve University campus to record the maestro teaching a student or two at the LSA Seminar in the summer of 2014. Pat was amenable. A couple weeks before the seminar I phoned him to discuss the plans. Alas, that was our last conversation.

After his death, I realized that I was not getting the full value of the lessons I had had, since it takes three hours to get through the films without stopping, and so I was only focusing on parts. I undertook to transcribe all of them for my own use, as well as an audio recording of his long lecture on practicing at the LSA Summer Seminar in 1982, which I obtained from LSA Librarian Anne Burns. A reader of the transcript can read and absorb this material much faster in print than on video or digital audio, and it is easier to see the organization of the whole and to focus on one bit at a time when it's on paper.

Months later, the editors and editorial board of the *Journal* began to discuss a special memorial issue dedicated to Patrick, but we despaired of having enough appropriate material. It then dawned on me that I might have an entire *Journal's* worth already in first-draft form on my hard disc. So I sent my transcriptions to the editors and to Christopher Morrongiello, who had studied with Patrick for years and would be able to evaluate how complete my lessons had been and to contribute tablature examples. Their judgment was positive.

Patrick had disseminated his knowledge almost exclusively orally in lessons, personal consultations, or lectures. Therefore, though numerous professional lutenists and guitarists and many amateurs

profited by his teaching, most of us could not. It is most fortunate that the recordings of our lesson sessions, made initially for my own edification, can now serve to introduce all lutenists and plucked-string players to Patrick's pedagogy. He was unusually articulate, both in a lesson and when lecturing to a group, so his words transfer effortlessly to formal, academic print, though in a conversational tone.

It is significant that Patrick begins the Lessons from the standpoint not of gross body posture, but of the fingertips, the smallest anatomical component of performance posture. The rest of the body, from the larger finger bones and muscles to the forearm, upper arm, and torso must support optimal placement and manipulation of the fingers. For he had long ago discovered that overuse of the tip joints—distal flexion—can lead to dysfunction, and could even end great careers such as that of pianist Glenn Gould.

On my lap at the sessions I held not a lute but a rented steel-string guitar. In response to my question at the very beginning, Patrick assured me that the principles and exercises he would be teaching me apply equally to almost any plucked-string instrument and any musical style. He spoke from his perspective of decades-long acquaintance with 5-string banjo, classic and folk (steel-string) guitar, jazz guitar, bass guitar, and surely other instruments that he did not mention. Early in his musical career he learned from folk and jazz musicians and later from classical guitarists such as Alice Artzt. In the Lessons he frequently told anecdotes about other musicians and where he learned this or that technique. We preserve many of these anecdotes or observations in order to illustrate not only the points Patrick was making, but also to illuminate his multifaceted musical personality and background.

Since its inception, this *Journal* has tended to print articles on newly-developed or little-known aspects of lute history, be it a composer's biography or his music, or lutherie, rather than applied pedagogy. Though the discoveries and innovations of Patrick O'Brien are no longer completely new, as he taught them for decades and many of his students in turn have taught them to others, they still remain relatively little known or undiscovered to most of the world of plucked-string musicians because he did not publish most of them. This and subsequent *Journal* issues will attempt to fill this lacuna.

It is profoundly gratifying to the editors that we can preserve with this memorial *Journal* issue much of the essence of the teaching of Patrick O'Brien and that also in the process a vivid image emerges of the man himself.