Oscar Ghiglia drawing by Giusti • 1983

A DECADE NEAR the MAESTRO

1958-1968

by Oscar Ghiglia

I come from a family that is both musical and artistic—my mother was a pianist; my father, an artist. Perhaps it was because the harsh black and white keyboard of the piano together with its pomposity seemed to repel me that everyone took it for granted I was to become an artist, like my father. He loved the guitar and often played it while contemplating his work; it seemed to bring him the peace he needed to awaken his artistic perception. The name of Segovia was familiar to me early on, since it was almost always mentioned whenever the guitar was spoken of. However, it took a long time and it was in a very indirect way that his influence was meaningful to me. Unlike many of my colleagues, it did not originate from listening to his concerts or to his records. It came about through a very simple incident which had an unexpected effect on me.

One day I was given the guitar to hold in a pose for a painting which my father had planned. I had to ask him where to put my fingers; it hurt, but I couldn't leave it and walk out. Soon the soreness in my fingertips gave way to a new feeling—it was better than painting, I thought. I liked the magical relationship between the physical sensation of holding the instrument and the sound it produced, and, my first real friends began to appear soon after I began strumming the guitar. I took this to be an excellent omen. My interest was obvious and my father asked a friend of his, a famous songwriter (Alfredo del Pelo), to teach me. The lessons were most unusual: del Pelo told me I was to observe him and "steal" his skill from him. However, when he became convinced that I was really interested (I had even taught myself to write music, in order to capture on paper what I had learned from him), he recommended me to Benedetto Di Ponio, one of his friends who had recently been appointed guitar teacher at the Santa Cecilia Conservatory in Rome. Thus, I began to play what was then called "concert guitar" (at least in the austere halls of the conservatory).

Segovia's name began to be heard more and more often about this time. When he gave a recital, I attended with some of my school friends. (This was the first of a long series of concerts which stand out in my mind individually—each revealing his artistic core to me in the many aspects I love and appreciate more and more.) Afterward, we shook hands with him in the green room. Etta, who spoke Spanish, told him we were aspiring guitarists. "Very well," he answered in a sweet and Olympian voice. Back home, I was convinced that my playing had already improved; I couldn't understand why some of my friends felt so depressed that they refrained from playing after hearing Segovia—everytime I heard him perform, I felt tremendously inspired. As a new student at the conservatory, I began to instigate a sudden interest in the Accademia Chigiana and in an unfamiliar repertoire. My teacher, fearing that he would lose the respect of his pupils and their admiration for his teaching, tried to stifle it, but couldn't. One summer, alone in my class, I decided to go to Siena.

There I discovered ancient walls and winding streets bearing strange names; the splendid shell-shaped Piazza del Campo, surrounded by patrician palaces and dominated by the City Hall and its tower—tall and half a millennium old and the white stone cathedral, on the steps of which I played almost every night with fellow students. The audience was most illustrious, consisting of tourists and Sieneses and, occasionally Segovia himself, who sometimes stopped to listen during his evening walk. Finally, there was the majestic Renaissance Palazzo Chigi-Saracini (the residence of a long dynasty of art-supporting Sienese counts, the last descendant of which had founded the Accademia Chigiana).

The members of the guitar class seemed to be hiding within the meandering corridors, stairs, cross-passageways, and cubicles of the palace in an apparent effort to escape the aggressive cacophony resulting from the sudden rumbling cascades of notes and other wild and ghostly sounds which echoed all over the Academy. On entering the classroom itself, I saw antique chairs arranged against the wall side by side in a single row around the room. Two chairs faced each other in a strategically favorable place; between them, a wooden music stand and two wooden footstools. It

was very warm; an electric ventilator stirred the hot air fairly quietly. Soon, the room was filled with cosmopolitan faces. Although Segovia was not in Siena that summer and his pupil, Alirio Díaz, was teaching, his "presence" and influence in all that happened was very clear to me.

