

# DUO GUITARINET

COLIN COOPER meets JAKUB BOKUN and KRZYSZTOF PELECH



*Duo Guitarinet.*

*THE Duo Guitarinet consists of Jakub Bokun, clarinet, and Krzysztof Pelech, guitar. Krzysztof Pelech is well known in the guitar world, having made an international reputation as a performer of, at first, mainly South American music (in which he performed in duo with the great Jorge Morel), then music from his native Poland, while expanding his scope and repertoire as he went along. His partnership with the clarinetist Jakub Bokun is ten years old now, and thriving: an impressive list of bookings, two CDs, good music written for them by such talents as Jaime Zenamon and, even younger, Marek Pasieczny.*

*There is something about the sound of the clarinet that makes it a good partner to the guitar; perhaps because they are both made of wood - a point made during this interview. Personally, I loved their sound. If you do not get a chance to hear them in a live performance, at least buy their CDs.*

*Tell me how you met and how you came to start a clarinet and guitar duo.*

Jakub Bokun: This is Krzysztof's story. The idea came from him, about eleven years ago. Our first concert was ten years ago. We knew each other. We were not friends, but we had some friends in common.

Krzysztof Pelech: The idea came during the concert when Jakub played as a soloist in the Wroclaw Philharmonic Hall.

JB: That was in 1995. I played the first Weber clarinet concerto.

KP: I was always fond of playing chamber music. Solo playing is very exciting, of course, but I was looking for something that would combine the guitar with another interesting colour. Flute and guitar were already very popular and there were very many duets. And I was thinking that it could work, this sound of the guitar and the clarinet. Especially Jakub's sound, which is unique, a very soft and velvet sound. And Jakub...

JB: ...was very eager to play.

KP: We were very surprised when, after we had played a few pieces, people told us that the sound was very interesting. There was no other duo like that. Sérgio Assad told me that he doesn't know a duo like this, playing concerts on a regular basis.

JB: There have been some projects and recordings on the market, but I am not sure there's another duo that has survived ten years. Our friends from Prague - Milan and Petra Arner - have been playing together for quite a while, so maybe I'm wrong.

*Do you have to make a lot of adjustments to volume and timbre and that sort of thing?*

JB: No, I don't think I make any particular adjustment when I play with Krzysztof. The only thing I try to do is to explore the bottom range of dynamics, which is to go from *piano* below and not to go too high up, because the highest register on the clarinet will certainly not blend with the sound of the guitar - warm, dark and wooden. So this is the

only concession I make. As you know, the clarinet's sonority has changed over the past 20 or 25 years. Even at the beginning of the 1980s, the most popular clarinet sound was quite bright, edgy and shrill. And now all the great clarinet players in the world look for a warm, round and focused sound.

It's like a fashion change, and basically we owe this to the great clarinet teacher Michel Arrignon, Professor of Clarinet at the Conservatoire de Paris. He was the man who really started the revolutionary changes in the sonority of the instrument, even if Arrignon himself was formed by an old French school, always associated with adjectives like 'bright', 'light' and 'sharp-edged'. As I said, now it's completely the opposite; the trendy clarinet sound is round, dark and very warm. This type of sonority, which I try to adopt, goes well with the guitar.

Pavel Steidl, our wonderful friend, told us after a concert in Holland that our sounds blend really well. But his compliment was not just addressed to the players - he was more referring to the fact that both our instruments are made out of wood. I must say I like his way of thinking. A flute made out of even expansive metal is hardly going to blend with a guitar made out of wood.

*There seems to be a fashion for the basset clarinet. What is that, exactly?*

JB: The basset clarinet is a hybrid, something between clarinet and basset horn. The normal clarinet is either A (also the pitch of the basset clarinet) or B flat, the basset horn is in F. The mouthpiece is the same, and the technique of playing is the same, except for some new keys and special fingerings for the extra notes in the bottom range. Basically, it is a clarinet with the extension of a minor third downwards. So instead of reaching the low C at the bottom, I can reach A. This is the instrument for which Mozart wrote his Clarinet Concerto K622 and his Stalder Quintet K581.

*Do you find that your choice of repertoire is limited by the range of the clarinet?*

JB: Not at all. How we adapt in playing chamber music mostly depends on our musical partners, and the instrument is only a secondary problem - another problem, in fact. Krzysztof plays with a little amplifier (he has a Schlemper system built into his guitar), which helps a lot to balance the two instruments. I can basically play with a full clarinet sound. If we go down with the dynamics, this is because we both like the nuances of piano, pianissimo and below.

