

Conversation between Patrick O'Brien and Antonio Madigan, c. 1991

VIDEORECORDED BY TOM SINGMAN

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Introductory playing by Tony as a younger and then as a somewhat older musician.

PATRICK O'BRIEN: I promised to do this [make a video recording of Tony] for my friend [Dr.] Frank [Wilson] some day.

This is Tony Madigan. He had focal dystonia and consented to talk about it, much as he would like to forget it for the rest of his life. The primary thing is to see that he is back and able to play. Tony is a composer and pianist ...

TONY MADIGAN: I had just moved to New York and was very fortunate that Pat was here because I don't think there was anybody else in the world who was capable of treating this particular affliction, which I found out during almost two years of working with him was actually quite common. Unfortunately.

I think the hardest thing about our work together was letting go in two senses: in my [right] hand, of course, but also letting go of my investment in being a guitar player, and had to give up the idea completely that I was a guitarist. This, after 20 years of playing, was very hard to do. It was my identity.

That's the hardest thing, because when you start to let go, that's the beginning, paradoxically, of really doing something about it. I remember all the ways I used to go about playing and working on problems by very direct means. It was the time-honored procedure, thinking that if I practice 10 hours instead of five, I'll be able to fix this.

O'BRIEN: When did it start? When did you first begin to notice?

MADIGAN: I first began to notice it in about 1986 when I had big emotional stress in my life, both personal and professional. I was trying to hold down three different jobs. I was playing vihuela, romantic guitar, and was also playing modern music in a very loud German orchestra.

O'BRIEN: You had been doing that in Germany for some years at that point.

MADIGAN: Yes. Just doing way too much and not thinking about how I was doing it.

O'BRIEN: What did you start to feel?

MADIGAN: First, I had scoliosis in my back anyway and that started really acting up. Then I got a herniated disc in my back. I first started to feel a lack of flexibility in my right hand, and then serious problems with my middle finger. Eventually, it wouldn't even get near the string.

O'BRIEN: You aimed it and it just didn't hit that note?

MADIGAN: Right.

O'BRIEN: Did it stay in the hand or sort of out?

MADIGAN: It stayed sort of outward. At the end I couldn't play a scale, couldn't play an arpeggio passage. And a very alarming thing started happening, which is that my thumb—that [MCP] joint—seemed to absolutely go berserk. It started flying around in all directions. To fix it I really jammed it into my hand. There was no pain, except in here [he points to his temple], but it caused distress because not only my livelihood depended on it, but also my investment, and I had no other identity apart from being a guitar player. I had all these instruments and couldn't play them when I should have been at the peak of my powers.

I moved away from the city where I lived and came to New York. After about six months of not playing at all, I came to this room.

O'BRIEN: With that very guitar.

MADIGAN: The first thing was a very tight right hand. The coordination between the thumb and the rest of the fingers was not working at all. It was very jammed up right in there [pointing to the base of the thenar eminence in the palm]. A lot of tendons are going in here.

The difficulty was to find out what was the cause of all this, where did it start? That took over two years to find out since, of course, all these things are interrelated.

O'BRIEN: When did it start to improve? How did you feel, what kind of evidence did you have that it was getting better? You had to go on faith for a while.

MADIGAN: I knew something was happening when one day I had been alternating with thumb and index finger and could do it without disturbing the rest of my hand. I remember saying to Pat, "That's it, that's a week's work right there." The lesson that day lasted seven minutes.

I started to notice the whole relationship of the thumb and the fingers. So I got a renaissance lute and we started reorganizing the thumb.

O'BRIEN: We tried the 16th-century lute technique of playing thumb-under. I should parenthetically note that Tony is interested in lots of different kinds of music and has played some 19th-century guitar and early music of other kinds. He has played a lot of different instruments in the course of composing for them. So this is an extension of a previous interest in a way.

MADIGAN: Very much so. I'd played them basically all the way I'd played them on guitar, so I was getting off the modern guitar. The one I had was a big, full-size Ramirez, which was a problem in itself. We worked with the renaissance lute, where we had to reorganize my thumb-out, and also we had done a lot of work with the little finger down.