Gustavo López, Rodrigo Riera, Ruggero Chiesa, and Etta Zaccaria were among the more advanced pupils there. They all tried to help me adjust by telling me of their own experiences. In a way, they were trying to give me a survival kit, a password, something I would need to know immediately. Each gave me a different measure of help; I absorbed all this advice eagerly and slowly began to become familiar with the school, my role in it beginning to come into focus. It was not until the following year that I played for Segovia, but by that time I had fully absorbed the advice I had received from my new friends, the gossip I had overheard in the corridors or in the café where we all spent a great deal of our free time, and Alirio's direct words to me and to others he had taught. I realized that the results of my work were modest; however, I was hearing differently and that was what really mattered. I had the feeling that I could attain the level of playing of Rodrigo and the other advanced students. I had been training myself to listen to each and every note I played, and the pitches were now all in my head—together with a concept of tone—"good tone." (In his preface to Sor's *Etudes*, Segovia had written, "Good tone stems from the excellence of one's soul.") I didn't think I had to search that far; I would just listen to the good ones around. The result was that my tone had crystallized into a fat quantity of sound, well-distributed among the notes that made up my repertoire.

Obviously, I had guessed wrong; big tone did not mean good tone. I had just finished playing a slow and stately Renaissance dance and was still shaking from my first experience before the Master, when I looked up and saw Segovia and Díaz speaking very confidentially in Spanish—a language I did not yet understand. The expressions on their faces were those of two doctors sharing their diagnosis over a patient's head. His manner and facial expression told me that Segovia had not cared for my performance. Alirio looked "all ears" and seemed to agree fully with the Master's negative opinion. Then, still facing his assistant, Segovia brought his weightless hands to his guitar and played part of the piece I had just performed. The tone he drew from his instrument was the direct opposite from the one I had searched for during the entire past year. I couldn't decide whether I liked it or hated it. Analyzing it quickly, I noted that although my tone was thick and velvety, it was also dull and seemed to drop like a dead weight to the ground. His, on the other hand, which at first had seemed naily, overly thin, and worse still, dry and "unsweet," was actually clean, clear, articulated, and carried with it the sheen of a precious pearl . . . like that glow which the connoisseur—with eons of experience—recognizes instantly, but the neophyte almost never notices.

It took another year before I could reach out past Segovia's indifference to me. He did notice me before this; he even spoke of me to his other pupils and friends at his table in the café, but only to tell them of a nightmare he had had: "A dark shape moving around . . . full of hair all over . . . was it a spider? . . . a gorilla? . . . No! It was Ghiglia I dreamed of." As was the case some years before with Gustavo,[1] this indirect lesson did have a disciplinary impact on me. I did not get a haircut or trim my beard, but that winter the "dark hairy shape" worked hard—so hard—back in Rome.

I had selected a Bach piece which I had heard Rodrigo play all summer—the *Prelude and Fugue*. (The *Allegro* completing the triptych was not yet available. Segovia had only published the first two pieces of Bach's BWV998.) With the aid of a metronome, I had disciplined myself to study the work so slowly that no two adjacent notes could pass" unsupervised or uncontrolled." I could tell when my study was going forward or backward; when it went forward, I discovered new ideas in the work; when it went backward, I again made the same mistakes that I had made a week or so before. While practicing so slowly (about ♪=74), all the recurring themes in the teachings of Segovia and Díaz were ringing in my head. Once I had gotten myself into that particular temporal and psychological dimension, I rarely repeated a passage; it seemed as if the piece were developing inside me as a foetus inside a mother's womb.

When summer came again, my chapter in Segovia's stories (when he felt like speaking of his students) began running differently. The scary monster of his nightmare was now deleted from his tales; a more human and interesting figure began to appear—"He held his guitar like a lightning rod; he accompanied Bach's *Gavotte* with funny grimaces." He kept repeating these stories and others like them. Later he added a new comment, "One day he played Bach's *Prelude and Fugue*, and that was well done; since then, he has been playing well." I heard him repeat the entire bit some time later, his voice reflecting the deep satisfaction he had derived from his successful teaching during those years. "This work is an important achievement for your musical career," he had said to me that day, after the class had stopped clapping and was waiting silently for his response to my playing. "Do not ever abandon this piece, for what you did in it will lay the foundation for your future technical and interpretive skills." Later, my friends echoed the teacher's approval. After that day, everyone around paid more attention to me: Rodrigo, Gustavo, Membrado, Alirio Díaz, John Williams—all shared in their friendship with me.[2] I, in return, loved, respected them and learned their languages.

