

An American Classical Mandolinist in Germany: Interview with Chris Acquavella

By Robert Margo

Born in New Jersey, Chris Acquavella received his music degree from Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance in London, England, where he studied with the late Alison Stephens and participated in master class with Caterina Lichtenberg. At Trinity Acquavella was the recipient of several prizes, including the Wolfsan Foundation Award and the TCM Trust Silver Medal for String Studies. After completing his degree Acquavella moved back to the United States where he settled in San Diego, California. He quickly established himself as one of the leading classical mandolinists in the United States, with numerous solo, chamber music, and orchestral performances, and frequent appearances at workshops and conventions such as the Classical Mandolin Society of America, David Grisman's and Mike Marshall's Mandolin Symposium, and the San Diego Classical Mandolin Camp. Acquavella has released three recordings to date: "Letters from London," an EP of recordings from his days as a student in London; a solo CD, "Praeludium"; and "In Other Words" with his long-time Duo LaRe partner Nate Jarrell and other musicians. He is a member of the Ger Mandolin Orchestra, directed by Mike Marshall. Acquavella recently moved to Germany making this a good time to introduce him more widely to the German mandolin community. For further information about Acquavella and his musical activities, see his website <http://chrisacquavella.com/>.

Let's start with your background. Where did you grow up? When did you first begin to play music?

I was born and raised in Jersey City, New Jersey. I started to play guitar when I was 10 years old. At that time I learned that my father, who passed away before I was born, played guitar professionally. I decided at that moment that I, too, wanted to be a musician. It was my way of having my father be a part of my life, even though I never met him. I haven't looked back since.

You were a rock musician before becoming a classical musician. Does that experience shape your classical performances today?

After I graduated High School, I played in a hardcore punk band called Born Blind around 1997. Shortly thereafter we signed two record deals and toured all over North America. Born Blind played together for five years and after the group split, we took off in different musical directions. I have also played in Rockabilly, Funk and Jazz bands in my younger years. It was a great outlet for writing music and making true friends. My rock and roll background still plays a big role in my life as a classical musician. I tend to be attracted to repertoire that "rocks out" and is high energy, no matter the musical period. A lot of my personal compositions have some kind of popular music element to them. My solo mandolin composition, "Imardin," has a very driving 'heavy' section in the middle, which was completely inspired by my time playing on Born Blind. It's nice having the ability to bring various styles into the classical structure and a way of personalizing new music for my instrument.

When did the mandolin come into the picture? Was it classical from the very beginning?

I came to the mandolin, like most Americans, through bluegrass and Irish music. I was playing guitar on an Irish band called "Clarsah". There was a time when we needed another melodic instrument in the group. I always had a dream of being a classical violinist. So I tried my hand at the violin. After a week of making horrible noises, my partner at the time told me to get rid of that instrument or she was going to leave me. One of my neighbors played a Kentucky Colonels LP for me. I loved the drive of Roland White on the mandolin, which piqued my interest in the instrument. However, when I heard the David Grisman "Quintet" album -- that was the end of the story, I was hooked! I knew I wanted to learn the mandolin seriously. I played mandolin in "Clarsah", little by little, until the instrument completely took over my life. As much fun as it was playing traditional music, I really wanted to pursue the mandolin classically. The depth of classical structure really appeals to my desire to tell a complete story of each piece. My partner, at the time, was accepted into Cambridge University to get her doctoral degree, so I had to make my way to England anyway. I decided that I wanted to go back to college to finish my music degree. I typed into Google "Classical + Mandolin + England" -- and Alison Stephens' website appeared. I read in her biography that she was a professor at Trinity College of Music, London. I thought to myself 'why not; I can do that' and promptly made an audition video. The next thing I knew I was off to England to attend Trinity College of Music, London, now called Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance. It's one of the top ranked conservatories in Europe, an amazingly inspirational place to study. The college is in the beautiful Wren-designed heritage site of King Charles Court, right in the heart of Greenwich, England. However the inside is very modern with excellent acoustics. Such a great blend of period structure meets modern acoustic design. While at Trinity I was able to not only study the mandolin, but also Alexander Technique, Kodaly, website design, music (financial) management and recording arts, and a slew of contextual study and musicianship courses. The staff at TCM created a wonderful program, providing me with all the tools needed for this profession. They have a fantastic Early Music program as well. I highly recommend checking out Trinity Laban for any musician looking to study in Europe.

How would you describe Stephens' approach to teaching?

There is no doubt I would not be where I am today without her guidance, inspiration, mentorship, gentle prodding and sometimes outright bullying. We had many interesting student/teacher experiences; sometimes resulting in one of us walking out the room. But that is how I knew she cared about me. Alison refused to give up on me when sometimes I gave up on myself. I'm truly grateful that she gave me freedom to find myself as an artist. Alison's approach to learning the mandolin was refreshing and open minded. She always dedicated herself to helping me reach my full potential. Her approach was to learn technique but don't let the mechanism get in the way of musicality. Always learn to shape your tone and make the phrasing sing as if it was from a human voice. Alison would tell me that the audience should always be able to walk away from the concert humming the melodies I just performed. If all they say is "Wow, he can play fast", then I clearly didn't do my job. She played one of the most important roles in my life. I'll always cherish Alison because, quite simply, she believed in me and shared her life with me. Sometimes that is the best, and most inspirational, gesture a teacher can do.