O'BRIEN: Tony has a collection of 19th-century guitars and has looked at 19th-century music and 19th-century technique with an eye to playing it in a fairly authentic fashion. So I said why don't we try this idea of putting the little finger down on the top. The very opposite thing happened with Tom [Singman] here; he's always had this thing about putting his fingers down on the head of the banjo. Some of the work we did was getting his fingers off the head. In a sense it was just breaking another part of the pattern and looking at the hand in a different way.

MADIGAN: All this was in the course of a very long time—you can't rush it. You figure I spent 10 years or so doing this to myself. So I got to the point that I could play various little Sor pieces [with the pinky down], so there wasn't ever a period when I couldn't play something.

O'BRIEN: The tabla story is kind of interesting. We were together about a year at that point and your hand was working pretty well. You were taking some lessons on tabla, and you stopped doing that as you were

working on the guitar. But you went back to the tabla one day, and the problem really came back.

MADIGAN: Absolutely. I tried to fill up my time as best I could with activities other than this [guitar]. I thought it was very important to not do the things I used to do on the guitar. I even turned the guitar around to tune with my other hand, so that there was no old habit at all connected with my playing. You can tighten up your hand in a matter of seconds even while tuning.

I thought I would do a whole bunch of other stuff that would be work, like playing harpsichord. And I always wanted to study Indian music, so I thought here's my chance. I played tabla for about a year during the time we were putting my guitar playing back together. Then when my guitar playing got a little bit better playing simple pieces, I thought, "Great." So, one day I took out the tablas, which were sitting in the corner gathering dust, and I started playing, and I just felt absolutely the same symptoms I had a year ago. The thumb just went [fell apart] literally in a matter of seconds.

Thank God I had a lesson that day. I came in and said, "Look what I've done." It all came back: that strange tingly sensation in the hands. The thumb seemed to be somewhere out in the New Jersey swamps, and everything was a mess.

O'BRIEN: I spoke with Frank [Wilson] recently on the phone, and one of the things that he mentioned was that playing a video of someone having a problem caused them to actually pass out while watching it. It's such a panicky issue that they don't want to go back to it at all. Once you've been through this problem, people don't like to talk about it. A lot of people that I've worked with will send other people to me, but they don't want to get in touch with me themselves because they don't want to revisit that horrible time in their lives. You always suspect that the memory is in there, and you can trigger it again. I've had people actually undo the problem, and then get in a couple of really good weeks, and then lose it, and not be able to get back to it.

MADIGAN: It comes and goes for a long time. I think it's a good thing in that what it comes down to is that you really need to know how you do what you do, whereas when you're 20 years old, you don't have to worry about that, you just do it. But 15 years later it's very important to be able to know exactly how you do it—to know exactly how your body works.

TOM SINGMAN: When you lost it, how did you get it back? Once you've made progress and then have a setback, were there any particular steps that you took to reclaim the progress you made?

O'BRIEN: By going back to simple gestures.

MADIGAN: You just go back to the exercises that seem to work, and say to yourself that it's not permanent, I've found it once before. It's there, I know I can do it again. However, I can't go at it in a coercive way, I can't force myself back. You can't use direct means. However, when you lose it and find it again, every time you do makes it all that more secure. The test, of course, is playing in front of people, which is what I did for two years, except that I found the baroque guitar—which was a completely new instrument and had none of the performance associations with the classical guitar—seemed really like a gift from heaven.

O'BRIEN: The baroque guitar involves a lot of strumming, and that's one of the things that you're first able to get back is kind of throwing your fingers in large motions.

MADIGAN: The baroque guitar was an enormous boost. I thought, "This I can do." I could get gigs with it.

O'BRIEN: We played a trio with another student of mine about a month and a half ago in a concert which was really fun.

MADIGAN: I think basically the technical challenge was changing my left hand a bit from the former way of playing, which never gave me any problem. But I'm beginning to find that working on my left hand is clearing up the last of the problems with my right hand.

O'BRIEN: We were working recently on adduction of the fingers of the left hand, and that actually supports some things in the right hand as well. We also worked on freeing the left-hand thumb on the back of the neck. It supports what he's done to free the right-hand thumb as well. What he was doing at one time with the thumb, especially in the flamenco pieces, in which fast bass passages are played with both up and down thumb strokes, caused his thumb to creep inward [toward the palm of his hand] and become very tight behind his hand, and he's now trying to get it loose and outside his hand in its normal place, thereby loosening the hand. That seemed to be an important part of his process.