One year, Segovia began to divide his teaching between Siena and Santiago de Compostela. Following his courses, there was to be an international competition—The Orense Competition. I decided to prepare for this event in Galicia, near Compostela. I felt quite confident because of my recent success as a student and the increase in my concert activity in Italy.

Santiago de Compostela's setting is quite different from that of Siena, which has a lovely medieval charm. In the midst of the Chianti region, Siena resembles a jewel ornamenting the beauty of a feminine face, a smiling face, familiar to me. The air in its streets and in the dark stairways leading to the boarding houses in which I had lived, summer after summer, had a special ancient and reassuring odor. Its light, the "Siena-colored" hills with their neatly ordered ranks of vines or speckled with the greyish foliage of the rich olive groves, did not look foreign to me. Furthermore,

Santiago de Compostela • drawing by Bobri • 1971

Segovia's words of admiration, the fact that he had regularly returned there—all this, I had always taken for granted. On the other hand, the aspect of Spain was quite different; its fields, its distant pine groves and its desert-like land—punctuated here and there by castles perched on the tops of rocky hills—seemed endlessly extended, as the slow train proceeded onto my destination. During one stop in a small village station, a guitarist beggar approached the window of my compartment. He looked like Picasso's *Blue Guitarist*, straightened up for the occasion—a real Spanish Guitarist—in Spain! The road to Compostela was carved in the skies; what I had vaguely known as the Milky way was "El Camino de Santiago," the road to ancient Santiago, which pilgrims followed to reach that holy center. The cathedral itself, built in the high-pitched years of the Inquisition by the Catholic Kings, exhibited aggressive and angular forms. The cross on top of its bell tower was shaped like a sword; the sound of its bell, a dark omen for believer and non-believer alike.

As I was singing the pilgrim hymn, the "Canto de Ultreia" on Convocation Day, marching slowly with the student body, teachers, and staff of the academy on our way to the Cathedral, I knew that we were all pilgrims of sorts, following our musical stars toward a distant destination unknown to us. Our teachers would show us which stars to follow, we would proceed, and in turn show the way to our own followers. All we would need was our talent and a great deal of work. As Segovia often told us with a touch of mischief, we only need 5% of inspiration for success; however, to get there, we had to work our way through 95% of perspiration.

In our classroom in Santiago, the competition began the very first day. We still had one month before us, yet everyone was already making predictions. It seemed that I was one of the favorites. J. Tomás and J. L. González were the other expected winners; their playing had the sensuous poetry only Spanish players seem to have. J. Williams, who already had an important reputation, would be on the jury. (Incidentally, Williams told me he had noticed a remarkable progress in my playing. Later, after the competitions, he told me that I had the potential to have been the winner.) Segovia worked us quite hard, for he liked to bring us up to his expectations when we played the pieces required for the competition. He was very generous in supporting me; he trusted both my talent and my discipline. When I showed indecision, he would say, "Trust your inner flame!" Then he would give me several examples to follow; he expected me to rise to the heights to which he pointed. I tried; when the idea was a musical one, I often succeeded. Once, however, he raced me through the scales of the Bach *Chaconne*; near the end, he actually sprinted: I tried to keep up with him, but he ripped through the last few notes to the applause of the class. I couldn't free my right hand; it puzzled him; he couldn't find a remedy for that gap in my technique. Many years later, I was able to correct this fault by myself. When I finally succeeded, it seemed to me that it was my mental image of Segovia as he was trying to help me on that occasion that had done it. Some lessons just take more time!

