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The classical-guitar legend gets into a Latin thing on her new album, with guests ranging from Strunz & Farah to Al Di Meola and Steve Morse.





Latin Allure

LIONA BOYD'S LIFE-CHANGING MUSICAL JOURNEY

BY MARK C. DAVIS

FROM PLAYING IN A COURTHOUSE TO ENTERTAIN "BORED STIFF" O.J. SIMPSON jurors at the request of Judge Lance Ito to giving a command performance for the British Royal Family, classical guitarist Liona Boyd has never met an audience she didn't like. Equally eclectic with collaborators, she has opened for Gordon Lightfoot in sold-out Canadian hockey arenas, toured with Tracy Chapman, and recorded with Chet Atkins, Eric Clapton, and David Gilmour. Her virtuosity has garnered her five gold albums, three platinum albums, and five Juno awards (Canada's equivalent of the Grammy). She is also a five-time winner of the *Guitar Player* Readers' Poll for Best Classical Guitarist, and was inducted into the magazine's Gallery of Greats.

On her latest release, *Camino Latino/Latin Journey* [Moston], Boyd reveals her talents as an interpreter and composer of Latin music—a journey that began in earnest after she commissioned up-and-coming singer Innis to sing "Latin Lady" and "Morenita" on the album.

"Innis is a 26-year-old kid who is considered by some to be the next Ricky Martin or Enrique Iglesias," explains Boyd. "He and his manager wanted to record in Miami, and that was the beginning of my own 'Camino Latino,' because working there changed my life. I fell in love with the city's Latin culture, brushed up on my Spanish, got divorced, left Los Angeles, and started a new life in Miami."

Of course, *Camino Latino* is far from just a vocal album, and Boyd assembled a pretty heavy crew of guitar guest stars to perform with her. Fellow travelers include Al Di Meola ("Torbellino"), Steve Morse ("Rumbo al Sur"), Strunz and Farah ("Ambos Mundos"), Paylo ("Café Kastoria"), Luis Villegas ("Carretera Libertad"), and Jesse Cook ("Samba Para Dos"), as well as

"I'm an individualist," says Boyd. "I don't always wish to follow Segovia's footsteps, and whenever I've strayed from being a classical guitarist—playing with Chet Atkins, going on tour with a band, frizzing up my hair, or wearing leather pants—I've gotten into all kinds of trouble with the classical critics."

album producer and co-writer Richard Fortin. Her renewed passion for Latin music also prompted Boyd to give 45 performances with a full “nuevo Latino” band—a logistical feat compared to her usual solo and orchestral performances that underscores this adventurous guitarist’s feverish commitment to her art.

What guitars did you play on *Camino Latino*?

For the last ten years, I’ve played guitars by German Vazquez Rubio. He’s a Mexican

builder originally from Paracho, but he now lives in Los Angeles. I have several spruce models, but I used my cedar Rubio a lot for the recording, because it has the easiest fingerboard I’ve ever played. It’s a bit narrower than usual, and it fits my hand perfectly. You see, I sometimes have trouble with my first finger on barre chords. I can’t press down the third and fourth strings. Julian Bream observed that I had a dent between the two knuckles of my index finger! To compensate, I’ve often had to twist my finger around or

use different fingerings, but the cedar Rubio is quite easy on my fingers. Now, it’s not a loud guitar—although it is quite resonant—and it has a few dead spots. Certain notes don’t sustain, but I like the tone. It’s always a tradeoff with guitars.

I actually did a bad thing to that guitar before I took it on the first *Camino Latino* tour. I knew I’d have to compete with percussion, so I had a McLish pickup installed. It’s an excellent system, but the brass pickups that are installed under the bridge made the guitar sound slightly more metallic. I guess I kind of sacrificed that poor guitar! When you think about it, Segovia was very smart. He toured with one guitar, and he never even miked it.

What type of strings do you use?