MADIGAN: There's no particular position because you do want to be able to change positions. The difficulty in the process is not "holding," but keeping a balance between holding and maintaining a position that is not wrong, that is not doing damage, especially holding at the first joint, which is a problem for the classical guitar because you need a whole lot of strength to get a good sound.

O'BRIEN: In addition, we've noticed that over the years, modern classical guitars are being built heavier and bigger all the time, in which case they are louder, but they are more somber in tone and less bright. That becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, which means once you buy the instrument that is so dark in tone, you have to tighten up and very shrilly hook the hell out of it in order to get a bright enough sound to penetrate. It's technically got a potential for volume, but only if you tighten your hand a lot and get a lot of nail on the string. The result is that buying that kind of guitar leads you in that direction, whereas lighter guitars, such as 19th-century guitars and flamenco guitars and many other types of guitars, are much brighter. So, there is a movement in classical guitar that's been getting the guitar to go in a direction that reinforces a modern way of playing in a very, very tight way.

SINGMAN: That raises something that happened to me when I got my Martin D-28 and started to play bluegrass. Previously I had a classical guitar that I used to just pick folk music on. Now I had this big, gorgeous, steel string guitar with telephone wires for strings, and I started fingerpicking on it, but really it was meant to be blasted with a big, heavy flat pick, at least for bluegrass.

O'BRIEN: That's a very important observation regarding folk music. I don't know if you realize this, but what they do to make a Martin Dreadnought is to make the whole body very much bigger, and then they take the upper bout and shrink it down two frets, so instead of having 12 frets to the body, like a classical guitar, it's got 14 frets. They don't actually shove the neck up, they actually squash the body down. The original intent behind that was to kill the treble chamber of the instrument, and to make it too bass heavy so it could play in string bands. So what you are supposed to do is boom in the bass and go boom-chuck, and you're supposed to get a very thin sound in the treble. So, when you try to fingerpick that guitar, you really dig into the treble.

Likewise, if you get a guitar that is rosewood, it's very stiff and heavy, and you really have to dig into it hard to play. It resists the big

booming pick very well and gives a great sound, but with fingers, it really drives you crazy. What you need then is a Martin New Yorker, or one of those older, smaller Martins, or one of the "O" sizes. That's a parallel case with what Tony is talking about. For the modern classical guitar, they've actually shoved the neck out and made the strings up to 2 cm. longer. Everything is heavier and bigger and just much harder to play. Once you put a lot of aggressive force into it, you think, "Well, this is a much louder guitar," but it isn't really a lot louder. When you get a smaller instrument that's lighter, it's so much brighter that it often projects better. It's more distinct at a distance. It's more audible and clear at a distance. But the bigger instrument seems to be absorbing more energy, and you think that it's a big, booming sound, but it's not really traveling. This is a classic example how you just absorb the language of the instrument itself that you play.

SINGMAN: I remember trying to play ragtime, and this was part of the syndrome of ruining my hands.

O'BRIEN: In ragtime you want the treble to come out, and you are not able to make it happen. It is just putting an idiom on what appears to be the right guitar, but isn't really. That's the bluegrass um-chuck guitar. In fact, when Martin began to make the D-28c, the so-called classic, it had a big, oversized body, but they had pushed the upper bout back out to its normal place, with only 12 frets to the neck, and that meant that it has a rich treble as well as a big bass. That is a fingerpicking guitar. It responds much better in the treble. So, we've been playing instruments and strings that don't respond as well in the treble.

What happens is an odd thing, and here's how it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. You get players who are not very sophisticated who pick up the guitar, especially in America, when they come to college. They've played rock guitar, they have an ear for shrill tone—very, very bright, hard sound. You get them to play classical guitar because the music department says they have to, and then they begin to play classical guitar for the first time, and they have a very uncouth touch. They're sort of smashing the hell out of the guitar. So, what you do is make a bigger, heavier guitar that doesn't sound very bad when they do that. It smooths them out and flattens the effect of what they do. The result is then, of course, if you take a sensitive player and put him on that, he realizes what should happen in the music, and he starts whanging the instrument like crazy to try and make things come out. The instrument is fighting him because, like the compressor when you do a recording,

it's trying to flatten out everything he does and make it sound more suave and even, because it's designed for a bad player. A good instrument is supposed to be real sensitive and it reflects what you do. If you hit it well, it gives you a beautiful sound; if you hit it badly, it gives you an awful sound.

