

JULIAN BREAM (1933–2020)

By Fábio Zanon

Since August 14, 2020, Julian Bream's passing has been mourned by guitarists and music lovers all over the world. I join the ranks of those who recall first hearing him over the radio, as a child, quite by chance: the effect was synesthetic, enthralling, a banquet for the senses. I sensed a deeply cultural musical purpose and felt, at last, that the whole gamut of expression could fit on the guitar. I was granted the idea of what sort of musician I'd strive to become. Other artists had the power to bring people to the guitar, but Julian could bring us to a wider musical and cultural landscape through the classical guitar and the lute.

I remember a guitar method preface pointing out the contrasting personalities of Andrés Segovia and Bream—the former a rapturous personalist, a musician for the senses who made every piece his own, the latter a sophisticated scholar who strove to find the appropriate hues for each moment and each composer in rigorous readings. In the perspective of today, we can perceive that the lines of continuity that join them are as bold as the elements of rupture that separate them: we listen to Bream's art as a synthesis where “chaos must shine through the adornment of order,” to borrow Novalis's words. What is most puzzling, though, in this parallel is the unlikely course of events that led the working-class boy from suburban London to what we now perceive as the major point of inflection in the second half of twentieth-century guitar history: the artist who, by means of an impeccable musicianship, musical and historical knowledge, and finely regulated awareness of what the guitar was able to convey—but had not yet conveyed—most successfully brought it to a higher platform of aesthetic fruition, depth of musical argument, and intellectual respectability.

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Born on July 15, 1933, in Battersea, South London, a stone's throw away from the iconic power station, he was raised in Hampton, where his grandmother owned a pub. His father was a commercial graphic artist who loved the guitar. His early—and lifelong—love for the classic jazz of Django Reinhardt was challenged once his father brought home a gramophone record of Segovia playing *Recuerdos de la Alhambra*. He described that encounter in the most affectionate terms—his fascination for the sound, a completely new aural experience for him, which led him to learn the classical guitar.



Julian Bream by Eamonn McCabe

He was devastated when his parents got divorced and his mother left the family home, leaving his father alone to raise the children. That brought him even closer to his father, who spared no effort to find proper tuition for the boy who, whilst not academically bright, proved to be an extremely fast learner on the guitar.

In post-WWII England the general view was that the classical guitar was exclusively Spanish territory and that there was no affinity between the Brits and that Latin instrument. Still, there was a Philharmonic Society of Guitarists; there, his father met Dr. Boris Perott, a Russian-born doctor and amateur guitarist. Perott became the young Julian's only ever regular teacher, encouraging him to play with the little finger stuck to the soundboard and to try to stand out by playing a multiple-string guitar. It is fair to say, then, that as a guitarist Bream was largely self-taught, which led him to develop an unusual degree of autonomy. This seems to have been enough for him to play his first professional concert in Cheltenham at the age of thirteen. The positive reception led to a succession of musical engagements around the country.

In the same momentous year of 1947, he attended Segovia's first post-war London concert, with a pair of binoculars so that he could analyze Segovia's technique of producing tone. He described the occasion in a radio interview: “I was simply riveted by his playing. I had never heard such beautiful articulation, such a wealth of tone color, and such wonderfully integral interpretation.”

He was introduced to Segovia at the occasion. The wish of becoming his protégé failed; they had only a few, often bumpy sessions, and Segovia offered to take him under his wing on a world tour as a protégé. Not able to figure exactly what Julian would gain from such an enterprise, his father declined the invitation. This cast a shadow over his relationship with Segovia that would last forever, but his admiration for the Spaniard was unabated.

He was admitted to the Royal College of Music in 1949 on a full grant as a composition and piano student. As commonplace as that may sound, he was in fact one of the first—if not the first—guitarists of note to benefit from formal conservatoire education: a guitar program would still have to wait another ten years to be created. The principal of the Royal College, Sir George Dyson, was sympathetic to Bream's talents but not to the guitar; he also advised the youngster to "clean up" his cockney accent in order to increase his chances of being socially accepted.