Unfortunately, the long wave that had pulled me up some time before, was now receding, on its way to the trough. I was awarded the smallest prize of the three. I felt emptied. Segovia spoke to me and it was clear that he still had faith in my work. "That's what really counts," I thought. His support had been given to me once before at another painful moment of my life. One year after the class had ended I suddenly became very sick; I had fever which kept rising, abdominal pains and nausea. I visited a doctor, who gave me some pills and told me to drink hot tea if I felt worse. He told me not to worry; I must have eaten too much *chorizo*. Since I knew I had, I was reassured and went to my room. The next day, although I was very weak, I groped my way together with my roommate, P. Paolini, into a taxi which took us to the airport, on the first leg of our journey back to Italy. I felt fine in the air, but the pains reappeared as the plane began to lose altitude in order to land in Madrid. At the terminal, I met other student friends who had arrived on different flights. I felt miserable and Mike and Ray helped me to their hotel. Segovia was informed of my condition and immediately sent his friend, Doctor Rubio. I was told not to eat or drink anything; I needed surgery. The only question was, would I prefer to have it done now, or later after I reached home? "Now," I said. With sirens blowing all the way, I was quickly rushed to the hospital. Many hours later, I returned to a semblance of consciousness. It was very late, but Segovia and Emilita had been waiting for me to be brought out of the recovery room. Segovia sounded happy and joked to cheer me. Later, he said, "You made it, Oscar, but it was good that Dr. Rubio had you operated on here. You wouldn't be alive if you had waited until you had returned to Italy." I had had peritonitis for days, and had been drinking tea! A few days later, I wanted to thank Segovia for having saved my life. My vision was blurred by weakness. I saw Ramírez at my bed; he seemed worried; I must have looked awful. Segovia was also there and he said, "Don't be afraid, my son, the danger is past. Besides, you are not a harpist, you play the guitar and, you know," he added with his index finger pointing to

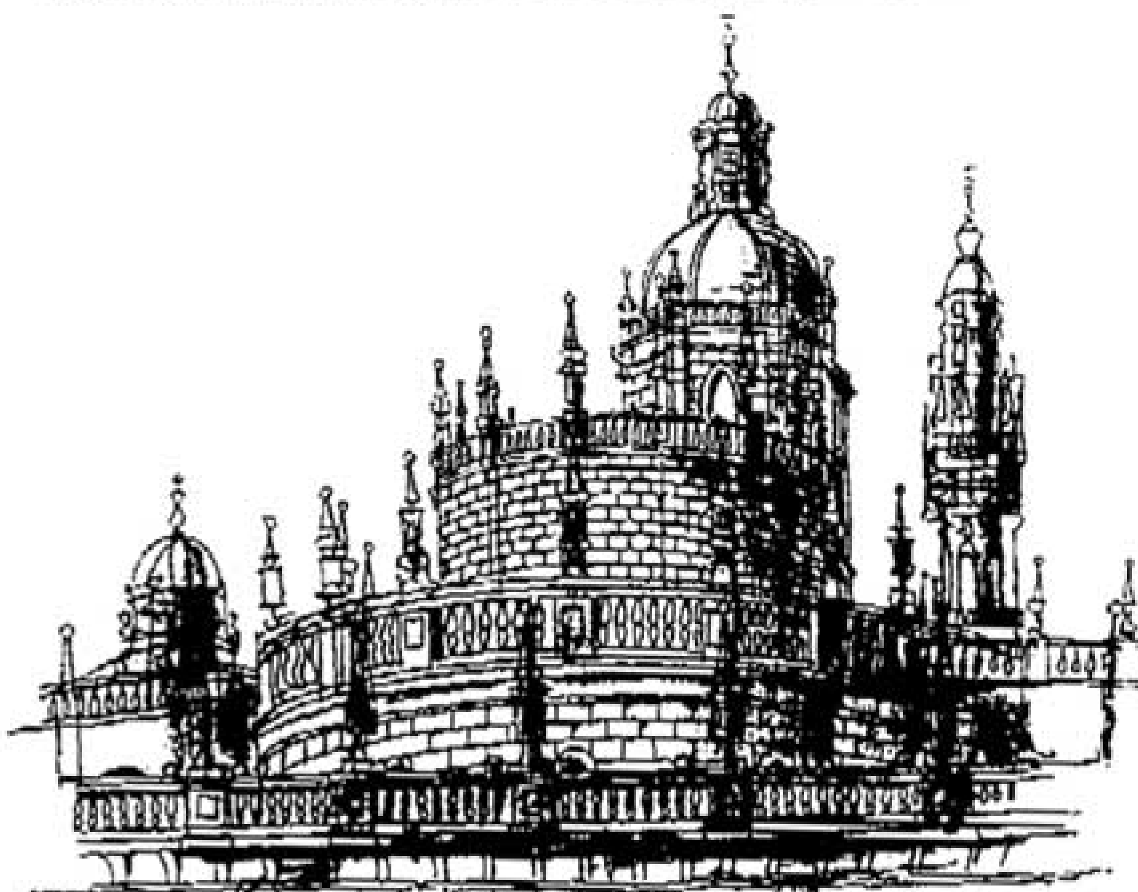
the ceiling, "in heaven, guitarists are not very welcome. Now, if you played the harp, then you should be worrying." I still felt sick, but his unexpected humor[3] had perked up my morale.

