

CLASSICAL GUITAR



Newman & Oltman Guitar Duo: Still Thriving After 40 Years

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Michael Newman and Laura Oltman have been playing together as the [Newman & Oltman Guitar Duo](#) for 40 years. In this time, they have expanded the duet repertoire through commissions from a number of prominent composers, in addition to serving as down-to-earth anchors of the guitar scene in New York with their annual New York Guitar Seminar at Mannes and Raritan River Music Festival. This past summer, too, they were the artistic directors of the Lanciano Guitar Festival in the Abruzzo region of central Italy.

Newman, a graduate of Mannes College of Music in New York, teaches guitar and chamber music at Mannes and at the College of New Jersey. Oltman studied with Bruce Holzman at Florida State University and teaches guitar at Princeton University in New Jersey and Lafayette College in Pennsylvania. They met initially when Newman played for the guitar society at Florida State University, but did not

get together until two years later, at the Aspen Music Festival, where they both studied with Oscar Ghiglia. The husband-and-wife guitar duo became the first-ever guitar Ensemble-in-Residence at Mannes. They are featured on nearly a dozen highly praised recordings and have performed worldwide in a range of collaborations with notable artists, which include ETHEL string quartet, fiddler Eileen Ivers, the Calder and Turtle Island string quartets, composer/conductor Marvin Hamlisch and the Pittsburgh Symphony Pops, mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade, violinist Tim Fain, and the late, Pulitzer Prize-winning author Frank McCourt.

“We prepared a talk at Salisbury University’s Perdue School of Business in Maryland that capitalizes on our 40 years in the music business,” Oltman says. “Everyone’s employment is now patterning itself after the musician’s: It’s a gig economy now. More and more people are finding that their jobs are temporary. It’s not as easy as it used to be to establish having some qualification, get hired, work your way up to a senior position, and then retire after 40 years with the golden parachute. Many academic institutions are trying to teach students how to function in an economy where they may not keep their job an entire lifetime, which describes the arts. In the arts, you get hired on a nightly basis and are always trying to get the next gig.”



Lisa-Marie Mazzucco Photo

The Newman & Oltman Duo launched their various guitar festivals, new music commissioning, and community outreach programs as a way to promote the guitar and expand both duet repertoire and music education.

“We operate as a nonprofit and, whether you choose this route or the profit route, it’s still a business and operates like a business,” Oltman says. “You ask for grants, which is the same thing as asking for venture capital. Sponsors for the arts believe it is a valuable way to foster the local community because it brings in other business, which in turn, benefits the entire community.

“In the recession, many lost their jobs and subsequently lost their health insurance, their mortgages, and their houses. One thing about being self-employed is, you’re probably not going to get fired,” Oltman says. “It is under your control whether you work or not. At times it wasn’t easy, but we kept going. So when parents question, ‘Why are you wasting our money on tuition for an arts career?’ I don’t think there is a ‘safe bet career’ out there any longer. Even if you choose a different career path, I would say, you’re going to have to do the same kinds of things to keep that career going. So why not do something you love rather than something you hate? Even if you’re a lawyer, you’ve got to get the next client.”

When asked how the duo balances their business endeavors with actual guitar practice, which cannot be delegated, Newman says, “We manage that with extremely great difficulty. The amount of time we devote to the business part of the music business is far more than we ever anticipated. To be successful, you have to have some degree of talent, a lot of determination, hard work, and then a whole bunch of good luck. We first started our training as classical guitarists with the expectation that most shared at the time, which was, we’d complete university or conservatory training and then become performers. The people who played orchestral instruments learned to do killer auditions for orchestras, land a position with an orchestra, and then have a job for life.

“Guitar has always been more entrepreneurial because we couldn’t join an orchestra or sing in the Metropolitan Opera chorus,” he says. “Guitarists have always needed to look a little farther afield for the possible employment opportunity. As we’ve discovered from studying the history of the arts and culture in society, it’s always been like this. Bach and Giuliani always had to get a gig. You had to work just as hard then to convince someone at the church or the king’s court as you do now, to convince a university or a concert presenter that what you have to offer is of value.

“Our training was devoted primarily to teaching us how to become great guitarists and musicians. The schools assumed we’d all discover how to make our own way

once we graduated. Now that has changed,” Newman says. “Mannes is 100 years old now and has always embraced change and new approaches. Mannes introduced Schenkerian analysis of music from Vienna in the earlier part of the 20th century when it was considered a revolutionary method. So for Mannes to mandate that every student take at least one course in entrepreneurship is a change that reflects what students must assimilate in order to carve out a career in society.

“When we were starting out, we faced a number of industry gatekeepers who kept everyone down because they wouldn’t sign you to labels or give you concerts unless you were connected somehow,” Oltman says. “I am speaking of managements, record labels, publicists, publishers, and, of course, administrations in academia. However, if you could convince these people they could make money from selling your product, they were the ones who put their money at risk, not you.

“Our students have numerous videos online. They have produced their own CDs and have digital files available for download so people all over the world can see them. It’s a phenomenally crowded world now, compared to when we started as a duo. Whatever expenses go into creating these products, too, is your own money and not someone else’s, as it used to be, when management paid for everything. And the fact is, the young artist who creates and owns their recordings will now have to become their own manager. Even today, most management agencies have become a service that you pay for. They require a retainer,” Oltman says.