In 1950, his father died, and Julian, at seventeen, saw himself without a safety net. At that time he met Thomas Goff, a lawyer who also built lutes and harpsichords. Goff was of decisive importance to the young man's artistic life. Not only did he encourage him to learn the lute—which again, he did by himself—and to delve into the astounding Renaissance repertoire still dormant in museums, but he also made the lute he would use for a decade, first in professional engagements on the radio and later as a recording artist. Goff also arranged, in 1951, his first concert at a major London venue, Wigmore Hall, which was to become the foundation stone for his international career.

In 1952, he was drafted into three years of military service, where he played guitar and cello in various bands, but managed to manipulate the rules to the extent of being able to live in a flat and continue to develop his career. He started to appear as an orchestral soloist and embarked on a series of Renaissance song recitals with the tenor Peter Pears, developing a friendship not only with Pears but also with his partner Benjamin Britten. By the end of 1954, he had appeared at Wigmore Hall many times and had already tried out the lute and guitar concert format, to great acclaim.

In 1955, he was discharged, which allowed him to play abroad for the first time and to be invited to increasingly higher-profile concerts. At this point, the pillars of his artistic achievement started to become apparent. His concerts started to feature some of the first works written expressly for him, culminating, in the late 1950s, with the premieres of Berkeley's *Sonatina*, Henze's *Kammermusik 1958*, and Arnold's *Guitar Concerto*. He managed to strike a balance between the lute and the guitar, and between solo and chamber work. His recording career started in 1955, first accompanying Pears in lute songs, and then solo with

the Westminster label, where he quickly steered away from the conventional album of short pieces, and made in 1957 an all-Bach recital on the guitar and another, all Dowland, on the lute.

By the early 1960s his fame started to spread worldwide, and he became a favorite artist in Britain, a regular guest of major festivals and television programs. In 1961 he formed the Julian Bream Consort, specializing in Elizabethan music, one of the first regular groups to adopt historically informed performance practice. In 1964, the thirty-year-old Bream premiered Britten's *Nocturnal*, a piece that would redefine the guitar's aesthetic orientation and expressive capabilities. A day later he received official recognition through the Order of the British Empire. A new recording contract with RCA in 1959, which was to last thirty years, initiated a succession of now classic albums, most notably *20th Century Guitar* in 1966—a landmark recording. It had become clear that his artistic voice was persuasive enough to promote contemporary music to listeners who would otherwise reject it, and to present the guitar to listeners who would not otherwise care for it.

Moving to a country house in the 1970s, he started a partnership with luthiers, who established a workshop in his property barn; in this way the work of David Rubio and José Romanillos came to prominence, as well as that of other harpsichord and lute-makers.

By now, he was a part of the cultural mainstream of the time. His name was frequently mentioned in literary works; purchasing a Julian Bream album was, for people with a cultural inclination, as *de rigueur* as attending a Francis Bacon exhibition or reading the latest Booker Prize winner.

He maintained an intensive concert schedule until 2001. Those decades saw a constant flow of projects of all kinds: world premieres, television appearances, duet concerts with John Williams and George Malcolm, poetry recitals with actress Peggy Ashcroft, and concerto recordings with such distinguished conductors as Colin Davis, André Previn, and Simon Rattle. He was awarded the Villa-Lobos Medal in 1977, a CBE (Commander of the British Empire) in 1985, and doctoral degrees *honoris causa* at the Universities of Surrey and Leeds. Between 1979 and 1985 he recorded several albums of Spanish music, culminating in the 1985 eight-part television series *Guitarra!*.

All this activity was only temporarily interrupted by a serious car accident in 1984, when he smashed his right elbow against an overpass pillar. He recovered fast enough to go back to the concert stage a few months later, with a slightly altered right-hand technique. He ended his relationship with RCA in 1989, moving to EMI to release four albums in the 1990s. In November 2001, he celebrated fifty years of concerts at Wigmore Hall; this was to be his London farewell concert, too. His last official concert was

JULIAN BREAM

in Norwich on May 6, 2002. Typically, those concerts included a raft of demanding music he had never played before. When asked why he didn't carry on performing a little longer, with less demanding programs, he replied: "That wouldn't be me."

