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WISH YOU WERE HERE

IDA PRESTI 1924-1967

By ELEFThERIA KOTZIA

TWENTY-FIVE years ago, in the Grand Memorial Hospital in Rochester, New York, Ida Presti, great guitarist and musician of genius, faced not an audience but the laws of nature. On April 24th 1967, at the age of 43 and at the height of her career, Ida Presti died from an internal haemorrhage.

She was born on 31 May 1924 in Suresnes, a suburb of Paris, and baptised Yvette Montagnon. Her father, Claude Montagnon, was French; her mother, Olga-Gracia Lo Presti, a Sicilian. M. Montagnon thought that Ida Presti sounded better than Yvette Montagnon, so Yvette later adopted her mother's name. Her father loved music, and himself often played the accordion at Sunday fiestas.

Impressed by a Segovia recital in Paris on 7 April 1924, he returned home and announced to his wife, eight months pregnant, 'Our child will become a great guitarist'. A few weeks later, Yvette was born. M. Montagnon bought himself a guitar and fiddled about with it, in order to be able to introduce it to his child later (incidentally, he had similar ambitions for his second child, a son, but nothing came of it).

For Ida to become a great guitarist became a major ambition of M. Montagnon. When she was six years old, he began to teach her on a full-size instrument, mostly through Segovia's recordings, helping her to develop her natural talent and to learn discipline. The work began after school, when young Ida would have a siesta and then her guitar practice and *solfège*. Her unusual musicality and dedication began to show miraculous results. She played in public for the first time when she was eight, and gave her first full-length concert at the age of ten, on 28 April 1935 at the Salle Chopin-Pleyel, Paris. Already 'special' - a prodigy, in fact - she learned also to be a real professional. One day she was playing 'la marchande' (greengrocer) with a knife, against her father's will. Warnings that this game might be of danger to her hands were not heeded, and the inevitable happened: Ida cut her finger. On the following day the child had to play in a concert. Years later the traces of her disobedience could still be seen, but she could also be heard to say 'I never had a childhood'.

Ida Presti was the only artist younger than twelve years old ever to be invited to play at the concerts of the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire and Les Concerts Padeloup for two consecutive years.

Her circle of admirers grew. She even played in a film of the time, 'La Petite Chose' based on a romance by Alphonse Daudet. On the occasion of the centenary of the death of Paganini, she was the performer who played on the composer's guitar (and also the guitar of Berlioz) during a commemoration in his birthplace.

Presti's graceful talent was conquering everyone; she was a brilliant success. After her debut concert, Bernard Gavoty wrote: 'At ten she has a secure technique... her full sound and the variety of her timbres are of the most beguiling.' (Le Figaro, 10 May 1935). And the reviewer of Aux Écoutes: '...An inborn feeling, an extraordinary sense of rhythm...' (4 May 1935). On 26 January 1938



Ida Presti

L'Époque commented on her 'impeccable style'; and nine days before, on the 17th, A. Dandelot wrote that he had 'marvelled'. And La Presse said: 'Ida Presti is at the moment the youngest, the most astonishing and the most prodigious guitar virtuoso'. Emilio Pujol called her 'a miracle of facility and grace' in 1935; and Segovia himself said, when she was 13, 'I have nothing to teach her ... she should not accept the advice of any other guitarist'.

Her concert programmes between 1935 and 1938 included pieces by Bach, Broqua, Malats, Fortea, Sor, Moreno Torroba, Paganini and Albéniz. Together with the five recordings she made on 78s for Gramophone between 1934 and 1936, it represents a solid and varied repertoire for an international concert guitarist of that epoch. An article titled 'A Wonder Girl Guitarist' appeared in 1938 in 'Rhythm' magazine, where A. P. Sharpe, commenting on the often-discussed possibility that a better guitarist than Segovia existed somewhere in Spain, announced: 'That "better" guitarist is here - and she is a child of only 14 years of age'.

To me, who neither met nor heard Ida Presti live, the above statement does not seem a journalistic or marketing exaggeration, but an obvious remark. To listen to her in the recordings of that period is, simply, a



Summer School, Nice, 1964. Ida Presti 6th from left, Alexandre Lagoya on her left.

unique experience. Never in the history of the guitar has a child of that age (about 13) played various concert pieces (certainly difficult for those days) with such sound, virtuosity and sensitivity. Never.