Later on, I had better luck: I entered two competitions—one in Santiago, the other in Paris—and won both. Besides Segovia, the jury in Santiago included Alicia de la Rocha and Raphael Puyana. The prize was a Ramirez guitar; it was my first really good guitar. Aldo Minella, another Italian, had also played very well in the competition and Segovia, in an excess of generosity, had offered to raise enough money in order to award a guitar to him also. To celebrate, we were given an exceptional meal in the Comedor Real (Royal Dining Hall) of the Hostal de los Reyes. At the end, Segovia revealed that Puyana had shared the cost of the second guitar--Puyana of the good heart—a heart that was as Segovia said, "bigger than the great harpsichordist himself." To me he said, "And I entrust you with this instrument, hoping it will accompany you for many long years." It seemed to me that there was a threatening sound to his words. Later, I learned that an important woman in the Santiago establishment had "whispered" to him that I might sell it. Perhaps this was the reason; perhaps there was another. I do know that I was usually late for lunch in the refectory and this lady had harshly berated me one day when I entered as the second course was being served. I told her that I didn't like the soup; apparently, this angered her. At any rate, she was wrong; I still have that guitar.

After I had won the Paris "Concours d'Interpretation," I moved to that wonderful city. Segovia would appear on my horizon when I saw his name on the *affiches* posted in the most important subway stations (Louvre, Etoile, Opéra) or on the big standing cylinders on the Champs Elysées. As I made my way to my seat in the Salle Pleyel, I wondered if my appreciation of his playing would be affected by the fact that I had now become a "Parisian." I must say, that the foundation of my artistic faith had been violently shaken by Paris. Although I had bravely fought against it, in the end I had to get rid of a great deal of artistic ballast that had been hampering my growth. This was about the time when Segovia's style had become controversial. (Today, his stature defies all disputes.) If I looked one way, I found his supporters; if I looked in another direction, there were his detractors. It was difficult to defend him, yet I could never join his enemies. When I argued in his favor, I realized that I was motivated by my emotion; perhaps these emotions were so deeply rooted within me, that I could not extricate myself from them and place them in perspective. I accepted this phase as a necessary step in the life of a pupil. I knew that I would later learn to appreciate my teacher's art in a more detached and unemotional way. Also, I felt that what I had always cared for in music had met with his approval. If I denied him, was I not denying myself? In Paris, I learned that I could resist only those attacks which were against the real values in music, those which are abundant in Segovia's playing. I could do that by being myself, strongly myself. In the end, nobody could or would stand by me; I had to find my own core, that part of myself which could alone provide inextinguishable inspiration, faith, and wisdom. After all, I was only following Segovia's first "commandment" to himself—the one with which he begins all recollections of his life. "Be your own teacher and your own pupil."

