



“It’s only when you’re fed up with it  
that you can start learning . . .”

## Ian Davies

in conversation with **Paul Magnussen**

“What he plays would be extraordinarily good were he a 40-year-old Spaniard, in dazzling technique, in feeling and vitality, and in content; in one of his birth and upbringing, it is preposterously good.”

Thus spake Discus, in February 1969’s B.M’G., of Ian Davie’s record *Flamenco Excitement*; Ian was then just 14 years old.

The next I heard of Ian was his remarkable Wigmore concert in April, (reviewed July issue) merely one event in a remarkable career.

While still at school, he was playing three nights a week at Antonio’s Restaurant, in Covent Garden. At 16, following a recommendation from Serranito, he went to live in Madrid, to work at the prestigious *tablaó*, *Café de Chinitas*. There followed ten years’ performing and touring with some of the best artists in the business. With Serranito (Victor Monge) and Luis Pastor, Ian toured Italy, Spain and America, appearing at Carnegie Hall and Alice Tully Hall in New York. Together with Luis Carmona (‘Habichuela’), José Ortega (‘Manzanita’), and Felipe Maya they recorded on the *Hispavox* label.

Ian has also toured the world with the El Camborio, Siluetas, Antología and Maria Rosa Ballet Companies, and recorded his own compositions on the *Hispavox* and *Amenecer* labels. He has also recorded a Flamenco programme for Radio 3’s *Music for Guitar*, scheduled for June.

“I got interested by accident, just before I was nine. I was crazy about the Beatles, as everybody else was at that time, and wanted to be like George Harrison. As it happened, a schoolfriend’s mother was Spanish, and she played a bit of flamenco, a bit of regional music, some light classical . . . and my friend was starting to learn with her. So we started together, and it was very convenient.”

Had Ian had any other teachers?

“I met Pepe Martinez here in England. He teaches by sending over tapes with sheet music in *cifra*. He would play very slowly through different *falsetas*, or complete pieces; that would be accompanied by the *cifra* on paper, and any

comments spoken on to the tape. So for some time I was receiving these tapes from him, from all parts of Spain (because he’d be on tour, and he’d be recording these tapes in hotel rooms).

I went to Paco Peña for a while as well, for more material; because I was only picking stuff up from records, I wasn’t having any personal, visual contact with any other guitarist.”

However good a performer may be, it’s not everyone who gets the chance to make a record, especially at that age.

“I don’t know exactly how it came about, I was too young to be aware of that, to tell you the truth. But there was a record-shop owner in Hackney, and he’d heard me play somewhere or other. He arranged an audition for me at EMI with a friend of his called Walter Ridley, and immediately they wanted to make an LP. So I recorded this album for Columbia.

“Around that time I was playing at Antonio’s in Longacre three nights a week (because other nights I had to do my homework). I left school straight after my O-levels, with the idea of studying Spanish and Music for A-level; but rather than spending two years doing it at school, I’d do it at home, privately, in one year.

“So I started doing that, which of course gave me the evenings free, and I was full-time at Antonio’s. And I’d only been doing that for a little while when Victor’s (Serranito’s) concert was on at the Queen Elizabeth Hall. I already knew him through a mutual friend, a dancer called Juan Quintero, and he stayed at my parents house when he was here. It was then he mentioned to me that there was a vacancy at the *Café de Chinitas* for a guitarist; and that if I was interested he could give them a quick phone call and ask them to hold the place for me, if I could go straight over.

“It was obviously an opportunity not to be missed, because the only way I was going to progress any further was to live and work in Spain. So it took about two weeks and then I was over there. I started on November 1st 1970: I remember I was just capable of not putting my foot in it, I mean I wouldn’t go out of *compás* or anything.”

The *Café de Chinitas* in Madrid is of course not the same as that of the same name in Málaga at the turn of the century, celebrated in the Lorca song; none the less, it is well-known in its own right,

"When it opened (which was three months before I started), it was surely the best *tablao* in Madrid. It was *so fresh* then: they'd gathered the artists they wanted under the direction of La Chunga and Tomás de Madrid. It was very well attended, because it was a very high-quality *tablao*, with the restaurant offering a four- or five-fork meal. The audience was mainly *aficionados* who would have an expensive dinner there, not people just wandering in for a drink."

