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GILLES APAP

IS HE CLASSICAL? IS HE FOLK?
NO, HE'S A STAR VIOLINIST
WHO DEFIES ALL DESCRIPTION



■ Fresh approaches

MARGESS

MICHEL QUENNEVILLE



After hearing Gilles A
Mozart Third Concerto, M
'an example of a musica



On yet another boringly beautiful, crisply sunny day in California, Gilles Apap is taking a break from his typical morning ritual of practice. In preparation for a tour that will take him to Europe for concerto appearances and for concerts with the renowned Irish fiddler Kevin Burke, he is reading through the Berg Concerto and Bartók Second – five minutes at a stretch while also watching Danny Kaye in *The Court Jester* on the television. Apap is at home on a yawning property in the rustic Arroyo Grande, not far from favourite beach spots where he plies his latest non-musical passion, surfing.

It's a typical day in the life, in other words, for one of the violin scene's virtuosic iconoclasts. There's no question that Apap is a highly and naturally skilled contemporary practitioner of the violin – or fiddle, as he prefers to call it.

That much is readily apparent on the luminous new album *Music for Solo Violin* on Apapaziz (pronounced 'Apap as is'), an independent label he and some supporters formed in 1999. Fortified by generous, deeply felt portions of Bach – including a moving take on the D minor Chaconne to close the programme – the disc also includes works of Ysaÿe and a few detours into Irish and American folk tunes. It is a Gilles Apap album, after all.

Explaining his latest recording, Apap casually refers to the folkish 'detours' as 'just little things here and there to release the tension from all this godly music. I do a lot of gigs nowadays with just solo fiddle, because first of all this is the music that I play every day.

'I will play a few numbers that will put my mind on a good track, and then I will take coffee and then play some more. This new album is about an hour of solo music that I would play everywhere. I found a good way to interest people in music. I've been doing this for the past two years, just going on the road with my fiddle.'

Stirring his audience's interest in music and keeping himself true to his wandering instincts are primary concerns for Apap. That can create misleading impressions in a music world sold on easily digested artistic identities.

For all of his off-centre efforts in the centre-oriented world of classical music, Apap has been branded many things, including a genius and a clown, a rebel and, to quote one of his heroes, friends and most fervent champions, the late, great Yehudi Menuhin, 'an example of a musician of the 21st century'. Menuhin made this statement in the twilight of the 20th century, after having first heard Apap's sensational cadenza for the Mozart Third Concerto, and the 21st century does seem to be treating Apap well, despite his refusal to play by the standard rules of classical behaviour, eschewing contracts with Sony, EMI and Columbia Artists in favour of a more self-determining path.

Now 43, Apap has long made it his habit freely and literally to 'cross over' – without really trying – from classical music proper to other musical loves, including Bluegrass, old-time Americana, Irish, gypsy and 'Hot Club'-style swing, not to mention notable ventures into Indian music (including a concert with L. Subramaniam at the Menuhin-founded Gstaad Festival last summer). As such, the violinist has been naturally branded with the 'crossover' tag. Some may even consider him a poster boy for the crossover craze.

To hear Apap tell it, though, he feels uncomfortable and misunderstood in that role, having been engaged in various musics in a natural rather than experimental way for nearly 20 years. As he explains in the whimsical biography on his website, he started playing the violin at the age of seven and went through proper channels of classical study, but he 'started playing the fiddle at the age of 26. Better late than never. It took me 17 years to realise (with all due respect to dead composers), that there was something out there that could open my third eye and all my chakras – folk music.'

Later he explains how, on his 27th birthday, his new-found friend Phil Salazar, a Southern California-based Bluegrass fiddler, took him to the Bluegrass Mecca of the Strawberry Music Festival in Yosemite. 'It cured me from all mind diseases that I had contracted in French conservatories and American institutes over the years.'

In short, Apap is an unwilling crossover poster boy. Asked if he's growing tired ▶

GILLES

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Equally at home with Bartók and Bluegrass, Mozart and the music of the Bulgarian ghettos, Gilles Apap is a violinist who defies categorisation. JOSEF WOODARD met him

I realise that you can make people feel good with music. If only the president could play the fiddle, that would be beautiful

of the label, he confesses, 'I always was. I have become more aware of it lately. But there was always something that bothered me about that. I'm not exposed to music, really, except old-time and a few little bits of swing, Irish music and Bluegrass here and there. I don't ever really go to classical concerts.

'But something that I've picked up along the way is this new fashion for crossover things. I won't mention names, but some people don't even know about the styles, yet for commercial purposes they just mix things together. It's not right. It's not good. So, every time I go somewhere, people are asking, "Oh, are you going to cross over?" It's just nonsense.

'I'm a classical musician. That's what I do. But these little tunes are treats for myself that I bring on the road, because with the intensity of playing classical music in these classical surroundings, every time I play a tune, I think of my good buddies. So that's why I play the music that I do, and why I share it with people. All this crossover

stuff that you hear commercially is just something else.'