In the 2010s he established the Julian Bream Trust, which, on the one hand, offers financial support to exceptionally gifted youngsters to study at British conservatoires and, on the other, pursues a policy of commissioning new guitar works from prominent composers for them to play. These students have had the privilege of premiering works by Birtwistle, Anderson, Brouwer, Cowie, and Mustonen under his guidance. He can rest assured that his legacy will be extended into the future, now under the direction of John Williams.

II

Julian Bream was the emblematic artist of the era of recordings; he traversed the whole LP era and, starting in 1988, made the transition to digital recording. He was able to exert total control over the artistic outcome, recording with homemade instruments at the nearby Wardour Chapel, and always working with the same technical team. His albums spread his name worldwide; and, in the process, he invested the guitar with unsuspected artistic standing. Not only did his recorded legacy help to establish new works, it also brought to the mainstream music by Giuliani and Diabelli—not to mention the lute composers, who had been neglected by the older generation.

His uncompromising personality crystalized the late twentieth-century curatorial method of programming—the opposite of a pick-and-mix, striving instead for a balance between substantial pieces and lighter ones, creating musical contrast and stylistic cohesion at once; at last a guitar program didn't look odd when placed alongside a chamber or piano recital in a festival. His recordings, unlike those of the previous generation, explored each area of the repertoire in analytical breadth. *20th Century Guitar*, for instance, is a model of seamless narrative, where each piece seems to add value to the next.

Julian Bream will forever be celebrated for his efforts to create a repertoire of lasting quality. This quest started as early as 1947, when he premiered Terry Usher's Sonata, and will be extended beyond the last piece he commissioned himself (Edward Cowie's 2019 *Streams and Variations*). It included music he is not readily associated with (Dodgson's Quintet and ApIvor's Guitar Concerto, for instance). He often declared it was not enough to commission music, but to wait for the right moment to do it and to throw oneself into making it work. He was not inclined towards shocking or experimental music: he strived to produce modern

classics and did not shy away from touring with a thirty-minute-long dense atonal sonata in his program, if he was convinced it was worth it. Out of the two dozen or so pieces he actually recorded and the many more he premiered, it is safe to say that at least a dozen substantial pieces are firmly placed in history.

I regard his recorded legacy—both the official and the bootlegged—as a never-ending source of delight and wisdom. According to Sidney Molina, it can be divided into six periods:

1955–58: six albums on the Westminster label. Half of them are played on the lute, two of them as an accompanist to tenor Peter Pears. There is already an attempt to create a "thematic" format, with a focus on single composers.

1959–64: nine albums as an artist for RCA. This first RCA period has an experimental outlook: we can hear recital-like programs, live recordings, his first few concerto recordings, and chamber music, including the first Julian Bream Consort album. By the age of thirty, Bream had already fifteen albums to his credit.

1965–70: nine albums, where he seems to develop a comprehensive view of his discography, and to explore in depth single areas of the repertoire. It contains such popular albums as *Baroque Guitar*, *Bach Lute Suites*, *Classic Guitar*, *Romantic Guitar*, and the iconic *20th Century Guitar*, as well as formidable lute albums and more chamber music with Peter Pears and harpsichordist George Malcolm.

1971–78: eleven albums stressing the same elements, framed by two all-Villa-Lobos albums, his single forays into music from the Americas. This period also saw the release of his three very popular duo albums with John Williams, as well as a continuous flux of premiere recordings, notably Bennett's and Berkeley's guitar concertos and Walton's Bagatelles.

1979–91: his last eleven albums for RCA. The major project during this period was the *Music of Spain* series, which consolidated his authority in this repertoire. This period also includes *Dedication*, a full album of world-premiere recordings, and *Two Loves*, with actress Peggy Ashcroft.

1992–95 marks the last phase of his recording career, with four albums for EMI. These albums combine new works with second thoughts on repertoire he had previously recorded, including the *Aranjuez* concerto, Bach, Britten, and Frank Martin. His last album, *Sonata*, includes Antonio José and Castelnuovo-Tedesco, composers he recorded for the first time.