I hadn't seen Ian since I met him at Paco Peña's house, in the late 60's, when he was still a schoolboy. I invited him and his Spanish wife Beatriz over for a relaxed afternoon, with the formal interview sandwiched somewhere in the middle; but we ended up taking the whole day, going to a South Bank concert together and finishing at my place at 3 o'clock in the morning. One of the most interesting things we had to talk about, and one on which Ian was able to offer a unique perspective, was the problem of trying to learn flamenco in a foreign country. I asked Ian if, when he arrived at *Chinitas* at the age of 16, he found that his style was different from the other guitarists'.

"In some respects it was downright *wrong*, I was playing things upside down. It's only when you start sitting next to people who know what they're doing, and watching them, that you realise when you're finishing on an up-stroke they're finishing on a down-stroke. There are little details like that, that make you think 'I wonder why that is?' After a while you start drifting into the way they do things — especially in the *cuadros*, where you've got eight girls all giving *palmas*, and it's all very boring, let's say (it's not boring when you start, it's after a year or two, doing the same thing every night — *alegría, soleá, alegría, soleá, rumba, alegría, soleá* . . .).

"In some respects flamenco is open enough that you can do things your own way, that's the nice part about it; but only to a certain extent. There's a moment when if you do things differently, in your own personal style, it just doesn't sound right — and that's when it's wrong."

Ian should know: he has been first guitarist for ballet companies, composing all the arrangements himself, teaching them to the other guitarists, and working on the choreography with the dancers. But of course, outside Spain, many people have no choice but to learn from books and records.

"You can learn guitar solos, of course. And the Japanese copy the singing when they don't even speak Spanish. I've heard Japanese players that are in Spain for the first time, they

play these Paco de Lucía solos that they've lifted from records, and they do it very well. But I don't think that's the important thing about flamenco — the guitar solo is the last station on the line. It's the knowledge all the way from the beginning of the line that you need, to be able to make up a guitar solo for yourself, and for it to be right.

"These people are trying to run before they can walk. For the foreigner who starts with Lucía's music, it's too advanced, he's missing *why* and *how* it's arrived at. You need something more basic, to get your *compás* right, and the knowledge of flamenco. So people should go back at least as far as Sabicas — Ricardo, too, but Sabicas stuff is crystal clear.

"Lucía's stuff is too advanced, and there are so many notes, and the *compás* is too syncopated. It's not just outside, the majority *in* Spain are copying Lucía, have been for years; and I feel sorry for them.

"A perfect case that comes to mind is Manzanita. He was sixteen when he started at *Chinitas*, and it was incredible. You'd sit and listen to him, and his *picado* would be as fast as Paco's, and with all this ease — he'd just sit back and laugh, and do these incredible runs, *falsetas*, anything, and sound just like Paco, and it was all a joke to him. But that was his problem, he'd sound too much like Paco. And next day he'd come along and say 'listen to this new *falseta* I've just worked out!'; but it didn't say anything, because it might as well have been another of Paco's *falsetas* off his latest record.

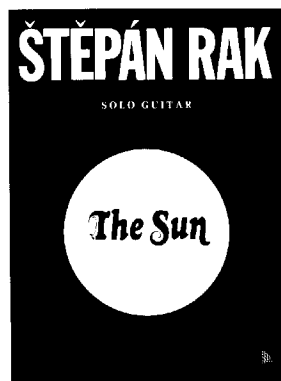
"Paco's material was copied by all the artists, especially the younger generation. Within professional circles, he was the best. But with him, and with Serranito, too, I found that it was too difficult for the average professional, although they'd *want* to copy it. In *Chinitas*, I remember *very* often, other guitarists would say 'show me this one', and Victor would start to show them the *falseta*: but it would become too complicated in the left hand, and they'd give up. Or, they'd try and simplify it and it would lose half its meaning."

Ian says he has never taken actual lessons from Serranito, although obviously he has been very influenced by him.

