HEART OF A MASTER

ANTÓN GOIRI

After nearly half a century as one of the world's most celebrated classical guitarists—both as a member of the Romeros and as a soloist—PEPE ROMERO reflects on his Spanish heritage, how to build technique, the correct understanding of time, the meditative approach to the instrument, and the emotional center that is the foundation of his virtuosity.

Talk to Pepe Romero for a few minutes and you will begin to realize what it truly means to have guitar "in the blood." Born in 1944 in Malaga, Spain, Romero comes from a family of guitarists who emigrated to the United States during the Franco regime in Spain, then gained fame as "The Romeros," a guitar quartet known for their fiery virtuosity and flair as performers. Their original lineup consisted of the family patriarch (and guitar teacher), Celedonio Romero, and his three sons: Celin, Pepe, and Angel. (The group now includes Celin, Pepe, Celin's son, Celino, and Angel's son, Lito. For more on the Romeros, visit www.romeroguitarquartet.com. To learn more about Pepe's solo work, visit www.peperomero.com.) From these roots the artist Pepe Romero grew: a musician deeply bound to his family and his Spanish heritage, and shaped by the musical experiences of more than half a century.

BY PATRICK FRANCIS

By any measure, Romero's contributions to the classical guitar are formidable, with dozens of recordings, pupils who have gone on to become established concert artists and teachers, and a decades-long career of touring and performing internationally as a highly regarded concert guitarist. Also noteworthy is that through close friendships with esteemed Spanish composers—Joaquín Rodrigo, Joaquín Turina, and Federico Moreno-Torroba among them—Romero and his family have had a hand, directly or indirectly, creating many of the most significant 20th-century Spanish works for classical guitar. History may one day judge this fact as the most enduring element of the Romero legacy, but it is the man's humble regard for his art that is most striking, for he speaks of the guitar, performing, and his responsibility to the music with a deep passion and spirituality.

"To be a virtuoso, one of the most important things you must have is as close to a perfect sense of rhythm as you can."

NAOYA IKEGAMI

At age 62, Romero remains busy as a concert artist and shows no signs of slowing down—touring around the globe to perform solo, as soloist with orchestra, or with the Romeros. In conjunction with his performances, Romero conducts master classes, offering aspiring guitarists the chance to play with and learn from a virtuoso and to benefit from a depth of insight into the instrument accumulated over decades.

Busily preparing for the premiere of a new guitar concerto, Romero took time out of his practice schedule to meet with me one sunny afternoon last summer in Del Mar, California, to discuss his Spanish roots, technique, performing, and his guitars.

The Romeros are known for their virtuosic technique. What's the secret, besides hard work?

ROMERO It's a combination of many things. It's very strong training: all the Carcassi studies; all the Sor studies, beginning from the time I started to play; all the Aguado lessons; all the Giuliani studies. Later, Villa-Lobos, Tarrega. It's also being with my father, who was an unbelievable guitar player—an incredible virtuoso. It's that on one side, and flamenco on the other. Flamenco gives you agility, and it gives you rhythmic precision. To be a virtuoso, one of the most important things you must have is as close to a perfect sense of rhythm as you can. I play flamenco and I love it, but to be truly dedicated to that art form you have to give 100 percent of your life to it, because it is a way of life. I have chosen to give mine to classical music.

Can you talk about your experience with flamenco and how it informs your classical playing?

ROMERO I was born in Málaga, in Andalucía. The music that represents, that sings, that embodies the tradition, the history, the temperament, and the sound of the people, is flamenco. Flamenco is a music that has inspired all the great nationalistic composers of Spain. Our most famous concerto, how does it begin? [*Plays the opening to* Concierto de Aranjuez, **Example 1**.] What is that? It's a perfect *bulerías*, beginning on 12, with the accents absolutely perfect [*sings entry of orchestra*], and incredible influences of flamenco. [Flamenco] is a music that has deeply touched the inspiration and the music of our greatest composers. I was born to it, as any musician who is from Andalucía is born to it. My family's house was

Ex. 1: From *Concierto de Aranjuez*

frequented by the great flamenco players in Málaga and later, when we moved to Seville. My father was very good friends of all the great *flamencos* [guitarists] of his day, so I grew up with that, and I've played it. We had people like Nino Ricardo, Manolo de Huelva, Paco de Lucia, etc.—all the great *flamencos*. And today's flamenco players are some of my dearest friends: Manolo San Lucar, Paco de Lucía, Tomatito, all the real great ones. I did a tour with Paco Peña. We keep a very close relationship. In Spain, the *flamencos* have a wonderful relationship with the classical players and the classical players with them. There is a closeness between the two disciplines. In this way, one enriches the other.