For another more concentrated and broader dose of the 'alternative' aspects of Apap's art, proceed directly to his celebrated, crazily multi-genre cadenza for the Mozart Concerto no. 3, which he has performed numerous times over the years and which can now be easily found on YouTube.com. As it happens, Apap has had friendly encounters with the media beyond the internet as well. His charisma has been captured, and disseminated, via a documentary by Bruno Monsaingeon in 1993, seen widely on European television and, more recently, in another on Apap's work in India, Max Jourdan's *Apap Masala*.

Despite his reputation for challenging norms in the classical scene, Apap insists that 'being a rebel was part of the process, just to force me to do something. I heard that a lot, about my being provocative. It's the last thing in my mind to be provocative. But I had to do it, in order to do something like the

Mozart cadenza. I just had to go on stage and put it out, and push everything that I could.

'I do things with a better understanding of people now. I pretty much know where to draw the line. Before I didn't know that, so that's why people treated me as a rebel. You push it so much that you shock them. But you have to shock in order to do something.

'So now I can balance things better, even when I play solo. I realise that you can make people feel good with music. If only the president could play the fiddle, that would be beautiful,' he laughs. 'If all the presidents at the summit meeting could play the fiddle, and whip them out to jam, that would be great. But dream on.'

Born in Algeria in 1963, Apap had a slow-growing love affair with the violin. He studied with André Robert, Gustave Gaglio of the Nice Conservatoire and with Veda Reynolds from the Lyons Conservatoire. In the mid-1980s he married another violin prodigy, Nina Bodnar, who brought him back to her home town of Santa Barbara. The marriage didn't last long, but Apap settled into this lovely, affluent and cultured seaside town. While he travelled and half-heartedly pursued his promising musical career, he also forged musical liaisons with folk musicians in the region and was the concertmaster of the Santa Barbara Symphony for a few years.

He looks back on his decade spent in Santa Barbara as a healthy soul-searching time. It was an opportunity 'to find that you can find a life and that everything is possible. Santa Barbara was the perfect place to do that. I started meeting musicians, more and more.'

Late in his Santa Barbara period, before moving up north to Arroyo Grande, Apap further secured his already strong local following by performing as soloist with the Santa Barbara Symphony. After playing Bartók's Concerto no. 2, he launched into his soon-to-be famous cadenza for the Mozart Concerto, to the mild chagrin but also bemusement of then-conductor Gisèle Ben-Dor.

In explaining the path to creating his genre-stitching Mozart cadenza, Apap starts at the basic level of bow technique, and appreciating the differences of various global and idiomatic traditions. ▶



KATHERINE DU THIL

Apap has explored many non-classical styles, including Hindustani music

Yehudi was looking at me and saying, 'This is the way I would like to play the violin'

'What you do with the bow is where your style comes from,' he says. 'Everything is in the bow. Of course, the left hand has a big part in it, but the bow gives the rhythm. So the way you change the bow, and the way you phrase is something incredible. If you're aware of it, as a violin player, and are exposed to the music, you just go home and think, "This is trippy. I should go deeper into it and find out more." That's what I did. That's how I came up with this little cadenza for the Mozart Concerto. But it is Menuhin's fault, because he's the one who told me to go on a search and do it.' The search continues.

So it was as if Menuhin gave him permission to experiment, in a way?

'Yes,' he laughs, 'like God reaching down. It is cool. Yehudi was looking at me and saying, "This is the way I would like to play the violin." I remember the most beautiful time with this old man, just talking about the fiddle. It's not just the fiddle. It's the people.'

Through his various travels, beyond just the usual classical music circuit and byways, Apap has come into creative and personal contact with a diverse assortment of musicians. He tries to make musical connections wherever he goes, whether it's to an old-time Americana jam session just down the road or in Alaska, India, Bulgarian ghettos or Benares.

'When you go to people and don't speak their language, you go because you play the music, you're right there,' he says. 'That's what has happened in India and in Bulgaria and everywhere I've gone. I went to China and was playing this Chinese music. Nobody spoke English and people ate scorpions. There is no better way to get inside a culture than through music.'

Citing an example of a musical encounter fresh in his mind, Apap comments, 'When you play old-time music, you play the A part and the B part,' he sings a chugging, rollicking phrase. 'But you repeat the tune 30 times and get



Apap playing his newly acquired 'violin without a pedigree'

into the trance. It's all a matter of trance, more or less. It's a great thing. The other night, we had a party and we played in the key of A for four hours. It was A major, then A minor. And they changed fiddles whenever they changed keys. This is the ultimate of music making, because you just go for the group.'

In a completely different neighbourhood, literally and musically, Apap looks back fondly on a ten-day tour he took with gypsy musicians in Bulgaria. A go-between had approached Apap after being impressed with him in the *Apap Masala* documentary. 'These guys live in the ▶

APAP PLAYS...