Another formative musical experience was your participation in the 2003 European Guitar Mandolin Youth Orchestra in Patras, Greece.

It was such an eye opening experience. I was in my first year at Trinity when I was chosen to represent Great Britain in EGMYO. My views of the classical mandolin at that time were very young, American and uninformed. Being there and meeting all these fantastic players from all over Europe exposed me to a much larger and serious classical mandolin world than I was previously aware of. It was so great to work on professional and challenging original repertoire for mandolin orchestra. Because of the 2003 EGMYO, I returned to England with a strong drive and clear vision of how I needed to dedicate myself to the art of the classical mandolin. That experience helped me shape the remaining 4 years of my studies.

Stephens performed on an original eighteenth century Neapolitan mandolin and also on a modern copy. Did your interest in historical mandolin performance begin with her or did that come later?

My interest in historical performance started while I was at Trinity College of Music. It didn't become a passion until later. As part of the BMus course, a mandolinist has to study and do assessments in all periods of music. One of my years was completely dedicated to eighteenth century repertoire and methods. Alison had me work through all the methods of the period, perform sonata after sonata and look at most of the solo repertoire as well. The 18th century is so important for building and understanding classical mandolin technique. I find it interesting when people call themselves a 'classical mandolinist' but have never studied the methods/music of Gabriele Leone, Pietro Denis or Giovanni Battista Gervasio (and the list goes on). This is the genesis of classical mandolin technique. It would be like a lutenist never studying Weiss or Dowland, a violinist never playing Bach or Telemann or a guitarist never studying Giuliani, Carulli or Carcassi. I am extremely grateful that I was not given a choice as to whether or not I would study Early Music. At that time, I was very much into contemporary music and probably would not have studied Early Music on my own. However, the more Alison encouraged me to study eighteenth century repertoire, the more I appreciated it and understood how it influenced future techniques. Now I am in love with Early Music, the repertoire, the technique and the instruments. Sometimes, when I play my baroque mandolino (soprano lute), I wonder why we ever modernized the instrument. The baroque mandolin sustains well and has a warm, luscious tone – it's all very exciting and fantastic.

You are a composer as well as a performer, with several works already published by Trekel and more on the way. Give us an overview of your compositional activity and your approach to writing for the mandolin. Who are your major influences as a composer?

I have been quite busy lately composing works for various artists, ensembles and for publishing. I am so happy people like my work and want to perform my music. My most popular piece at the moment is "Imardin for Solo Mandolin", which is published by Trekel. Also available on Trekel is "Music on Route", which is a combination of two of my compositions for mandolin and guitar called "Departure" and "Freedom to Travel". My next compositions available from Trekel in June 2014 are "Journey to Pazardjik" for solo baroque mandolino and "Yutuma" for mandolin orchestra. I am especially excited about these latest compositions. There are no contemporary pieces for baroque mandolino that I know of. "Journey to Pazardjik" uses the historic tones of the baroque instrument combined with modern harmony and a contemporary edginess. Some people might ask why write new music for a baroque

instrument -- however, I ask why not. The baroque mandolino has such a soft, sustaining voice and a color of its own. I hope more mandolinists will try to take the baroque mandolino in new directions.

My main compositional influences are Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Max Richter, Gabriel Prokofiev, Bela Bartok, Eastern European folk music, as well as popular rock music like Rush, King Crimson and Led Zeppelin. A lot of my compositions have elements of minimalism, as well as finding the energy and aggression that defines rock n roll. I feel that I am attracted to repetition as structure because of my background in rock music. It is like getting into a really cool riff and letting the melody soar above the groove.

For some time you have been performing on instruments made by Brian N. Dean, a Canadian luthier. Tell us about Brian, his background and philosophy of making instruments, and the instruments he has made for you.

I perform using three instruments by Brian Dean -- a modern mandolin (German model), a baroque mandolino (6-course) and a Vinaccia model (eighteenth century Neapolitan). What originally attracted me to Brian is his willingness to look outside the box but still respect tradition. His work is very original, unique and earthy, soulfully organic and powerful in tone and volume. His philosophy is simple -- "don't complicate it". Each instrument he builds is very elegant and has a unique voice. Even though I play a "German" model, my instrument doesn't sound like a Seiffert, Knorr or Woll. It has a voice of its own. Brian is a real down-to-earth, humble craftsman and artist -- someone I am proud to call a true friend.

You have recently moved to Germany. Tell us about the circumstances that prompted the move.

I moved to Germany in early January of 2014, due to my upcoming marriage to musicologist and mandolinist, Dr. Stefanie Rauch. For the last year we have been living together in Germany and in San Diego. A couple of months here and a couple of months there was getting old and we decided that we didn't want to spend any more time apart. Steffi has a great job at the conservatory and I am the freelance musician. It was pretty clear to me who had to move.

