

at the 9th Long Island Guitar Festival
C W Post Campus, Long Island University

reviewed by Michael Lydon

Guitarist and composer Carlo Domeniconi gave a concert both fiery and friendly April 27th at the ninth Long Island Guitar Festival at the C. W. Post Campus of Long Island University, playing only his own compositions and winning a standing ovation from a bowled-over crowd.

A native of Italy living in Berlin, Domeniconi has come to the States only once before, also to the Long Island Guitar Festival in 1998, but European audiences know him well as a concert artist and guitarists everywhere play his "Koyunbaba," a demanding but richly melodic piece.

A stocky man with iron grey hair, Domeniconi took the stage with a quiet modesty, sat, adjusted his footstool, and opened with "Cinque Pezzi in Stile Classico," short pieces well-named, for they had the artfully simple interplay of bass, alto, and treble voices beloved in Sor's great teaching pieces. One piece opened with a beautiful four note motif that Domeniconi developed and varied like an old master. Even at fast tempi, Domenico's playing remained unaffected, valuing musical feeling over technical flash.

"Sunayama Henge," the composer told the audience, is based on a Japanese pentatonic melody. As it grew, the piece moved over the full range of the guitar. Powerful bass rhythms surged into flicked high harmonies, tiny chords into flurries of dazzling speed. Clear single string melodies gave the gentle jazz flavor of "Prelude and Fugue" an hypnotic inevitability. Domeniconi paints with a wide palette of colors, but his pieces do not float away. He grounds them, instead, on well-balanced compositional elements, each movement of a piece flowing logically (though surprisingly!) to each new movement.

Long soulful lines filled the slow "A Step in Paradise," lines that sung and spoke. "Tocatta in Blue" and "Homage to Jimi Hendrix" had strong jazz and rock textures, "Tocatta" starting out with a rollicking boogie woogie and "Hendrix" developing wah-wah pedal effects with long hammer-on chord passages. Yet both pieces had a classical restraint. "Hendrix," Domeniconi said, is a Tombeau, a Baroque form used to commemorate the famous dead. His performance proved "Hendrix" to be no pastiche of Jimi's melodies, but a meditative tribute

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to a fallen fellow-artist. Domeniconi ended on tiny chords played high on the neck. When the crowd caught its breath, the walls of Hillwood Recital Hall rung with applause.

Domeniconi came back after intermission for three of his best known works, "Variations on Anatolian Folk Songs," "Krysea Phorminx," and "Koyunbaba," all three springing from his love of the music and land of the eastern Mediterranean. He based the variations on songs improvised in Turkey to express "being in love with life," and "Krysea" on a fragment of ancient Greek melody found on a terracotta shard. "Koyunbaba" evokes a little bay on the Adriatic coast near Homer's Troy. Here as before, the composer-performer delivered guitar fireworks aplenty, but as satisfyingly, strong musical structures that made the music speak bold and interesting ideas.

"Krysea" opens a window on the music of the ancient lyre (though after the concert Domeniconi said he makes no claim to authenticity, using the fragment as a leaping-off point for his imagination). After a mysterioso opening, "Koyunbaba" melts into gorgeous chords that develop into fast flurries and long moments of quiet reflection.

Some of Domeniconi's melodies were haunting, some pretty, but all were guitaristic, covering the gamut from high first-string pianissimos to thick ostinatos.

Toward the end of the two hour concert, Domeniconi rested his head on the upper bout of his battered guitar as he played, a sensual, intimate gesture that perfectly expressed his sensual, intimate music. The audience, with him all the way from the opening "five easy pieces," leapt to their feet when the last note died away. Domeniconi accepted the applause with a smile, played a short lively encore, bowed again, and disappeared.

Kudos to Harris Becker and the Long Island Guitar Festival for giving Domeniconi his two North American performances. An important composer for the guitar, of concertos and songs as well as solo pieces, Carlo Domeniconi is an engaging and commanding performer. Those who have heard him hope he will soon be touring coast to coast to great acclaim.

Michael Lydon is a guitarist and songwriter and the author of Rock Folk, Boogie Lightning, and Ray Charles: Man and Music, as well as many articles on contemporary music.