The period which followed was the last phase in my long apprenticeship under Segovia's influence. My travels had taken me around the world; I was married; I was a recording artist; my name had already been ranked with the five top guitarists of the world. Segovia's prophecy, that I would become "a celebrated star in the artistic firmament," was slowly but inexorably being fulfilled. One afternoon I played in Baltimore and drove with Anne-Marie down a snowy road to Washington to hear Segovia play in Constitution Hall that same evening. I was curious, because I felt certain that his sound would be lost in that tremendously large and almost cubic hall. I listened when he checked his "A" with the oboe before playing two concerti; his tone came across surprisingly clear and full. It was not until the encores were played that I realized he had been amplified. In these solo pieces the sounds overlapped and echoed in a strange way; even the worst built hall (acoustically speaking) could not cause such distortion. However, in the concerti, the effect was delightful. Not for a moment was his guitar drowned out, even in the tutti; the dialogue between solo and orchestra was excellent. Knowing full well how he felt about amplifying the guitar—"Have you ever heard of an amplified singer?"—I realized that he had been surreptitiously "miked" by a "smart" stage hand. (Incidentally, that concert was the second of two consecutive performances which Segovia gave at that hall.) I went backstage, and while waiting my turn to greet him and congratulate him, I noticed my friend, Regis Ferruzza. A copy of Washington's most important newspaper was sticking out of his overcoat pocket; the headline was plainly visible, SEGOVIA AMPLIFIES GUITAR! I thought, just wait until he sees it!

When I spoke to him, he had already learned what had happened. Speaking forcefully he said, "I'll never play in this hall again." Then he changed the subject and told us he would once again be teaching in Santiago the coming summer; this was after a long period during which he had only taught short classes. He would be there an entire month this time, after which there would be another international



"Chorale in Stone" drawing by Bobri • Compostela 1972

competition in Orense. I told him that I would definitely attend his classes, although I felt I was too old to enter a competition. "Nonsense," he said, "you must go. I have already spoken to Lorimer, Parkening, Fierens . . . everybody is going; besides, you can win. The prize is high—if you win, you will have great satisfaction; if you lose, nobody will know." "Of course, I will go," I answered. Needless to say, I began to learn the required pieces immediately. However, my playing was in a variable state; I had been experimenting with sound and rhythm and was following a scent which took me on a kind of wild goose chase, in and around my musical perception. I had been studying some atonal repertoire and my judgment was no longer sure on some stylistic precepts, which had formerly been clear. I was not ready to let this be known, especially since it would most surely upset Segovia. In addition, it was not the best time for me to compete, since judges tend to fret at anything which is a bit eccentric.

Soon summer came, and we all converged once again—many of us for the last time—on that severe city which had been the scene of our earlier efforts. We had matured and our interrelationships were now different. Some, who were formerly my students, were now my competitors; their attitudes were more self-assertive. Groups formed around one or another figure in the new firmament. I suffered from this alienation and tried to break down as many barriers as I could. Segovia had an easy time with our egos. However, once he walked into the chapel where our classes were held, everything fell back into place, exactly as it had been years before. Our personal successes in front of our teacher would hardly ruffle any of our competitors' feathers. It was later, that everything would count. We were calmly assessing everyone's assets and trying to emphasize in our practice those of our strong points which would counterbalance those of others. Soon we reached a kind of unofficial ranking, in which each of us fitted comfortably. We awaited the moment of truth quietly.