How are you adjusting to your new life in Germany? I imagine you miss the San Diego weather, Mexican food, margaritas, and so on -- but surely there are compensations like great German beer, wonderful museums, classical music and culture in general? And it must be exciting to making your way into the German classical mandolin world, which is much more extensive than in the States.

Germany is very interesting in many ways. I definitely miss the San Diego weather, Mexican food and driving on the California coast in my car with the sunroof open. However, German beer and Bratwurst has indeed helped me get comfortable here in North Rhine Westfalia. I know a lot of people here and look forward to new working relationships. It is very exciting to introduce myself to the plucked string and Early Music community here in Germany. I have had several concerts already and the audiences have been wonderful. They are really enjoying what I am presenting.

You've started a new duo with Stefanie Rauch, who is very well known the German mandolin community. (Having heard the two of you perform last fall in Canada, it's a great musical partnership

– fantastic musicianship and sound). Tell us about your short and long-range plans for the duo – performances, repertoire, and recordings.

I couldn't be more thrilled about my duo with Stefanie Rauch. This duo has been presenting a wide range of repertoire for the last year. The duo started because I composed a piece of music for us, while we were dating, called "Wishes". From there we've been performing more of my original compositions, our arrangements of Erik Satie's music, Zambrano, Calace, Gervasio and others. Steffi and I recently commissioned a new work for two mandolins by Jose Antonio Zambrano, which we will premiere at the Euro Festival in Bruchsal. In regards to recording, several ideas have been talked about. Recently, funding was secured to make one project happen. We are recording our debut album in July, along with the Bach Collegium San Diego. Duo Acquavella and Rauch will be recording the works of the Gimo Collection. This will coincide with Steffi's edition of the Gimo Collection available from Trekel. We will record in San Diego at the end of July; right after the San Diego Classical Mandolin Camp. I am really looking forward to working with members of the Bach Collegium again. It is always fun creating music with them.

You built an active and varied musical life for yourself in San Diego. Do you see your career in Germany unfolding in a similar way?

I look forward to combining my American career with a new flourishing career in Europe. The last ten years in North America have been amazing for me. I have been so blessed to work with wonderful students, conduct a dedicated mandolin orchestra, as well as work with some amazing Symphony orchestras and chamber groups. Of course, I will continue to work in North America with various chamber groups, as a soloist and in concert with Duo LaRe. My move to Germany now marks a new chapter in my life. I am looking forward to sharing my music in front of new audiences; performing all across Europe with Duo Acquavella and Rauch. I am also really excited to start performing again with my former duo partner from Trinity Laban Conservatory of Music and Dance, Zura Dzagnidze, who lives in Stuttgart. We are going to be recording videos of our compositions published on Trekel; followed by many concerts. Zura Dzagnidze is such a tremendously talented guitarist & composer that it is always a special occasion performing with him on stage and composing new music for mandolin and guitar. This duo thrives on creativity and excitement. One of my biggest goals for the next year is to find a mandolin orchestra that is looking for a new director. Possibly even create a new mandolin orchestra here in Detmold. I have enjoyed being the artistic director of the New Expression Mandolin Orchestra for the last three years. I am hoping to find a mandolin orchestra here in Germany that I can share my musical vision with and create fun and interesting music.

Your many fans in North America, of course, hope that you will visit us from time to time. I know that you will be back in the summer of 2014 for your San Diego Classical Mandolin Camp. Do you plan to keep this going in future years?

Absolutely! Gary Payne and I have created something very special. It is a place where people can learn about the classical mandolin's technique, history and repertoire in the beautiful setting of San Diego, California. It is a place of employment for thriving classical mandolinists from Europe and North America

where they can share their knowledge and art. We will keep the San Diego Classical Mandolin Camp going as long as there are people interested in learning and creating music with us.

About the Author: Robert Margo is an accomplished performer on classical guitar, renaissance lute, and modern mandolin. He studied classical guitar with William Newman in Philadelphia and John Johns in Nashville, and has performed in master class for Sergio and Odair Assad, Manuel Barrueco, and David Starobin. On renaissance lute Margo studied with Catherine Liddel in Boston, and with Paul O’Dette, Ronn McFarlane, and Nigel North at the Lute Society of America. An avid fan of new music for plucked strings, Margo has commissioned pieces from many composers, including Clarice Assad, Philip DeWalt, John Goodin, Francine Trester, and Frank Wallace. Twice a prize-winner at the national performance competition of the Classical Mandolin Society of America (CMSA), Margo frequently writes article for the CMSA Mandolin Journal, for whom he serves as Reviews Editor. Margo’s arrangements for solo mandolin and for mandolin ensemble have been performed by Chris Acquavella, the CMSA En Masse Orchestra, the New Expressions Mandolin Orchestra, the Providence Mandolin Orchestra, and the New American Mandolin Ensemble, among others. He currently performs with the New American Mandolin Ensemble and the Providence Mandolin Orchestra, both directed by Mark Davis. When not making music, Margo can be found at Boston University where he is Professor of Economics.