Maybe affected by his experience with the lute, Bream was arguably the first major guitarist to develop a truly polyphonic style of playing. Where the older generation, however beautiful the playing was, tended to treat even a Bach fugue like a sort of accompanied melody, Bream

dispensed infinite care into polishing a coherent articulation and finding the right proportion between horizontal sense and vertical balance. His playing technique might not be immaculate by today's standards, but even his very first albums display an intense preoccupation with not letting the guitar's idiosyncrasies interfere with wholesome musical values. If a note has to be held in part-writing, if an inner voice must come forward, if a wide legato has to be sustained, he did not reckon the cost of achieving it.

His treatment of color, whilst heavily indebted to Segovia, testifies to his more analytical approach. Onstage, his sound was huge, solid, meticulous, embracing, with deep basses and bright trebles; in the last decade it was not totally unblemished, but the further one sat from the stage, the more distinct it grew. Many younger players find his extreme timbre choices repellent or unnecessary; what is often forgotten is that he employed those effects according to a carefully considered structural vision, which was ultimately underlined and revived by that kaleidoscopic foreground. The same can be said about his tendency to push phrasing forward with upbeat accents: again, those were the conscious choices of a strategist to increase momentum and polyphonic awareness, much the same way a Horowitz or a Schnabel did. He did not play only for other guitarists but for all.

Another mysterious aspect of his artistry is his rhythmic urgency. He had a relentless sense of pulse and periodicity, a determinant factor for an overall feeling of cohesion; and yet his phrasing rarely sounded rigid.

III

In a profession where self-esteem and public image are paramount, rarely have I met a musician who had such a precise and honest assessment of his own stature, of his strengths and weaknesses. There are few musicians of his caliber who would admit, in an interview, having felt sad for not playing at the premiere of Boulez's *Le Marteau sans maître*, as he knew he wouldn't be able to cope with the rhythm and ensemble difficulties; or who would allow his embarrassing meeting with Stravinsky to be included in a biographical documentary. He was able not to take himself too grandly. I once went to greet him backstage after a concert, and there was a lady trying to show him an old photo album. She said she had a picture of him together with his father. When she finally found the picture, it was clear it was not Julian but John Williams. I thought he was just going to turn his back on her, but he simply said: "I don't remember ever wearing glasses, but I might be forgetful!" The lady went out completely satisfied.

For those of us who were fortunate enough to attend the masterclasses he offered as a visiting professor at the Royal Academy of Music between 1989 and 1995, he

became a model to be aspired to. Each of us will have a number of personal recollections, and the most vivid refer to his imagery and mood swings. He rarely gave any direct technical instruction and never called a student by his or her name; technique became an issue to be pondered over once the musical demand was thrown. When I played Berkeley for him, he asked me to imagine the last variation like a faint silhouette lost in the mist, which becomes gradually identifiable as one gets closer. There was no need for specifics; that image alone indirectly built the required technique.

He could be abrasive, almost cruelly direct. Giacomo Susani, one of our last students to play for him, said he had no filters of conscience and his blunt comments could be disheartening, but the encounter challenged him to find his own artistic truth. Once, another student played Brouwer's Sonata, second movement. It was sensitive playing but twice as fast as Bream normally played. I cringed and feared he might rebuke the student, only to hear him say, "I must admit it is at odds with what I do, but it sounds very charming"—and completely transform the interpretation just by saying, "This movement could sound like an overheard old piano."

Much of the sense of an ending brought by his passing can be credited to the fact that he represented the guitar in the analogue, late twentieth-century era. He didn't have social media or a cell phone, possibly not even an email address. His career was steadfast, geared for slow consumption, built incrementally on reputation, peer recognition, and the promotion of dense repertoire. Even his luscious tone and choice of instruments betrayed, above all, a musicianship built to be savored onstage. This stands in sharp contrast to twenty-first century patterns, where artistic identity and even tone production technique have to be tailored to online consumption.

After his last few concerts I regretted the fact that I would never hear such magical guitar sounds again. In 2020 I mourn the musician whose like will never exist again. Julian was the musician I probably spent most hours in my life listening to; it is like letting go a part of my being, and I am sure thousands of first-class guitarists feel the same. Never mind; someone whose art has been engraved into so many people's conscience never dies. As long as Western culture flourishes in its most exalted form, there will be a place for Julian Bream.

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