The problem is that awful sound is a downside to the responsiveness of the instrument, and players will say that it is an unforgiving guitar. They say, "Make me a forgiving guitar." So, you make one that's kind of deadish, and they say, "Oh, this makes me sound much more suave." Then any time they want to make any kind of expressive effect, they absorb the necessity to take a tremendous amount of energy to make it happen. And there it goes. You get into a certain kind of trouble.

That happens in so many instruments that are built now for just raw volume, or specifically built to do one job, and they won't do another job. That's classically the case of the D-28, and it's the death of a lot of folk guitarists when they try to fingerpick a D-28. I have a Martin guitar that I fingerpick around the house, I think it's called a 227, it's from the 1870s, and it's what they called "lady's guitar." It has a very narrow body and it was made probably for gut strings. It has very light steel strings on it, and it responds with just the barest touch. It's a great guitar to fingerpick on. They've started to make guitars that are meant for fingerpicking, but for a long while that wasn't the case. What was happening was that the style of guitar in popular music and jazz and folk music has gotten more and more complex in the last 30 years, and sometimes the construction of the guitars themselves hasn't caught up in sophistication with what we're now asking the players to do.

MADIGAN: You can almost feel the symptoms coming back if you watch somebody on another instrument play with something that looks like what you have. The good news is that watching someone who has a technique that really works, and you understand why it works, watching that also helps tremendously. If I could point to a single thing that helped me the most during this time, it would be that I used to go around with a photograph in my head of Pat's hand, and that was tremendously helpful. I would check it in the mirror and imitate. I can't do exactly what he does because we have different hands of different sizes and construction, but something about this stuck with me.

O'BRIEN: A crucial 25 percent of it has to be similar. I think there are a million things you can do with your hands, and you can play a million different ways, but there are probably three things you're not

allowed to do because the human hand is just not built that way. If you get one or two or even three of those things to a certain degree overdriven, then things start to blow up.

MADIGAN: What has been found also, which is very reassuring, is that the greatest growth in the brain with regard to synapses after about 20 years old has to do with the hands.

O'BRIEN: That's interesting, I didn't know that. I'll have to see what Frank has to say about this. The amount of the brain given over to the operation of, say, the face and the hands, is enormous.

MADIGAN: Even at a rather late stage you can change your hands. I remember seeing this strange documentary about Segovia where they speak of his hands and large fingertips. However, when you look at photographs of Segovia's hands when he was young, they didn't look like that. He made them look like that to do what he wanted to do.

O'BRIEN: One of the things that I can definitely quote from Segovia [is] one of the few things I actually asked him once when I was with Alexander Bellow. I asked was there anything he had to change in his technique when he got older. He said he had to practice *apoyando* more and he has to loosen up more here every day. He always began with *apoyando* at the beginning of the day, not with *tirando*, and he felt that that helped him loosen up, and that that had to come over into his free strokes, his *tirando*. That was what he had to emphasize to keep his hand loose as he got older. Clearly, he was a person who could play into his nineties, playing concerts until the year he died. Everything else in his body failed before his hands. He sometimes got lost in pieces because he had learned them 70 years ago, and so his memory failed him at the end, but his hands would still function, and they would still make that extraordinary tone that he was always famous for.

An interesting thing about that is when you play with your fingernail, when you relax the tip of the finger as you play, you [the finger] depart from a broader and broader segment of the nail, and therefore make a mellower and mellower tone, as if you were plucking with the side of a plectrum. If you tighten up the tip of the finger, you [the finger] depart from a very tiny point of the nail and make a thin metallic tone. Part of Segovia's tone was clearly that relaxed tip. The weight of his hand was always balanced over the treble to the extent that when I saw him play from the front, I always remember the image of seeing

the back of his hand and the upper part of the fingers, and the rest of the fingers were in underneath it [the hand]. In other words, he wasn't out like this [with the right-hand fingers extended], he wasn't leaning off center. His fingers always seemed to be in, underneath his hand somewhere. That eventually made a lot of sense to me. He would find a good position and then he would play that way, and if he needed to play a different part of the instrument, he would move that whole unit somewhere else.