Although there is some Segovian influence in these early records, there are some other remarkable characteristics too. At last a sense of style, a respect for text and music. And what dignity in Bach! What flame and passion in the Spanish repertoire! These characteristics become stronger in later recordings. I was fortunate in being able to listen to a recording made later, in the early 1950s in Morocco, when as some token of friendship she recorded *Sevilla* by Emilio Pujol. One cannot imagine anything more dark, more Moorish; from the purity and the dignity of her Bach, she has become a real Gypsy, taking our breath away and making our hair stand on end. *Recuerdos de la Alhambra* (Tárrega) is played at an incredible speed, like a study; the middle section of *Asturias* is so free, though not 'romantic' or 'personal'. Bach and Albéniz do not sound alike, but the playing is natural, elastic, much more classical, and in the service of the music. Her *accelerando*, *a tempo*, *rubato*, *ritenuto*, the colouring - all have a musical purpose. Technique and virtuosity are only a means of expression. One forgets the absence of string 'whistle', the superb sonority and the phenomenal technique behind it, since it all serves the music.

What is left belongs to all the human feelings of our being; our subconscious comes to life, and we are overwhelmed. These characteristics are found later, and in a more mature form, in the recordings of the Presti-Lagoya Duo. But an additional role was destined for

the young virtuoso. At 13 years of age Ida Presti was to become 'chef de famille'. Not long after her 1938 concert, her father died from a heart attack, and Ida had to look after a young sister of three and a mother without a profession. It was Ida's guitar that earned the bread and butter for the family. The years of war that followed, and the period after, were full of difficulties. It was a period that Ida Presti did not like to talk about.

In 1943, at the age of 19, she married Henry Rigaud. A year later her daughter Elizabeth was born. In a way it was almost her second child, for, all these years and even when her mother was married for the second time, her sister Gina had lived with her. Ida was now living in the south of France, near Marseille. She never stopped playing, while tending to her little Elizabeth (possibly playing Pujol's *Guajira*, a favourite at the time) and preparing for concerts in the area.

The strict timetable imposed by her father in her childhood no longer applied to her daily routine. Ida had a rather bohemian nature, and liked to play until late at night, sometimes until two or three in the morning, for her friends the gitanos. With or without guitar, she loved to sing for her friends, and had a wonderful voice, a clear and pure coloratura. Much later, after a concert in the Salle Gaveau, Paris (her favourite hall) in the early 1950s, her friends the gitanos insisted on her singing. This was the first and the last time that Presti sang in public, as a true folk singer. It was song and the human voice that she gave, when teaching, as the ideal example for phrasing. She also liked to improvise, at times non-stop. Though she could spend hours improvising, she never put anything down on paper. John Duarte remembers that when Lagoya, in

a Sor study, was playing a *contrechant* he had written specially, she took the guitar and started playing an improvised third guitar part, tempo rapido!

It is only later, thanks to the care and attention of Alexandre Lagoya, that we have been able to talk about Ida Presti the composer. She used to write phrases or bars, leaving them all over the house. Later, maybe the next day, there would be some more products of her imagination. It was because Lagoya was keeping these 'flying' papers that she was later able to put the things together and leave us some spontaneous and lively duo and solo pieces like *La Hongroise*, *Danse d'Avila*, *Espagne*, *L'Etude Fantastique*, *Danse Rythmique*, *Six Etudes*, *Etude du Matin*, etc. She would say modestly: 'I am not a composer, just a guitarist writing for my instrument'.

After the Second World War, a visit to the home of André Verdier, on the Ile St Louis in Paris, was as important to guitar aficionados as visiting the nearby Cathedral of Notre Dame. Verdier's house was the meeting place of Les Amis de la Guitare. Many, having heard the records, went in the hope of meeting Ida Presti herself and hearing her play. It was there that a new admirer went to meet her: Alexandre Lagoya, whom she later married, and with whom she formed the Duo Presti-Lagoya.

Ida Presti was not only a child prodigy possessing at an early age a technique enviable even by today's standards. In her twenties 'The Female Mozart', as some music critics hailed her, never ceased to astonish her audiences with her fabulous playing and her youthful exuberance. She not only gave concerts in big centres but also introduced the guitar to small provincial towns, particularly in France (tours with J.M.F.) She also toured in Italy, Holland, Germany, Morocco, Indonesia and England, not only playing her own transcriptions (Bach, Albéniz, Scarlatti) but introducing composers never, or at least very rarely, heard in the Segovian repertoire: Emilio Pujol, Falla, J. Rousseau, Presti, Corelli, Tessarech, not forgetting her husband Alexandre Lagoya, some of whose pieces she played and recorded in addition to her own. She was the guitarist chosen for the first performance of the Aranjuez Concerto in France, broadcast live on radio. Via the radio programme 'Notes Sur la Guitare', she introduced the guitar to a large following.