In any case, it's difficult to play loud on the clarinet. The clarinet is not a trumpet. On the other hand, it's very easy to play soft.

KP: But not for everyone! I think many people are surprised that you can play so soft yet still with a good sound. It's the same with the guitar: it's hard to play loud and with a good sound. Often people play with a weak sound and very fast. It's easy to do it, but the effect is superficial. If you want to have a strong sound that projects well it's not so easy.

*Tell me more about the repertoire. It's quite varied, isn't it?*

KP: From the beginning, it's been our main problem. The choice isn't big. There's very little music originally written for clarinet and guitar.

*And mainly contemporary?*

JB: Yes. There are some good transcriptions too, but maybe not quite worth exploring, because you cannot avoid comparison with the original. Nothing compares with the original when you do

Schubert's *Arpeggione* and masterpieces like that. The lack of repertoire has been a problem for us. I think in all of us there is an ambition, a will to make out of our weak points something that is strong. There must be a good word for it - overcoming our own weaknesses? But this is what Krzysztof referred to: our problem with choosing the repertoire. Slowly, we became aware that the only way to survive was to make our own arrangements. So, the first album that we recorded some seven years ago was based on

what we had arranged for ourselves.

KP: Our own transcriptions.

JB: Even pieces that seemed impossible to transcribe at first glance, like the Sonata for Cello and Guitar by the Brazilian composer Radamés Gnattali. In some spots we reversed the parts, so that the guitar played the cello part and the clarinet played the guitar part. It was the only way we could make it work.

KP: But it's great music. It was worth doing. We have recorded it twice. The live recording from the Mikulov Festival, which we included on our new album, is even more virile and flexible in phrasing.

JB: With the second disc, the situation was a little easier, because we had pieces written for us by composers of the younger generation. Like Marek Pasieczny, Pavel Smutny and Krzysztof's friend Jaime Zenamon.

KP: His piece [*Luz y Sombra Op.121*] is longer, actually. There are two more parts, which we will play soon.

JB: We discovered some very good pieces by Sérgio Assad. There was a Belgian guitar duo that performed with us at the *Trzebiatow Guitar Festival* on the Baltic Sea, some eight years ago,

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and it happened that they were going to Wroclaw. We gave them a lift, and it turned out that one of the guitarists was a student of Odair Assad.

KP: Boris Gaquère - do you know him?

*I see his name a lot, but I've never met him.*

JB: He told me that Sérgio had recorded a very good CD with an Italian clarinetist called Gabriele Mirabassi [*Velho retrato, Egea SCA 068, 1999*], who is a great jazz player. And that is how I became acquainted with this music. Mirabassi is a clarinetist who explores very different territories in terms of creating new sound possibilities. He plays with accordion, with a wind band, he plays with different groups and combinations creating sound worlds that are not yet very well explored. I think that when we discovered that there were albums of music originally written for these instruments, we were quite surprised.

We contacted Sérgio to get the music. There were ten pieces, originally written for clarinet and guitar. We made a choice; I think we performed about half of them. Since then we perform three or four at every concert, because these are lovely little pieces.

KP: And very well written for the guitar and the clarinet.

JB: Harmonically very rich. Thematically very different from any other pieces we play.

KP: I would like to mention some highlights from the very beginning of our existence. The *Histoire du Tango*, by Piazzolla. Now it seems overplayed - everyone plays it - but at the beginning it was helping us a lot. It was actually something new. Even guitarists who knew the piece were surprised that it could be played with the clarinet.

KP: I played it when I was 16. Not with the flute, but with the vibraphone. Then I played it with the flute, the original version. I've played it with a violin, an accordion, and now with a clarinet. Five different versions! Some of them I have recorded.

*Which did you like the best?*

KP: Oh - I would say two versions were my favourites: with clarinet and accordion. Because the accordion can sound very close to the bandoneón, and it can improvise a lot.

*Did Piazzolla have the flute in mind when he wrote it?*

KP: It was a commission -

JB: - from the guitar festival in Liège. It was performed at the same time as the double concerto for bandoneón and guitar. Marc Grauwels, the Belgian flautist, was involved with it. [*It was in*

*fact dedicated to Grauwels - Ed.*] But I'm not so sure if flute was the right instrument...

*It works well on the violin: it sounds more tango.*

KP: Now we have a chance to play Piazzolla's *The Four Seasons*, in Sérgio Assad's arrangement.

JB: We don't have the music yet, but we're waiting for it.