What is the solution? “I don’t know if there is a solution as much as you must seek out opportunities. The one irreplaceable thing you can do is play live concerts,” Oltman states emphatically. “I think it is difficult to get people to attend classical music concerts in this country. This is not as true in Europe because classical music is intrinsically part of their cultural heritage. Our cultural heritage is about popular music, so getting audiences for classical music is more challenging. I feel like for guitar, in particular, too many people are chasing too few concert opportunities with the same repertoire. There is now a staggeringly high level of talent compared to what existed 40 years ago, but some of the music they are left to play, the world does not need to hear the same pieces over and over. I think the guitar needs to have more original music written for it.”

“Laura and I, as a guitar duo, are performers and not composers, which is why we started Raritan River Music’s New Music Commissioning program and have spent the last two decades working with composers and finding resources to commission them,” Newman says.

“We found it difficult to convince chamber music organizations to present guitar because it is not an orchestral instrument, so we started our own,” Oltman adds.

“For us to commission, perform, record, and oversee the publication of new music written for us and then see this music go on to flourish in the hands of other guitar duos who record and perform it, is extremely satisfying,” Newman says. “Even though we obtained the music initially to benefit our own careers, it was with the long view of expanding the repertoire available for guitar duos.” The composers they have commissioned over the years include Lowell Lieberman, Roberto Sierra, Arnold Black, Dušan Bogdanovic, Augusta Reed Thomas, Guggenheim Fellow Arthur Kampela, and Paul Moravec, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 2004.

More recently, the duo negotiated with Leo Brouwer and his office to request a new guitar duet, which they anticipate performing and premiering next year at the Raritan River Music Festival and the NY Guitar Seminar.

“The Raritan River music CD we produced nine years ago [*Music from Raritan River: New American Music for Guitar*, 2008] features all new music of an amazingly wide variety of compositional styles, written mostly by American composers,” Newman says. “The music runs from atonal to complex polyrhythms and polymeters to music written in the E Major chord. We enjoy that variety.”

“If we are commissioning from someone who is unfamiliar with the guitar, we advise them to approach it as if they are writing for the piano and leave it to us to figure out how to compress the notation,” Oltman says. “You can translate a lot of keyboard music effectively for the guitar into the right hand or left hand. One of the biggest problems composers who don’t play the guitar will have, or the resistance they have, particularly if they write tonal music, is that they are vaguely aware of the various ways that exist to create sound effects on the guitar through fingering. For example, Leo Brouwer exploits all these fingering possibilities to achieve the cool effects in the *La Huida de los Amantes por el Valle de los Ecos* movement from his *El Decameron Negro*. They know these effects exist but they do not know how to achieve them. Also, they don’t know what you *cannot* do, such as being unable to reach an F and E two octaves apart.

“Augusta Reed Thomas altered the tunings on both guitars for the piece she wrote for us, *memory: SWELLS*, and then she mapped out where all the notes were by location before she created the fingering.

“When we worked with Lieberman on his *Nocturne-Fantasy, Op. 69*, he wrote what he wanted it to sound like and we pointed out what would work and what

wouldn't," Newman says. "Of course, some people want to hand you a piece and be done with it."

"Paul Moravec wrote a piece for us, *Raritan Triptych*, that did not include any fingering. We asked if he had a preference, but he did not want to publish that," Oltman says. "What he preferred was, by far, not an intuitive approach. He composed upon the piano, which will resonate forever. Composers will be surprised how the same note on a plucked guitar string just goes, '*dink!*' and that's it. As a result, he tightened up a lot in the piece.

"Some new music pieces will be difficult to play," Oltman notes, "for the reason that some of it can be very pointy-headed. Many people do not know how to perform new music and, as a result, it doesn't get much air time. It can be a challenge to figure out how to perform these pieces, and because it takes a long time to become good enough at playing them, you might never unlock what it is the music has to say, unless you're the person who wrote it.

"I believe that artists and composers need patience and encouragement to write music that captures the zeitgeist of the time. Not everyone is going to like what it is. Maybe it won't last, maybe it will," she says.

"When we started our career as a duo 40 years ago, we thought we would be performing concerts, making recordings, and teaching," Newman says. "We had no idea how much more could go into a career in music in the arts, and that is what we try to impart to our students. As far as teaching, I've been at Mannes for 39 years and started teaching at the College of New Jersey three years ago. Laura's been at Princeton for 40 years and then joined Lafayette College four years ago. We know some people who are approaching the 40th year of their careers who are looking to unwind, but we're teaching now at twice as many universities on top of our other endeavors. We keep doing more and more. It's our job to spin as many plates on sticks as humanly possible."

Oltman invokes a memory of the late Thomas Humphrey, the maker of the duo's (pre-Millennium) 1978 and 1981 model guitars. "I remember Thom saying, 'All these young whippersnapper guitarists are such whiny complainers about how they have to practice all day. How long do they practice? Maybe four hours a day? Most people *work* eight hours a day. I have to go sell my guitars after I work eight hours a day making them.' Thom felt if guitarists thought they could just practice and make a career, then they were sadly mistaken. Prophetic words."

“Arnold Black, whom we worked with, led an amazingly varied life as a violinist, jingle composer, classical music composer, Broadway music composer, and teacher,” Newman says. “His best advice, which we take to heart to this day and share with our students, was, ‘If you don’t fit with the program, make your own program.’”



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