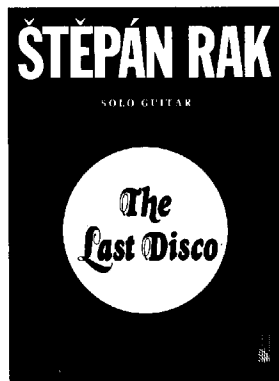
"I was on holiday in Spain and he invited me to his house. I played him some of his own material that I'd lifted from his records, and he repaired it for me. But mostly it was just being around him. It was through him that I went to work at *Chinitas*. And he took personal responsibility for me, as I was only sixteen years old: I lived in his house until I found a flat, and I was in his trio, and so forth. It was hearing so much of him, rather than going to him for lessons.

"I don't think he's being appreciated as much as he ought to be. It's the sort of thing that people are going to cotton on to

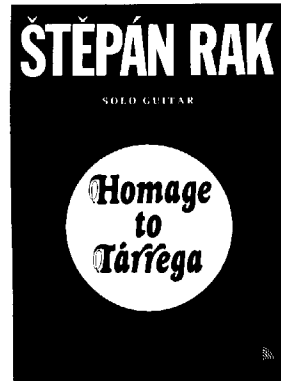
## IMPORTANT NEW COMPOSITIONS



**THE SUN**  
Fingered by Vladimír Mikulka  
Duration 10 minutes  
**£5.25**



**THE LAST DISCO**  
(In memory of a teenage girl murdered at a dance)  
Duration 14 minutes  
**£5.25**



**HOMAGE TO TARREGA**  
Fingered by Vladimír Mikulka  
Duration 10 minutes  
**£5.25**

Available from your local music shop, in case of difficulty direct from the publishers  
**MUSICAL NEW SERVICES LTD, GUITAR HOUSE, SHAFTESBURY, DORSET.**

when it's too late for him — he should be recognised now, not when he's ninety."

I suggested that he was unfortunate to be in the shadow of Lucía — especially since some smart person mixed the latter with John McLaughlin and Al di Meola and captured the American market. We agreed that the turning point for Lucía was *Entre Dos Aguas*.

"The funny thing is though, that *Entre Dos Aguas* was just a fill-in track to add a couple of minutes to an LP. Apparently (although I don't know this from the horse's mouth), it was a melody he picked up while he was in Brazil, from Baden Powell or someone, and he was just improvising on that simple little melody, and they put it on the record just to fill up space. But Philips loved that track more than any other, and put it out as a single, and that was it.

"But I feel sorry for Serranito, because he must wonder himself, why can't I get going? Lack of management, maybe, I think that's mainly what it is. I know he's not good at selling himself, so he needs a manager behind him."

Serranito's like all flamenco discs, are hard to get in this country, though the London Guitar Studio sometimes has them. Like Manolo Sanlúcar and Paco Cepero, Serranito appears to have jumped on the bandwagon of making records with orchestras. For myself, I have considerable reservations about this sort of thing, so I asked Ian which of Serranito's albums he would recommend.

"Cepero's a very good businessman in his own right. But with Serranito, it's not his idea, it's CBS's, and he's gone along with it. He doesn't write the orchestral part or anything, he just does his flamenco piece, and they add the orchestra."

"I would recommend the first four records, in that order. They were all way ahead of their time when they came out. But you don't usually see them in this country."

The difficulty of finding flamenco in England, or anywhere else outside Spain, is obvious; but there are some curious side-effects. In particular, whereas for the real flamenco their music is a relaxation (or at least a livelihood), for some foreign *aficionados* it becomes almost a religion, with them trying to be more Spanish than the Spaniards. Tweeness, cattiness and more-flamenco-than-thou attitudes are also not unknown. Ian had noticed this too, and offered some additional remarks.

"There's definitely a thick line between guitarists in Spain and those outside, there's a river that needs to be crossed: not just technically, but in the attitude and the understanding of flamenco. The number of notes you play isn't important: it's playing the *right* note, at the right time, in the right way."