*Do you think that experiment and innovation are more likely to happen on the jazz scene than on the classical scene?*

JB: I'm not sure. Sometimes we ask composers if they have considered writing for something for us, and they say 'Well, it would be something quite

new. But yes, it's interesting'. So no, I don't think it belongs exclusively to the jazz territory. You know, when we started to play, it was certainly the only team like that on the Polish music scene. Now, there are so many duos that play in the music schools and festivals in our country. There's a duo of two teachers at the Academy of Music in Szczecin: they have also recorded a CD and have done some concerts here and there. So many young players

are asking us for music and arrangements. So, it's basically something that, once you start, it works.

*What kind of music do you really like to play?*

KP: Impressionistic pieces, early music, and Latin-American music - and we are always looking for someone who can write something really modern for us, and that is really well written for this combination.

*How often do you meet to rehearse?*

JB: This is our 10th season together, and certainly we've had our ups and downs. This year, 2006, has been very, very good for us. We started with a great tour of Chile and Argentina in January and February. We had some important concerts in Europe. We've done more than in the two previous years. We are motivated with the recording also, to bring some new works that we've wanted to put together for a long time. We've been working pretty hard, and I think 2006 has been quite fruitful.

Our rehearsals are not just leading to concerts, but we bring some music that we want to try, we go through it, we look - and we say 'This is not going to work'. Or 'This is great. We should dig in and do it.'

*Do you both live in Wroclaw?*

JB: Yes we do.

*Jakub, I know that Krzysztof is a great solo player, but what do you do when you're not playing in the duo?*



JB: Well, I teach - clarinet, chamber music and orchestral studies at the Academy of Music in my home town. I'm also becoming more active in the conducting field. I studied conducting in California, at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, and I can say that each season brings some new engagements. This is something that is increasing and developing. So, I conduct, I teach, I form chamber groups. One of them is a trio, with piano and viola. My brother Bartosz is the violist, and the name of the group is Consortium Musicum.

Like Krzysztof, I have formed a duo with an accordionist, Michal Moc, because there is a spectrum of timbre to explore here which is quite unusual. My style of playing with accordion can be a little rougher, a little more edgy, which also makes the clarinet sound different.

The priority is chamber music. I definitely prefer playing chamber music to soloing with orchestras. You know your musical partners, their potential, style, phrasing and sound capacities. You have the feeling of being tied to them with a personal link. It's music making on a completely different level, whereas soloist-conductor-orchestra relations are very often merely 'professional' ones.

When I conduct, very often Krzysztof is the soloist. Our next engagement is in the Czech Republic. We are doing the piece I am conducting from the clarinet. We recorded this work with an excellent chamber orchestra from the Czech Republic, Camerata Moravia. The recording sessions took place in april of 2007.

I think it is very interesting, because first of all no one has done it on the clarinet. We've done it many times, it seems like we solved problems with the tricky transitions and the work now has the right pace and the right balance.

*How do you manage to conduct it from the clarinet?*

JB: That's my secret! When it works it's a real joy and fun to do it. It requires a lot of physical and mental energy, and I like to do it at the opening of the concert - to start the performance with it and have it done. Then the rest comes, and it's perfectly fine. In a way it's risky, because we might fall apart - the orchestra in some points is simply conductorless and can rely only on the concertmaster.

*Do you ever fall apart?*

JB: Not during a performance. But everything is possible. We're all human beings, it's a live concert. In the Double Concerto we've had some orchestras we really struggled with, in terms of making them listen more carefully, trying to make the whole piece a sort of 'bigger chamber music'. The solo parts are relatively simple. When I met Richard Galliano, the great French composer and accordion player, he told me that this concerto was something that Piazzolla left as a draft and both soloists have to add a lot, even to improvise.



PHOTO: LINDA JANKOWSKA

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So we went that way, and now I think the piece is achieving the right shape. We're looking forward to doing it again.

*Do you commission a lot of work?*

JB: There is a big commission coming for the tenth anniversary of Krzysztof's festival. A double concerto for clarinet, guitar and strings, celesta and percussion by Marek Pasieczny.

KP: Most of the music we play is written by our friends. We perform these pieces all the time, all over the world, and they are happy with that. They get the exposure and royalties.

JB: When we asked Marek Pasieczny to write a piece, he was relatively unknown. Now we can say he's famous, because his piece [*Homenaje a Manuel de Falla*] is obligatory in the Edmund Jurkowski Guitar Competition in Tychy. He performed on the opening night of the Tychy Festival two years ago, he's getting commissions from various places.