Ida Presti was living the life of a brilliant solo virtuoso. However, in her very early thirties, after her marriage with Alexandre Lagoya and the birth of her second child Sylvain, this outstanding player decided to bring to a halt her career as a soloist in order to continue in a duo with Alexandre Lagoya. The sacrifice was made in the service of music. Her work with Lagoya produced the greatest guitar duo in history. They created the foundations for future duos to build on. The Assad brothers have said that initially they based their repertoire on the repertoire of Presti-Lagoya. (As for the existing duos nowadays, the list is too long to be included in this article).

One of the early Duo concerts took place at the music festival of Aix-en-Provence, France, on 24 July 1956. It was a tremendous success, and was broadcast and heard in other places in Western Europe. It was in that year that Ida Presti decided to play exclusively in duo partnership with her husband. They toured the world together. Their duo was still far from being fully developed when she tragically died.

In ten years or so, 14 new and modern concertos were



Ida Presti, daughter and grand-daughter.

presented, not to mention the numerous other new works for two guitars by Rodrigo, Pierre Petit, André Jolivet, Daniel Lesur, Moreno Torroba, Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Tomasi, Duarte, Jouvin, Simonot etc. The Presti-Lagoya Duo conquered the world, introducing new playing techniques and creating a large following of pupils and, of course, fans. The press was unanimous in its praise: 'Remarkable' (Washington Post), 'Dynamic' (New York Times), 'A shock' (San Francisco Chronicle), 'One of the marvels of the world.' (Le Combat, Paris).

When she was young, Ida Presti did not like to teach. But, after teaching in the Schola Cantorum in Paris in the late 1950s and, in 1960 when she began to teach with her husband at the Academie Internationale d'Eté in Nice, she proved herself to be an excellent teacher. It is touching to read her pupils' reactions, their expressions of remembrance, after the unbelievable fact of her death. Even while on tour, Presti would find time to hear her pupils play. Her teaching was, according to one source, imaginative; she knew intuitively what would or would not work. 'Fingering and phrasing were the first aspects of a piece to be considered. She exposed the slightest imperfections and would invent technical exercises spontaneously', says Alice Artzt. 'She conferred nobility and grace upon the most trivial etude', writes Henry Dorigny. Presti was not only admired but greatly loved. Evangelos and Liza say 'the more one knew her, the more one loved and admired her', and continue: 'She was by nature tender and generous, and she always tried to give courage and help others to face difficulties'. Impressed by her, Timothy Walker says: 'With good reason she would suggest

fingerings, interpretation, explaining why. She would accept any convincing way, she was not dictatorial'. She would not attempt to impose her famous 'l'attaque à droite', but would simply explain it, together with other characteristics of her playing (trills, scales with three fingers etc.). For her there was no 'correct' way.

Why was she a great teacher? Aaron Skitri gives one reason: 'Whenever she taught a gifted pupil with a musical personality, she would leave him to do as he liked, only guiding him or her in their own ideas'. Wonderful! And in advance of her time. Presti was not of 'la vieille école'; copying *le maître* did not make her smile. She was happy to assist and to guide.

Ida Presti's unexpected death shocked music lovers and stunned the guitar world more deeply than any other event in the history of the instrument. The soul of the Duo Presti-Lagoya had unexpectedly departed. 'She made me understand that guitar could be music, all music' (Pierre Petit, June 1967). 'Great, pure, marvellous artist' (Daniel Lesur, June 1967). 'Even with the distance of time, Ida Presti is for many of us the greatest guitarist of this century' (Ako Ito, 1984). 'For a very short time, we have been in the presence of a genius, and it is unlikely that we will meet another such during our lifetime' (John Duarte, June 1967). Alexandre Lagoya says: 'Sensitive, emotional, passionate, of extreme profoundness, she was a genius. Never in my existence has a guitar performer moved and impressed me to such an extent. She was the music itself. I believe she was the best guitarist of our century. She was something inexplicable'. Inexplicable as well is the way we have forgotten her. Of course, she was modest and discreet, and did not like the superficial, the mundane. But if she were to come back, for just one minute, would she be happy to see how quickly we have forgotten her? How many young players have not even heard of her?

How little has been written about her or done for her! She gave her life to the guitar. I also believe that she was the greatest guitarist of the century. Of her 43 years, she spent 33 as a professional guitarist. Her compositions, as well as her solo recordings (apart from the Gramophon and RCA solo recordings, there exist hours of music she recorded solely for the radio), should be the property of every music and guitar lover. The memory and the work of an artist can only remain alive through those that are left behind. Must we bury her a second time?

Ida Presti was a phenomenal musician, a legendary virtuoso, a generous, lovable woman, a genius. Is it possible that I am writing a homage to her? Certainly not: I simply want to say: 'I wish you were here'.

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Ida Presti in the film 'La Petite Chose'.