"I've got friends in Madrid, and sometimes a player will come in, from England or Australia or whatever, and play us a marvellous *falseta* por Solea, or something. And we'd say, Yes, it's really nice. Then they'd say, Do you want to learn it? I'll show it to you."

"And that's a good indication of the sort of attitude. In

Spain, among professionals, no-one teaches anyone anything — you're *not interested* in learning a new *falseta*. You'll listen to it, and if you like it, good. What sticks in your head might be regurgitated later in something you do, or that you throw in when you're just playing for dancing; but to learn a *falseta* to play on stage is not done. And of course it *is* done here in England. There's a lot of repeating.

"I've found that gypsies, in particular, are almost incapable of learning a *falseta* the way it's shown to them. When Victor had his six guitarists accompanying him at *Chinitas*, I think four of them were gypsies. He'd show them the notes needed to accompany his piece, and of course they had to be played right, you couldn't play a G sharp for a C natural. But it's so difficult for them to learn anything note-perfect, they'll learn the spirit of it and then do it their own way."

"A *tabla* is a very important place to be, not only because of the other guitarists, but equally for the dancers and singers. You're around an older player who may be 60, and then a 16-year old, all playing different styles. So you're bombarded with different styles from all angles, and you pick up what you want. For the foreigner, this is what is lacking; and *this* is why he doesn't get to the stage of saying I'm not interested when a pretty new *falseta* comes along. Over there you're hearing it so much. In your spare time you listen to jazz, or go to the races or something. Here, you come home from the office and listen to your flamenco records. You never get to the stage where you just don't want to hear any more flamenco, where it becomes a trade, where you go to a *tabla*, do your job, and want to get out as soon as you can. And it's only *then*, when you're fed up with it, that you can start learning."

I told Ian that I was glad to see he didn't assume a fake Spanish name or accent in this country, like some people I could think of. He told me an amusing anecdote of a friend of his who changed his name by deed poll to Manolo Seguro, only to find, not only that there were already a singer *and* a dancer of that name, but that all the Spaniards called him Max.

"It shouldn't really matter what your name is or how you speak — it's what you do, in the end. I don't think it's necessary to change your name. O.K., if you're playing flamenco music in England, you change your name not only because you want to try and convince *yourself* that you're Spanish; but because if you're going to do it publicly, you're thinking about your audience. And of course, there will always be a percentage of people that think, Well, if he's not Spanish, he's not going to be able to do it authentically. So you've got either to miss a few heads in the concert hall, or play a game.

"The Spanish don't care what your name is, I can assure you. It's the English that are uptight about it, the Spanish don't care. If you're one of them, you are, and if you're not, you're not. They call me *El Niño de la Niebla* (the boy of the fog) because I'm from London."

## SPANISH GUITAR CENTRE

(Principal: Michael Watson)  
Guitar Specialists since 1954

We maintain our comprehensive range of student & concert guitars from Spain. Latest arrivals include top concert models by **PAULINO BERNABE & MANUEL RODRIGUEZ** & a unique Torres-size guitar by **MARCELINO LOPEZ**. (Send 20p in stamps for our detailed guitar list).

**BY-RETURN MAIL ORDER SERVICE FOR MUSIC** (inc. all ASSOCIATED BOARD EXAM PIECES), STRINGS (inc. Pyramid lute strings) & ACCESSORIES.

Professional Classical & Flamenco tuition

Spanish Guitar Centre

2 Elton Road, Bristol BS7 8DA (0272-47256)

BARCLAYCARD

ACCESS

## IMPORTANT NOTICE

### WHY DO GUITARISTS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD USE OUR FREE CATALOGUE?

\*With over 1,500 titles and growing, we offer the most comprehensive stock of guitar music in the U.K.

\*Regular news letters keep you informed as to new publications received.

\*We stock music not generally available (we're the biggest stockists of South American music for example).

\*Orders sent within 24 hours.

**MUSICAL NEW SERVICES LTD.,  
GUITAR HOUSE, SHAFESBURY, DORSET  
SEND FOR YOUR FREE CLASSICAL GUITAR MUSIC  
MAIL ORDER CATALOGUE**