

Platero y yo: An Interview with Frank Koonce

by Tiaraju Aronovich

The following interview was for a Brazilian magazine, and has been translated from Portuguese.

Platero y yo (Eng.: *Platero and I*) is a book of prose by Nobel laureate Juan Ramón Jiménez and dedicated to a little donkey named Platero. Subtitled “An Andalusian Elegy,” the book shares the experiences of Jiménez and of Platero to whom the poet confides his deepest thoughts, feelings, and observations about daily life in the little Spanish village of Moguer. Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco set 28 of the verses to music for narrator and guitar in 1960. Soon afterwards, Andrés Segovia recorded ten of them without narration since much of the musical score sounds complete by itself. Both the music and text independent of one another are highly expressive and moving, but together they become a little-known masterpiece. Several years ago, guitarist Frank Koonce, together with storyteller Don Doyle, made the first recording in English of 18 selections from *Platero y yo*.

TA) This work is still not very well known and it is rarely performed even though it is a beautiful and extremely well written work. How was the process of re-discovering it?

*FK) I first heard a few selections from *Platero y yo* with the narration in the 1970s while I was a student at the North Carolina School of the Arts. My teacher, Jesús Silva who was a poet as well as a guitarist, had also known Castelnuovo-Tedesco and he encouraged one of my classmates to play several of the movements as part of a recital. I’ll never forget how that performance affected me. I was deeply moved by the story and impressed by how effectively the words and music worked together. Even though I had already heard Segovia’s beautiful recording without the narration, it was only through hearing the spoken words that I could fully understand and appreciate the true genius of Castelnuovo-Tedesco. It is incredible how he managed to capture the imagery of the text through his music and how well the words and music play off of each other. I don’t know of any other composition with narration that is so musically inspired. If you consider other better-known works such as *Peter and the Wolf* or *L’histoire du Soldat*, you will realize that they are constructed throughout with recurrent musical themes and motives to identify the characters or subject matter. *Platero*, on the other hand, freely moves into different melodies, sonorities, tempos, and moods to capture the essence of the moment according to the text. When the canary in the story flies, the music flies; when Platero trots, the music trots, and so on. The musical imagery and “word painting” that Castelnuovo-Tedesco captures and synchronizes with the text is nothing short of amazing—and, imagine, it is all done with one guitar, not an orchestra!*

TA) Please tell me about the main difficulties you had when recording guitar and narration.

Most of the difficulties with the narration have to do with the translation from Spanish to English and then its coordination with the music. I have now performed this work many times both in the original Spanish and in English. I chose to record it first in English simply because of the opportunities for me to perform it in the United States. In reality, however, I believe that only the original Spanish can preserve the subtleties of meaning and poetic elements as expressed by its creator, Juan Ramón Jiménez. Consider, for example, the beautiful alliteration of the following phrase in Spanish as compared to the less musical sounding English translation:

In Spanish: “. . . la oropéndola charla, de chaparro en chaparro.”

In English: “. . . the oriole chatters, from evergreen to evergreen.”

There are probably even more controversial issues regarding the translation of texts from one language to another than there are in transcribing music from one instrument to another. I compared several different English versions of this text in addition to the one by Eloise Roach that is published with the music. All are different. For example, consider the phrase:

“ ‘Tien’asero’ ... Tiene acero.”

Which literally says

“He holds steel ... He holds steel.”

Since this idiomatic expression does not translate well in English, Ms. Roach adapts it, with some poetic license, to:

“ ‘He is like steel’, they say....Steel, yes.”

Notice, however, that Jiménez changes the spelling and he slurs the first two words to capture the Andalusian dialect, and then he uses the more conventional spelling and pronunciation when the words are repeated. This is a subtlety that is lost in the translation. I came across another translation, however, that attempted to create the similar effect of a ‘working man’s’ expression in English:

“ ‘He’s got steel in ‘im’ ... steel.”

Some versions of the text are more literal than others but lose the rhythm and flow of the original; in other words, the translations are more accurate but they lose artistic qualities. Other versions take a more subjective and artistic approach by trying to preserve the feeling of the original prose while taking some liberties with the actual text. The situation, as you can imagine, becomes even more convoluted when one has to consider the timing of the words to fit within a musical setting.

TA.) Why didn't you record the complete work and how did you select which movements to do?

FK) The main consideration was that all 28 would require making a two-CD set. Making one CD was expensive enough, and two would have been much more so, especially at that time when multiple sets were not common. Also, I considered that I had not yet established a reputation as a recording artist and that the work itself was not well enough known to English-speaking people. I was afraid that if people had to pay more for a double CD set, many would decide not to buy it. I chose movements that I thought captured the essence of the work and that led the listener through a variety of emotions before the end. I also selected the ones that I considered essential to the overall shape of the story. Some of the other movements are largely episodic and not as integral to the whole.

TA) Segovia recorded some of the individual movements from Platero y yo without the narration. From this we realize that these pieces can be perfectly performed as solo guitar pieces. Even without the narrator, they work beautifully. But many guitarists still don't play them. Why?

FK) Castelnuovo-Tedesco was not a guitarist and although he had a good general idea of the capabilities of the guitar he still did not know many of its inherent limitations. All of the movements, including the ones I recorded, need some adapting to work on the guitar. I had to do things such as make octave changes, re-voice some chords, omit some notes, and things like this to make it playable. This can be challenging, especially if it is done with regard to trying to preserve the composer's original intent. It is not something that one can do without a lot of thought. Also, some movements are less successful without the texts. Segovia had selected many of the ones that worked best as instrumental solos.

TA) We rarely have the opportunity to find a performance of this unusual combination: guitar and narrator. What about the public reaction? How is your experience of performing this work in concerts going?

FK) Public reaction in the concerts has been overwhelmingly positive. The paradox for audiences is that *Platero y yo* at first seems to be a simple children's story; then, before they realize what is happening, it becomes a metaphor for life and for some of the deepest sentiments we experience. As the poet himself said, it is a book "where joy and sadness are twins, like the ears of Platero." Perhaps the story is too sweet and sentimental for some, but I believe most listeners allow themselves to experience the full range of their emotions. More than one reviewer has commented that there "wasn't a dry eye" in the audience.

TA) Do you have any plans for the future regarding this work?

FK) I'm now giving some thought to re-recording it again, this time in Spanish, perhaps also with an illustrated book or on DVD. We'll see what the new technology brings in the next year or two. So, you see, I have plenty to keep me busy.