

An Interview with Josu Gallastegui

When did you first discover that you loved music?

Well, my father introduced me to music at a very early age – about age 3. I was not enamored at first, but around the age of 10, I recall enjoying playing the church organ for the religious services in our town. I had the advantage of having a natural facility for learning music, but coming to love it was a slower process.

Why did you study the piano? Were you ever interesting in playing other musical instruments?

I began with the piano simply because it was really the only instrument available in my little town in Spain, but it was at the organ that I really learned to love playing music.

Can you discuss your childhood and the importance of music in it?

I was lucky that I was exposed to good music in my childhood. My father played and taught the "Txistu" which is a typical Basque instrument similar to the bagpipe. My father was also an organist, so I often heard the folk music of the Basques, along with religious music at church. But classical music was, first and foremost, my father's favorite. Being introduced to these various musical styles helped me broaden my horizons and my understanding of different kinds of music. This has been an enormous advantage me in my career as a ballet pianist.

I was also fortunate to have a wonderful piano teacher -- Harriet Serr -- who trained me with an iron hand. She believed in me more than anyone else. That training was the key of my success. She gave me a lot of confidence, along with a very solid technique which enabled me to conquer all types of musical difficulties.

What have been the highlights of your career – the best moments for you personally? There are too many wonderful moments to describe in a few lines. Playing a pipe organ is certainly among the top. For example, I have performed at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, and playing the organ there is still one of the most memorable and gratifying moments. Also performing as a soloist with an orchestra is wonderful. Playing for ballet class can also give me great moments too. In fact, sometimes when I am playing in class, when the teacher and the students are truly enjoying and responding to the music, I feel like I am performing a small concert.

What led you to become a ballet pianist?

Just a simple accident of fate — like many other pianists in this profession. One day, just after I received my diploma from the conservatory, my piano teacher told me that a ballet school needed a pianist. I rushed to that studio mainly because I was short of money, but also because I wanted to experiment with different aspects of music. I had never seen a ballet class before, but I didn't care, I just wanted that job. I survived the first day since I am good at reading music at first sight and have no technical problems. It was a challenge for me musically, but I also found it fascinating. Since that time, I have been able to divide my time between concerts, recording, composing, and playing for ballet class.

Have you received any special training to become a ballet accompanist? Are there courses that teach accompaniment for ballet class?

No, I never received any formal training to play for ballet class. You are basically on your own in this field. There are seminars that pianists can take that cover how to play for ballet class, but I don't believe in them. If you don't love playing for dancers, if you don't love ballet, if you don't take joy in bringing beautiful music into the class, there's very little a seminar can do for you.

What do you think makes your playing unique? What do you bring to the piano to make your playing different from others?

Well, it's hard to say; perhaps it's a combination of different factors. First of all, you have to love what you do. Very few pianists in this field actually enjoy playing for ballet class. Secondly, one must have the taste and judgment to choose a good repertoire -- one that you feel and enjoy playing. And once you find your music, you must play with soul and passion -- lots of passion. Naturally, you have to have the technique to be able you to perform whatever you want. If you do this, I'll bet that, after class, teachers and students alike will come up to you to tell you how beautiful your music was.

You have performed extensively. How is performing different from playing for ballet class?

What you bring to a performance is not all that different from what you bring to the class room. For me, ballet class is like a performance, but with less pressure. I always play the best I can, whether it's for ballet class or a major performance. Naturally, a performance is more stringent — you have a set program that you have to play. In ballet class, you have freedom to go "with the flow" Unless the teacher requires specific music, you are pretty much on your own to do what you want

You've played for company classes and classes for aspiring dancers and amateurs. How is playing for a company class different? Do you like playing for company rehearsals?

There is not much difference between regular ballet classes and company classes — only that you are sometimes motivated to play more complex, demanding musical pieces in company class because you have exceptionally gifted dancers who are wonderful to watch. As for rehearsals, I have to tell you that there is nothing creative whatsoever in playing rehearsals. Repeating the same musical sequence over and over can be quite boring. Naturally, it's worth it if you are going to perform with the dancers on stage, but otherwise

When do you feel you most creative? Composing? Recording? Practicing? In class?

Definitely I am the most creative when I am happy and sitting at a piano.....it could be in my home, in a dance studio or wherever I find a piano. And when am I not creative? When I'm in a ballet studio looking at non-expressive faces at the barre, students who never smile or acknowledge my music no matter what I play. I have certain pieces in my repertoire that are very good to test on them. Most of the time, you will see some begin to smile as they begin to respond to the beauty of the music with their movements. Some still have blank faces. I have to forget them, because their dancing will be just as empty as they are.

Do you think that teachers and dancers appreciate your music?

Oh yes! All the time, dancers and teachers come to the piano to tell me how much they enjoy my music. This feedback always makes me want to do better for the next class.

Do teachers ever give you a hard time in class?

If you play enough ballet classes -- and I have played for hundreds of teachers on three continents -- you'll eventually run into someone who seems bound and determined to give the pianist a hard time, but it doesn't happen to me often. Once in a while, I encounter teachers who seem to feel overwhelmed by the music -- perhaps they are insecure or lack musical knowledge themselves. But generally with a nice attitude on your part, these things don't become a problem.

Can you explain the inspiration behind your recordings?

I have chosen all the music that I have recorded on my CDs very carefully. Nothing is left for improvisation. I can improvise in class, but never in a recording studio. Beauty is my first concern. A piece might have the right accent for certain exercises, but if I don't find it beautiful, I'll never record it. The music also has to be "square" -- that is, it has to have the right number of measures for the exercise -- and it can't be too complicated for students to count. But as I have said before, beauty is my foremost concern. Maybe this is why people respond to my recordings the way they do.