*He's on the way.*

JB: Absolutely. I mean, we believe in this guy. I said 'Marek, why don't you try to write something for us?' The piece that came out was something we reshaped together. The final version of his *Winter's Tale* is different from the first one, but we love the piece. And his *Motion Picture Score Concerto* from two years ago is absolutely astounding. It's like Richard Strauss multiplied by John Williams [*the film composer*], plus the

guitar. So colourful, alive and sonorically seductive! Marek has recently written a very demanding solo clarinet piece for me, *Tribute to John T. Williams*. Looks like he's trying to push me to the limits!

*How many CDs have you made together?*

JB: Three. The third-impresiones Argentinas - has just come out.

*Other projects?*

JB: We're looking forward to the new double concerto by Marek Pasieczny. From the drafts that he sent us, I know it's going to be a pretty big piece.

KP: Half an hour of music.

JB: It's going to be demanding.

KP: We like playing with orchestra, especially with Jakub as a conductor. He knows how to prepare the orchestra, but he also knows the mysteries of the guitar. As a conductor he's totally different from the others I have experience of, who don't really care about the difference between the guitar and the other solo instruments. This means a different approach in preparing for the recording too.

JB: A good orchestra is half of the success. The Camerata Moravia, from Olomouc, is an excellent small orchestra. Reduta, the concert hall there, is very, very good - warm, but not too 'wet' (resonant). Some people say it has the third best acoustics in the Czech Republic, after Rudolfinum and Smetanova Sin in Prague. So we're rather happy with the recording.

*Wasn't Mahler the director of the opera in Olomouc?*

JB: Yes. For a short time.

*I believe he didn't like it. He had trouble with the singers.*

JB: And he said it was the worst and the most undisciplined orchestra he'd ever conducted. It must have been quite terrible!

*Krzysztof, you have a successful career as a solo guitarist. The last time we talked you were with Jorge Morel, in Krakow.*

KP: Since then I have begun the Wroclaw Festival. This year we will have the tenth edition. It's doing quite well. I would say that it's the second biggest festival in Poland, after Tychy. The idea was to show the various different styles of guitar, not only classical.

Another success is the annual summer workshop in Kzyzowa. It's a beautiful place, perfect for this kind of activity. There have already been seven editions of the workshop. Many famous guitarists have come to it.

JB: A hundred people come to the masterclasses every summer, which is quite exceptional.

KP: I hope a lot of people will come and discover this great place. Another thing I'm proud of is the guitar society founded a few years ago. We have arranged tours for Tommy Emmanuel, the great Australian fingerstyle guitarist. Concerts in Wroclaw are organised every month, promoting young players. Wroclaw has become a very famous guitar city in Poland.

JB: Some people say it's Poland's guitar capital!

KP: The level of teaching is high in Wroclaw. Piotr Zaleski has a class at the Academy of Music, and he has many good students. And I have opened a new class in Bydgoszcz, which is in the centre of Poland. I have five students, very talented.

*So, teaching, organising and playing - both solo and duo - you are obviously very busy. Are all*

*these activities more or less balanced?*

KP: I think there's a good balance. Then there is the work I do with orchestra - the *Concierto de Aranjuez*, for instance. And I'm still trying to make the music of Jorge Morel known to a wider audience, trying to convince conductors that his music is worth hearing. Audiences enjoy it when they hear it.

Tony Acosta in New York has just brought out a new edition of Jorge Morel's work. The recording is very good. Jorge is really happy about it. We met in Germany recently, and played some duets. He's in good shape, and young in spirit. I have been playing his pieces since I was 16. I just love them, and I can't quit.

*Who wants you to quit?*

KP: Some people think there should be four sonatas in the concert, something like that. But nobody plays Jorge Morel's pieces, and I think he's the Barrios of our time. Melodies, rhythms, ideas - people love his music.

JB: And very well written for the guitar also.

KP: Yes, very well written. I think people appreciate that.

### **Discography**

Duo Guitarinet. Music by Brouwer, Kleynjans, Machado, Piazzolla, Pixinguinha, Zenamon. Dux 0163. Duo Guitarinet: 10th Anniversary Album. Music by Assad, Dyens, Castède, Gnattali, Graham, Pasieczny, Piazzolla, Roux, Shroyer, Smutny, Villa-Lobos, Zenamon. JB Records JBR 003-2.

Impresiones Argentinas- JBR 004-2 Jan Jakub Bokun and Krzysztof Pelech with Camerata Moravia Chamber Orchestra. Music by Guastavino, Morel, Dyens and Piazzolla.

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