You once did a Guitar Summit tour with Leo Kottke, Joe Pass, and Paco Peña. What did you take away from that experience?
ROMERO I took away a very enriching friendship with all of them. It was a wonderful experience to see people who love the guitar from different aspects, different traditions, and different disciplines. The love and respect and admiration that we all felt for one another—the camaraderie, it was a tremendous experience. It is something I wish the world could do: see things from different perspectives and respect each other.

"You have to transmit your feelings and your thoughts to a movement of the string."

In a recent interview in* Acoustic Guitar *[March 2006], Kottke talked about how you had helped him deal with rushing as well as a left-hand problem. What exercises do you recommend for technique building?
ROMERO There are many exercises. On the right hand, the *rasgueados*, the descending and ascending arpeggios—you have scales, you have chords, you have single notes, you have many different things. For the left hand, you also have many different things. For the right hand, I like to use the Giuliani right-hand arpeggios [**Example 2**]. Also, for arpeggios, Villa-Lobos #1 is fantastic. [*Plays Villa-Lobos #1*.]

You use no "a" [ring] finger?
ROMERO Exactly, because there, I am using the arpeggio to train the velocity and the exchange between these two fingers [*index and middle fingers of right hand*]. To train the "a" finger, number 19 of Carcassi [**Example 3**] is fantastic. Also, the chromatic scales [**Example 4**].

Then, for left-hand legato and to train the fingers—there is a common problem if you are doing this [**Example 5**]. See, my little finger is pretty stable, but many people, they are all over the place [*wiggles fingers*]. To be able to pull with three fingers and not bring the pinky down is a common problem. I like to fix some fingers, say on the fifth string—lightly, not holding tough—then [*pulling off on the sixth string*, **Example 6**].

Building strength and efficiency.
ROMERO That's right. It's excellent [for that].

Do you recommend the Segovia scales?
ROMERO I definitely recommend the Segovia scales. Once you know them, then learn how to play the scales with any fingering. Make up your own fingerings and make up rhythms.

How do you get students to let go of tension?

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Ex. 2: Giuliani

#1

#81

Ex. 3: Carcassi #19

Ex. 4: Chromatic Scales

Ex. 5

*Ex. 6

* Rest middle and pinky fingers on fifth string in measures 1 and 3;
rest index and ring fingers on fifth string in measures 2 and 4.

ROMERO The word "tension" is a misleading thing. You need tension; the string needs to be tensed, stretched, in order to produce the sound. It's almost like the good cholesterol and the bad cholesterol: There is good tension and bad tension. The tension that is built as a result of the energy produced to move the string, that's good tension. When you produce a sound, all of the tension must go back to absolute relaxation. The tension must be very focused and pointed just to the string. You must give yourself the time to do it in the cleanest, most precise, most energetically economical way. In order to do that, you need a lot of thought. If it takes you half an hour to think and to feel how to do one note, you take that half hour and you do it, and you do it like a meditation. You leave your complete being to that one note, and you learn how to do that. The next day, maybe it takes you 29 minutes. And eventually you are going to play 16th notes at 208 on the metronome and it will feel like you have half an hour to play each note.

It goes back to what I showed Leo: giving yourself an incredible amount of time and space within the fastest notes. Uncluttering your mind, uncluttering all the connections that go from where a note is conceived in the depth of your being until it is produced. You have to transmit your feelings and your thoughts to a movement of the string, and anything in that path. There is an electrical path that guides all your muscles, all the necessary things that your body must do to set that string in motion, to reproduce that which you have thought. All of that has to be absolutely clear. So, no tension.

"What do I do before I go out to play, besides warming up my fingers? I warm up my heart."

Earlier, you mentioned the agility flamenco gives you as a guitarist. Can you explain?

ROMERO For one thing, when we are playing, classical players are always going in [*plucks some chords*]. They never exercise the opposite [*plays rasgueados*]. So if you are doing one movement all the time, it's important to do the opposite movement—to work those muscles, so that they don't atrophy. We are using the pulleys all the time, the tendons that pull the fingers. We need to exercise the ones that extend, the extensors. The *rasgueados* do that. So, for *rasgueados*, I use one finger at a time [**Example 7**].

Ex. 7: Rasgueados

Picking Hand: c a m i i c a m i i c a m i i

c a m i i c a m i i c a m i i c a m i i

You worked side-by-side with the great Spanish composer Joaquín Rodrigo. What was that like?

ROMERO An absolute joy! An incredible experience! There, you see the act of creation, the genesis of it. I was very fortunate to see him work for long periods of time and to see him feel something, take that feeling, and change it into music—not only with Rodrigo, but also with my father, who was an incredible composer, and with Federico Moreno-Torroba, with whom we had an unbelievably close friendship. He dedicated many, many works to my family.

Many view you as the quintessential interpreter of Spanish guitar music.

