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Julian Bream: Spellbinding Talent, Inquisitive Taste

The classical guitarist, who died Friday, broadened the musical horizons of his instrument through his sensitive playing and wide-ranging repertoire.

Terry Teachout

Aug. 14, 2020 4:59 pm ET



Julian Bream with an acoustic guitar

PHOTO: DAVID REDFERN/REDFERNS

It's a safe bet that Julian Bream, who died on Friday at 87, would be remembered if he'd never done anything but play guitar. After Andrés Segovia, he was the best-known classical guitarist of the 20th century, a player of limitless sensitivity who could hold an audience spellbound simply by plucking a few quiet notes on his unamplified instrument—but who also tossed off more technically demanding pieces with the panache of an old-time barnstorming virtuoso.

Yet Mr. Bream did much more than merely play guitar. He doubled on the lute, the guitar's ancestor, and was responsible in large part for the postwar revival of interest in that long-forgotten instrument. He led his own ensemble, the Julian Bream Consort, one of the first period-instrument groups, and appeared frequently in recital with the tenor Peter Pears, a professional relationship that was immensely valuable to him. "I learnt a lot from Peter about phrasing like a singer, which is what we all try to do on instruments," he told an interviewer in 2007.

Most important of all, Mr. Bream commissioned and gave the premieres of solo pieces and concertos for guitar by many of the leading composers of his time, among them Malcolm Arnold, Lennox Berkeley, Hans Werner Henze, Toru Takemitsu, Michael Tippett and William Walton. Unlike Segovia, who disliked all but the most conservative 20th-century music, Mr. Bream did more than anyone else to modernize his instrument's dusty repertoire. Above all, he persuaded Benjamin Britten, Pears' partner, to try his hand at writing for the guitar, and the result was the 18-minute-long "Nocturnal After John Dowland" (1963), the first large-scale masterpiece for solo guitar and a piece that Mr. Bream performed so superlatively well that his first recording of it, made in 1966, remains to this day the benchmark for all other guitarists.

At the same time, Mr. Bream was no less impressive an interpreter of Bach, Dowland and the Spanish classics that Segovia favored, and the fare he offered at his recitals ranged widely, at once delighting and challenging those who came to hear him. Moreover, he recorded nearly all of his repertoire for RCA and performed frequently on TV, making it possible for those who came along after he retired in 2002 to appreciate his artistry.

Mr. Bream was a bluff, down-to-earth man with a quick wit and a bottomless reserve of anecdotes about his bumpy life as an itinerant musician. He came across in conversation not as a Great Artist but as a regular guy, and it was no surprise to learn that he was a jazz buff (he named his dog "Django" after Django Reinhardt, the great gypsy jazz guitarist). It

was the instrument itself, not any one kind of music, with which he initially became obsessed. “I just knew I had to play the guitar,” he told an interviewer for Gramophone, the British music magazine, in 2013. “I found I could speak through the guitar. Because you have the feel of the strings with both hands and it’s up against your solar plexus, it’s real, and so there’s nothing between you and the music.”

Mr. Bream performed often in the U.S., and I had the good fortune to hear one of his last New York recitals back in the ’90s. By then his technique was in audible decline, the result of a 1984 auto accident that smashed the bones in his right elbow, but he still had the power to hypnotize his listeners with nuances so subtle that you held your breath as you listened. The audience, as always when he performed in New York, was full of other guitarists, and I happened to be sitting next to the jazz guitarist Gene Bertoncini, who was agog from start to finish. When Mr. Bream finished playing Albéniz’s haunting “Granada,” one of his signature pieces, Mr. Bertoncini looked at me and whispered, “Exquisite!”

Julian Bream’s epitaph will not be hard to write: He ranks alongside Jascha Heifetz and Vladimir Horowitz as the classical musician who more than any other defined the musical horizons for his instrument, and his name will always be recalled with warmth whenever a younger guitarist has occasion to perform one of the pieces that he commissioned. There can be no finer monument.

—*Mr. Teachout, the Journal’s drama critic, is the author of “Satchmo at the Waldorf.”*
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