

IN MEMORIAM

Gilbert Biberian (1944–2023)

The Exuberant Heart

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THE SHORT WALK to the College of Arts and Design, during a frozen but sparkling October night in Minneapolis, in 1982, was brisk and stimulating. Alarming, the place was without heating, and the auditorium, where my lecture-recital on “Change in Music—the Nineteenth Century to the Present” was to take place, at a bone-cracking 42°F. In the audience, stoic students, friends, and a few faculty members were waiting, overcoats on, with desultory, resigned expression.

Arriving about halfway through my presentation, a striking, compact, swarthy figure, with an impish smile, longing eyes, and a prophet’s brow, sat nonchalantly, oblivious, it seemed, to the inauspicious circumstances. At the end, the gentleman introduced himself, thus starting my four-decade-long friendship with my brother-in-arms, Gilbert Biberian (b. Istanbul, February 19, 1944; d. Cheltenham, January 27, 2023).

The first word that comes to mind when reflecting on his work, his personality, is *cornucopia*: bountiful and boundless, Gilbert Biberian honors Victor Hugo’s view of imagination (“the erection of intelligence”) by the breadth, depth, and sheer volume of his legacy.

As anyone who has delved deeply into the universe of Biberian’s works knows, his path was not an easy one. He continuously diverges from, expands, contradicts, or denies established norms, in ways both unsuspected and exhilarating, baffling and inspiring, irritating and moving.

His last completed pedagogical project, the four volumes of his series *The Book of...* (right-hand technique, scales, chords, slurs), offers a system, unique in the traditions of guitar methodology, that attempts to integrate what, in another context, I described as the *wow*, the *how*, and the *tao* of music-making on the guitar: inspiration, craft, transcendence.

The Book of Scales, for instance, revives almost-forgotten lore in instrumental training, like Hanon’s or Domingo Prat’s patterned-scale exercises for piano or guitar, both refreshing and relevant even today. It is, likewise, a comprehensive sourcebook and

vade mecum for the study of scale-types, including infrequently seen ones in traditional methods, like the Turkish modes. This is an area that, while thoroughly explored by jazz guitarists, is still embarrassingly disregarded by many classical practitioners.

But it is in the culminating Etudes of part 2, as the composer supersedes the technician, that the author's uncompromising musical ethos becomes fully expressed. Distributed in (numerologically significant) seven *hebdsos*, or groups of seven, these études of increasing compositional complexity and length never quite abandon the vital premise of the book as a training lab for scalar study, although expanded considerably, as is unavoidable. In my view, as they progress they brilliantly showcase how ingrained what could be called the *sonata style* is in Gilbert's way of doing: his deep mastery of continuous variation and developmental processes. They serve as representative examples of his creative approach at large, where the scope of the expansive developments dislocates the formal framework that would be reasonable to expect: the études thus become "sonatas quasi fantasia"—rhapsodic structures à la Gilbert.

Incidentally, despite the obvious distance in time, aesthetics, and ambition, Gilbert recovered a frequently overlooked feature of the pedagogical works of Fernando Sor: the latter's most successful treatments of (mostly monothematic) sonata forms are in some of his studies.

As I browse through the tremendous riches contained in these four volumes, I confess to a degree of skepticism—probably due to my rusted-out abilities as a guitarist—as to the actual playability of some of Gilbert's designs, even as I remain in awe of the boldness of vision and the overflowing creativity. But, as is the case in all of his works, what makes them truly special is the humanity of the endeavor, the intensity of love that transpires from their every page, the commitment to friendship reflected in the numerous dedications—in a word, the *generosity* of spirit, untouched by cynicism, unjaded and, in a profound way, childlike. Together with his previous pedagogical-poetic sets (*Gradius ad...*, for two guitars, and the Twenty-Four Preludes), the completed array made up of the *Liber* and *Book of...* cycles stands as a monumental contribution to the art and craft of guitar playing.

Upon finishing my first reading of the *Book of Scales* and its companions, the memory of another beloved book came to me—specifically, its prologue, where the author writes:

There is an old Sanskrit word, *lila*, which means play. Richer than our word, it means divine play, the play of creation, destruction, and re-creation, the folding and unfolding of the cosmos. *Lila*, free and deep, is both the delight and enjoyment of this moment, and the play of God. It also means love.

—Stephen Nachmanovitch, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1990), 1

I have come to realize that my meeting Gilbert Biberian in Minneapolis some forty years ago was my first experience with *lila*. It was also my first exposure to a youthful "exuberance of heart" that never wavered or led to the old man's "bitterness of heart" that Liszt predicted... and suffered.



Gilbert Biberian (left) and Ricardo Iznaola, c. 1984. Photo courtesy of Ricardo Iznaola.

Our friendship throughout these years has been for me a source of joy, exhilaration, illumination, but also consolation and solace in moments of tribulation and doubt. I felt privileged by the favor of Gilbert's affection and the embrace of his music. I am honored to have been a part of the life of this ineffable *rhapsöidos*... and heartbroken by his absence.

—Ricardo Iznaola
Venice, Florida, February 2023