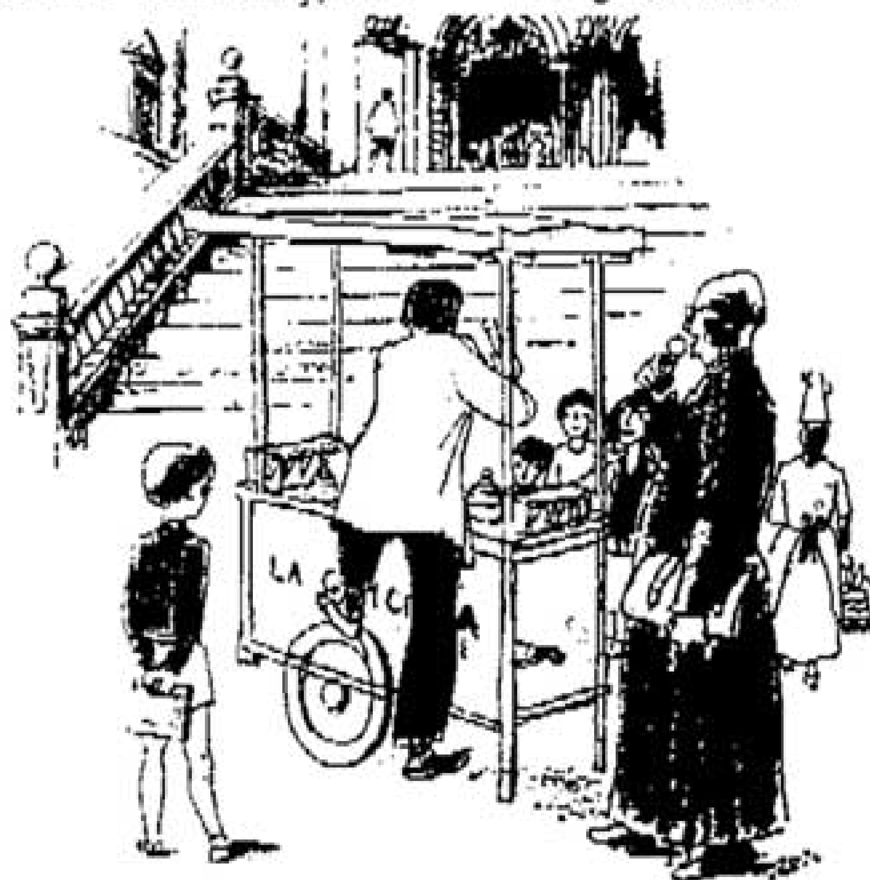
The competition itself was an anti-climax. I will not dwell on it, except to say that those who had organized it seemed to have mismanaged it in such a way that it ended up with no winner, only losers. No one who was there returned home happy. Yet, in retrospect, it did accomplish a great deal. It forced us to re-examine ourselves—our ability, our progress, our position. For some, the time had come to fly on our own—make our own way in our own special direction. For me, I realized that I had been revolving in Segovia's orbit a full decade, continuously influenced by his criticism, approval, counsel, and guidance. This had tempered and developed my self confidence and had brought forth that talent, that inner flame which was latent within me and which he had rediscovered and nurtured into life. I realized also, that he had taught me that I no longer had to walk in his identical footsteps in order to follow his example; he showed me the way to free myself and find my own path. There is no greater gift than this that a teacher can give to his pupil.

FOOTNOTES

1 Gustavo López, then a student in Siena, had had rough treatment from Segovia during a lesson. "Your thumb has a terrible tone. I can't stand it any more! Do something about it! If necessary, cut it off, perhaps a better one will grow!" That afternoon, Gustavo was sitting at Fontegay drinking Camparis, until the table could hold no more glasses. A friend sat down beside him. "¿Qué pasa, Manito?" "I'm waiting for the tower to open at three. Then I will climb up and throw myself down from the top." His voice was emotionless, his mind seemed made up. "But why?" asked the friend. "Because of my bad thumb . . . ," and he continued drinking and watching the clock at the top of the 300-foot tower. Segovia, warned of Gustavo's state, quickly walked to the Piazza and stopped Gustavo as he was leaving the café. "Wait, Gustavo, don't do it; don't cut that thumb off; perhaps a new one would be even worse."

2 Even the walls of the Academy were not indifferent to my confirmation. Many years later, they greeted me as the returning teacher to continue the work Segovia had carried out there.

3 I will never forget the time when Segovia had received an honorary degree from the University of Santiago and was being taken to the country for a private party in his honor. He was still wearing the official turquoise silk toga with the matching turban he had worn in the ceremony. As he rode with his friends in the slow limousines along the bumpy country roads, a group of peasants stopped working in the fields and came to the edge of the road to watch the black motorcade go by. When the peasants saw Segovia—all wrapped up in his shiny silk robe, his turban still on—they dropped to their knees, joining their hands in prayer. They thought he was some sort of a high-ranking clergyman. Segovia rolled down his window, and as his car slowly passed the peasants, he made the sign of the cross with his thick fingers, sending the contrite men his benediction with a delighted smile. ■



at the Cathedral entrance • sketch by Bobri • Compostela 1977