ROMERO You know, I am Spanish, and I've had many opportunities with my countrymen. But I've also worked, for example, with Morton Gould, the Jewish-American composer, who lives in Long Island. You cannot get more descriptive of the experience of American people than the music of Morton Gould. He wrote *Troubadour Music*, a work of gigantic inspiration, for my family. I've worked with Paul Chihara, the Japanese-American composer, whose concerto I recorded a couple of years ago with the

BEFRIEND YOUR STAGE FRIGHT

Does the great maestro and veteran performer Pepe Romero experience stage fright? "I do! I think every player, every musician, experiences it," he says. But, he adds, "It's what you think about it that makes a difference." At this point Romero waxes philosophical: "I feel that the world of music is a different dimension. It's like entering into another whole world that is here with us. I cannot separate music from my spiritual beliefs and from my philosophical and spiritual wants: my desire for love, for beauty, for unity, for peace, for people to love each other—to realize that we are on this gorgeous planet traveling through space and to take care of it and to live in harmony. I think all those elements are in the world of music. It's a beautiful place to be in the world of music, but it is guarded by the phantoms of fear—an energy field that manifests itself as stage fright. Why? It wants to keep me away from entering the place where I am going to feel absolute bliss. If I learn to recognize it, and I befriend those guards and I say, 'OK, you don't frighten me anymore. How are you?' they will say, 'Come in!' You have to go through the gates to really experience music. And on the other side, there is no fear."

Romero recommends players deal with their performance anxiety by dwelling on "the enjoyment that the sound of the guitar, the sound of music, gives you. Dwell on the well-being that music brings to your soul, your spirit—the calmness that it gives your mind. When you know that and look forward to that experience, that's the antidote to nerves. Of course I feel nerves. But what do I do before I go out to play, besides warming up my fingers? I warm up my heart. I think of someone I love. I get in touch with the part of me that feels love; the same part that feels love, feels music."

London Symphony. I had tremendous opportunities and musical experiences with him. What happens when you have these relationships with living composers is that you learn to have it with dead composers through the music. You learn to think of composers who have written music hundreds of years ago, so that when you play their sounds, when you experience what they wrote, they come alive. You develop an emotional friendship with the person who wrote that music. You learn to feel the presence of Bach when you are playing Bach. I've had incredible experiences, and I consider each one of those a great, great, gift, and the biggest learning experience.

WHAT HE PLAYS

Pepe Romero has one of the world's great guitar collections, but does most of his playing on a few. The two guitars he plays most are "La Wonderful," a 1973 cedar-and-Brazilian-rosewood instrument with which he has done most of his recordings, and "La Catedral," a 1974 Miguel Rodriguez that was his father's guitar. Romero has also performed on the instruments of Herman Hauser (mostly Hauser II), Santos Hernandez, and Domingo Esteso. One of the most precious treasures in Romero's collection is his beloved 1856 Antonio Torres. This instrument's robust, focused voice belies its 150 years. Simply appointed, constructed with a spruce top and maple back and sides, and smaller than the modern-day classical guitar, the Torres still packs plenty of punch. It is a playable piece of guitar history.

Romero is also very enthusiastic about the instruments being built by his son, Pepe Jr. Pepe owns several of his son's guitars, including number 60 (maple and cedar), number 90 (cedar and Brazilian rosewood), and number 100 (spruce and maple). But one of his favorites is Pepe Jr.'s number 30, "La Vieja." It features a German spruce top that was aged over 100 years and stored for many years in the workshop of Miguel Rodriguez, the great Spanish builder. Rodriquez had planned to make a guitar for Romero with this top, but he passed away before he could build the instrument. The Rodriguez family passed the top on to Romero, and it ended up as the top in La Vieja, which was completed in 2002. The back and sides are Brazilian rosewood.

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I have seen them create and lay it down on a piece of paper and then that piece of paper has been handed to me, with the responsibility that I give it my heart, my own inspiration, my own experience, and recreate it and bring the audience to the same place they were when they composed it—and close the circle.

To you, what makes a great performance?

ROMERO When you give yourself completely to the moment and you enter inside the piece you are playing—inside of it, and you are exploring it, and you are excited about what you are finding out. It is a complete surrender of your own ego, of yourself, into that which you are experiencing. Allowing the magic of the moment, the beauty the composer has laid down for you to experience. Letting it happen while you are on the stage in front of an audience. And then the audience will join you and participate. To me, it is one where I walk away with a feeling that I've never had with a piece that I've played a million times.

As a performer and interpreter, you've done it all. What's left that you'd like to accomplish?

ROMERO I'd like to spend my time doing exactly what I've been doing. I have a passion for the instrument. I have a passion for music, but I also have a passion for the instrument. I love the way it looks, I love the way it feels, I love the way it sounds. I would love to see young players experience and dwell on the tone of the guitar, to love the guitar as I have loved it. There is such a tendency in today's world to forget the tone and experience the velocity. I would like to continue to influence people to not become blind to one thing in favor of another. I'd love to continue to play many pieces that I haven't yet played. And I'm having an incredible time watching my grandchildren learn to play. AG

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