I use Savarez Alliance, because they make me these polished copper strings that diminish finger squeaks and extraneous noise. They’re great for recording. I’ll typically use an unpolished low-*E* string to give me a punchier bass, and I’ll put a D’Addario Pro-Arte EJ45 on the high *E*, because the Savarez strings are pretty bright, and the D’Addario is a bit more mellow. I tend to use very old strings a lot, because I don’t want the bass strings ringing like crazy when I’m doing melodic stuff in the treble range.

You studied with Alexandre Lagoya, who advocated using the right side of the nails for fingerpicking. What is the advantage of that technique?

Lagoya believed that angling your hand a bit—which is different from the Segovia style of holding your hand perpendicular to the strings—was a more relaxed position. I tend to pick and choose between Segovia’s way—which can sound a little thin at times, but very sweet—and Lagoya’s, which, depending on how you file your nails, can produce a very round and consistent sound.

Could you detail how filing your nails one way or another affects your sound?

Well, actually, there is no one set way of filing nails. My nails have always been a little bit longer than those of the average guitarist, because I like to play by hitting the strings at different angles. I don’t have a very consistent right hand—my fingers move a lot more than other guitarists—but I think it gives my playing a bit more variety. I believe that when you play classical guitar, you should try to get as much color as you can. I like to get a nasty tone at times, and, at other times, a very mellow and sweet sound.

Nails are so important to a classical guitarist. Badi

Asaad once said that breaking a nail is like snapping off part of a high heel—you just kind of limp along.

That's right! People often wonder why I react so strongly whenever I break a nail, but they don't realize it's like breaking part of your instrument. Guitarists are a little obsessive about their nails, and with good reason, because they are what make the tone. They are our vocal cords. In addition, a broken nail destroys the whole alignment of your fingering. The middle finger will throw off the index finger, which will throw off the ring finger.

Of course, if you're Al Di Meola, you can just take your pick out. But I've never developed that technique. You can do incredible magic with a pick, but it doesn't have the softness of a string plucked by a fingernail.

If you break a nail before a performance, how do you deal with it?

Luckily, I have strong nails, but Krazy Glue usually saves my life whenever one does break. I'll cut up a tea bag, soak the netting in Krazy Glue, put it carefully atop the broken nail, and then file it. In real emergencies,

I've also used pre-shaped plastic things called "Player's Nails."

Many classical guitarists cite one maestro as a main influence, but you've studied with many different maestros.

Yes, I have. Segovia, Bream, Lagoya—they were all presented by the Guitar Society of Toronto. I was the little prize student there, so I was very lucky to meet all of the guitarists of the day and pick their brains. Segovia, for example, told me I was playing too fast. I'd play him a Manuel Ponce piece, and he'd show me a slower, more lyrical interpretation. Julian Bream helped me with Bach. I studied the *Chaconne* with him, and he worked with my general interpretation, some technical things, and how to get a stronger tone. Lagoya, of course, concentrated more on tone. But the one thing all of these masters provided more than anything else was inspiration. It wasn't just technical advice—they would get me fired up. Being in the presence of these different players was tremendously inspiring, and hearing them would make me love the guitar even more.

Do you have a typical method of preparing for a performance?

I used to have dinner parties before I went on tour where I'd perform a 45-minute set for the guests. I'd make mental notes of my weaknesses and memory slips, and that was really helpful, because your performance always changes when someone is listening to you. When you practice alone, you can stop and start, and not be quite as focused as when an audience is silent—not even *breathing*—and listening to your every note. A whole other dimension comes into play on stage. For me, the best concerts are when I'm really, really secure technically, because then I feel comfortable taking risks and experimenting a little bit with my interpretation—such as drawing some notes out longer. When that happens, I feel like I've made the most out of that moment in time.

Do you have any advice for today's guitarists?

When I go to hear someone play, I want that person to stir up my emotions—not just dazzle me with technique. Sadly, a lot of guitarists make the mistake of concentrating so much on the technical aspect that they forget music isn't about how many notes you can play per minute. For me, it's about the beauty of individual notes, and it's in the pauses between those notes—the way one note fades and dies as another note comes in—where the music really happens. ■