

Eden Stell Interview

The Eden Stell Guitar Duo (comprising of Mark Eden and Christopher Stell) are a breath of fresh air in the classical guitar world. Based in the UK, the ensemble have been astounding audiences for over fifteen years on both sides of the Atlantic with their innovative performances and recorded material. Soundboard catches up with the duo and discovers their plans for the future (as well as which guitars Chris would kill a hamster for...)

Soundboard: We were lucky enough to catch you guys at the Aylesbury Music Centre, a tiny venue in the British market town of the same name. Last year you played some massive festivals and large concerts in both the UK and America - how on Earth did the Aylesbury gig come about? Did your agent screw up or something?

Mark Eden: Not at all. We like to perform anywhere - large or small, and of course there are some smaller venues with stunning acoustics for classical guitar which are a real treat to play in.

Do you the prefer smaller/larger shows, or is the dynamic different with each venue?

Chris Stell: The larger ones you can get really hyped-up for; but the smaller and more intimate ones can really produce some of the best performances as you're able to concentrate on the music making more. The larger ones also have the excitement of the event with anticipation, nerves and tension and that can have a positive effect on the concert!

Both of your playing is enviably amazing from a technical point of view, and you each hold teaching positions (including at the Royal Academy of Music, where you guys met.) Does the academia side of music take up a lot of your time, and does it hold much sway on your performances?

CS: I teach at the Royal College of Music and Mark at the Birmingham Conservatoire as well as junior Guildhall London. Teaching is an important part of our careers and helps with our own thoughts and concepts of musical Interpretation, as you really have to clarify what you are trying to say and explain to your students. It's also a lot of fun. It's sometimes tricky but we balance it fairly well with playing commitments.

You're a big fan of the classical and jazz composer Nick Cartledge, also a Royal College graduate, and have commissioned work from him in the past. How did that relationship come about?

ME: We met Nick a while ago through friends and at a teaching job we both used to have in London. He's an amazing musician and we got on well so it just happened that he wrote us a piece. He's written a double guitar concerto which

we've never performed as it's so hard to get an orchestra to perform new works.

Are there any other modern composers you admire and would like to work with?

ME: We also like composers Errolyn Wallen, Johannes Moller, Dusan Bogdanovic, Gary Ryan, who have all either written works for us or we'd like pieces from them and many more. There are some seriously talented composers out there and performing new music is an important part of our repertoire.

Your set is incredibly diverse - do you guys ever argue over potential pieces one of you would like to play or record? Has Christopher ever thrown a diva-strop?

ME: All musicians are mini-divas in some way, but we don't seem to have any strops over repertoire as we have to plan ahead so much with what we're got to learn and work on that it's not an issue. Tensions can arise over rehearsals as we can sometimes be critical about each others playing. You try to be diplomatic but when there's just two of you it's not worth beating about the bush.

Have you ever thrown a guitar through a hotel bedroom window? I need dirt.

ME: As far as a rock star lifestyle goes we're pretty tame, but I have been known to dance with the odd giant palm tree on wheels on occasion, with slightly messy results.

The duo rose to success fairly quickly and has hit dizzying heights. Were you aware early on how big this would become, or did it just snowball?

ME: I don't think that we've hit any dizzy heights! It certainly doesn't feel like that. Classical music and the classical guitar world is incredibly down to earth. We've been very lucky to have been invited to perform some big concerts and festivals and had some juicy reviews over the years but we're not famous in real terms. We're quite well known in the guitar world generally which sounds very boring but when you consider how many amazing players there are out there I'm pleased we just register on the who's who list.

Where to from here?

CS: Home for a cuppa! Seriously, we are working on some projects and a new CD of Spanish/Catalan music arrangements which are really beautiful. We have a few more duo projects after that including new works which have been written for us and more which should keep us going for a few years! We both also perform in the VIDA Guitar Quartet and have a new CD out called 'Love, the Magician' on the BGS label and promoting that with concerts has been a recent focus especially over this year.

You're sponsored by D'Addario strings, which we're massively fond of. Could you tell us a bit about your guitar set-up?

ME: We also love D'Addario strings and very proud to be sponsored artists. We play on the hard tension range J46 either Pro Arte or EXPs or the composites range. We're impressed with them all. We play guitars by Christopher Dean and we also ordered new guitars by Muller which we get this summer.

What do you look for in a good guitar? Similarly, are there any particular guitars you'd strangle a puppy just to own?

CS: It's not essential to play the same guitars in a duo but having the same maker has meant we have some kind of consistent starting point when playing as a duo. Spruce guitars are good for clarity like the Dean instruments but the new Mullers will be cedar, so this will be an exciting departure for us.

ME: I would love a Dietrich but he quite old now and not making much.

CS: I'd love to own an old Hauser or Fleta just as a collector. Don't know if I'd kill a puppy for one. Perhaps a hamster?

On the brilliant series Inside the Actor's Studio, James Lipton asks a quick fire series of questions to his interviewees at the end. I'm going to rip him off, if that's okay.

What is your favourite word?

ME: 'Fang-Fang' - I know it's two words, but he's our imaginary helper when we're on tour with the VIDA GQ. He does everything for us!

Er, Right.

ME: You go a little mad when you're on tour!

What is your least favourite word?

CS: Sound-check!

What turns you on creatively, spiritually or emotionally?

ME: Tough one! Creative would be just knowing you're performing great and communicating well with your audience. Spiritually is when you hear young players performing like at the World Youth Guitar Festival last year. Emotionally is when you get a huge high after a concert or a great review when you feel all the hard work and practice has paid off!

What turns you off?

CS: Laziness.

What is your favourite curse word?

ME: Bigger!

What sound or noise do you love?

CS: Piano - and the guitar of course!

ME: String Quartet and my kids singing!

What sound or noise do you hate?

ME: Bad guitar tone!

What profession, other than your own, would you like to attempt?

CS: Poet or cheese maker!

ME: I would like to compose but when ever I write something I get too critical of it and press the delete button.

What profession would you not like to do?

ME: Anything repetitious or mind numbingly boring. I'm very lucky as everyday I do something different.

If Heaven exists, what would you like to hear God say when you arrive at the Pearly Gates?

CS: I'll put the kettle on.

Finally, do you guys happen to need a singer? I can make up lyrics and *everything*. I'm also cheap.

ME: Hmm, Can we get back to you on that one?

Guys, thanks so much for managing to get through this list of questions. It was tough at times.

ME: Our pleasure. It was most enjoyable.