Whereas Gilles Apap has wide-ranging musical tastes and curiosity, his attitude towards his equipment remains surprisingly pure and simple. He has had the same bow for 20 years and recently changed instruments, in a typically spur-of-the-moment way.

'I play a really beautiful violin that I found almost by accident,' he recalls. 'I was walking along a street in Paris and there was this gypsy guy in the street who had a bow in a plastic bag. He called me over and said, "Hey, Gilles, you've got to try out my new bow." I went to Christophe Depierre's shop and said, "Give me a fiddle - I need to try this bow." They gave me a fiddle that was very nice. I didn't know what it was.'

'I tried the bow out, but the violin sounded so rich and so pretty, I told the guys at the shop, "I've got to have this fiddle. What is it?" They said they didn't know. I was never ever attracted to a fiddle like this. I always just had a fiddle and that was it. But this one was so rich. You can hear it on the recording, too. I started playing it and I told the guy, "I want this fiddle. How much?" He said, "I don't know. You're a friend. How about €4,000?" I said, "I'll give you €4,500." The same night, I used it to play the Mendelssohn Concerto in Paris.'

'I don't know what it is. It could be Italian or a mix of French and Italian, but the sweetness of it is something that is so much better than these old instruments that I've played, even a Stradivari. Yet it doesn't have any pedigree.'

'I always use it in concert now. Everybody wants to find the right fiddle. If you tune to the sound that you like without any expectation, you can always find a good instrument, without spending a lot of money.'



Apap playing his 'fiddle' at the California coast: 'I just do everything naturally. There's a surf side to life'

ghetto, neighbourhoods where you don't even want to step inside. I don't speak their language, and they didn't speak English or French, but we hung out together.

'They play this music that even the Bulgarians don't usually play. They play in the ghettos, for weddings. Some of them don't even have a mother or a passport. When we travelled, we had to invent a mother and give them a new name, because they don't even know their last names. We're talking wild characters.'

'So if you hang around people like that, you know what the real thing is. Now I'm going with Kevin [Burke], another thing in my life, which is going to bring me to a better place.'

Apap is a late-bloomer in some ways, partly because of his reluctance to play by the rules and abide by the advice of professionals and institutions. His recording career may be in full bloom now that he has his own label, but the label itself, like many an independent, artist-run company, was borne out of frustration with the proper industry. Apap had been signed to Sony Classical in the 1990s, and they released a couple of albums with his diverse classical-gypsy-folk group, the Transylvanian Mountain Boys.

He grew frustrated dealing with the whims of a large label, though, especially after they shelved a Bartók sonata

recording in order to avoid in-house competition with an Isaac Stern recording of the same material. He bid Sony and Columbia Artists adieu and settled back in Southern California, visions of independence in his head.

To date, Apapaziz has released several recordings, including one called – quite truthfully – *No Piano on That One*, and a rapturous new version of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* by his ongoing multi-cultural band Colors of Invention, with accordionist Myriam Lafar, cimbalom player Ludovit Kovac and double bassist Philippe Noharet. As for future plans, Apap plans to record his group's version of Ravel's *Le tombeau de Couperin* and make an album of tunes from the old-time – Bluegrass – Irish corner of his musical obsessions.

You get the distinct feeling that Apap is well set on his self-designed musical trajectory by this point, after some years of experimentation. 'I don't need to excuse myself or explain what I'm going to do any more,' says Apap, whose cult following and self-made reputation is finally starting to precede him as he goes out into the world. 'I've been booed several times, but I think it's all about how you approach it and how you feel. If you feel good about yourself and are sure about what you're doing, and do it with integrity and love, nothing can be wrong. If you really do it from your heart, there is nothing that can go wrong.'

'Sometimes, I used to feel nervous before a gig. Travelling and going on the road for me is not an easy thing – keeping the chops, the memory together when the concertos keep changing, sometimes every day. That's what I do sometimes, just push the limits. Every time I think about being nervous, if I can put my mind in this little channel, every kind of tension goes away. That is nice.'

Keeping inner peace is critical for survival in a career of sometimes frightening density. He cites the example of one single week on the road last year when he played, in rapid succession, two Bartók rhapsodies in Berlin, a solo recital in Strasbourg, a show in Germany with the Colors of Invention, a masterclass and recital in Sweden and the Sibelius Concerto in Turkey.

'That's why the music is so full. Finally, I'm getting it, man. I used to be so anxious about things, wondering, "Am I doing the right thing? What are people going to think?" I'm 43 now, and it's like, "Ooh, baby." It took me 40 years, but now I just rock on.'

His secret? 'I just do everything naturally. There's a surf side to life.' He pauses, and, for emphasis, adds the mantra, 'Surf's up!' He breaks into his infectious laugh, cutting the image of a very serious musician, who can deliver sublimity on the theme of Bach. But he is also a musician who understands the lightness of being and the healing power of a wink. ■