

INTERVIEW WITH LES FRÈRES MÉDUSES

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- Interview by *Pascal Proust*
- Help for translation : *Randall Avers*

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Les Frères Méduses : Benoît Albert and Randall Avers (photo by Jillian Bates-McKenzie).

Les Frères Méduses is one of the most impressive classical guitar duos today. At the crossroad between United States, France and Norway, classical and modern repertoires, folk music and improvisation, performances by American Randall Avers and French Benoît Albert catch the attention of their audience as well as their mysterious duo name. Here is a little interview so we can know more about the duo.

Bonjour Benoit, hello Randall, and welcome to The Acoustic Corner. Could you tell a few words about Les Frères Méduses, and the origins of your duo?

Benoît - I met Randall at the CNSM (Centre National Supérieur de Musique et de Danse) in Paris when I was studying the guitar with Olivier Chassain and Carel Harms. After taking the solo guitar exam, we wanted to create a guitar duo for our chamber music exam, which we passed in 1999. Then, due to our different locations and each other's professional status, we couldn't carry on this work. While staying in touch, Randall returned to the USA to study for a guitar Master in Arizona and I went down to southwest of France where I created a classical guitar studio at the Conservatoire National de Musique et de Danse of Agen (now called Conservatoire à Rayonnement Départemental). About ten years later as we were in Ohio for Randall's wedding and after some very relaxed improvisation sessions, the idea of programming rhythmic, folk music and improvisation appeared to us. Randall was living again in Europe and we could definitely work together more regularly.

Your repertoire is as varied as original, including contemporary pieces, and you also some improvisation on stage. Your music then seems to wander off the track of standard classical guitar. Is it a deliberate choice of yours or simply due to a matter of chance?

Benoît - It's not a matter of chance but the path and mutual expectation we have for the duo. Our three major musical aspects are :

- contemporary "multi-art" creation (related to dance, cinema, graphic arts etc...). This also includes orders to composers and our own individual or group compositions.
- music dealing with folk traditions
- free improvisation on stage.

Randall - I've been particularly tempted by the thought of conforming to a more traditional duo approach throughout the years, and Ben keeps reminding me of our original agreement - play music that we both enjoy, and use it as a means to create, to learn and experiment. We don't know what is ahead and that's one of the greatest attributes of our collaboration.

On stage or when teaching masterclasses for instance, a very good, obvious complicity gets out of your duo, beyond your talent or your technical skills. In your opinion, what are the keys to making a good duo?

Benoît - Permanent appetite and curiosity, a very subtle balance between feet on Earth and dreams, a lot of respect for one's partner and a devoted work, but not only on the instrument. The guitar is just a transmission tool.



Les Frères Méduses on stage (photo by Arlen Nydam).

Randall - I believe there needs to be a great deal of honesty and forgiveness, both in the workings of the duo and during performances. Treat every moment as a learning experience, and artistically speaking, become addicted to the feeling of pushing things one step beyond what you know.

You're often on the roads across various countries, whether to play your music, to be

members of juries in competitions (such as the prestigious GFA competition in Louisville, KY), or also to teach masterclasses. Besides performing, how important is it to teach, advise, and promote new talents?

Benoît - I never forget that if I had never met my first teacher when I was 14, I would have never had the opportunity to know the classical guitar or have the life I've got today. Passing along experiences from one generation to another is extremely important. It's become obvious to me as I'm getting old. I do believe in the importance of this transmission.



Les Frères Méduses show at Lommedalen school, Norway, during MEKANISK project tour (photo by Les Frères Méduses).

Randall - I teach at a public music school in Norway, and also help organize a guitar festival in my hometown Ohio where we guitarists go to public schools and perform and talk to students about guitar. This is some of the most rewarding work I do. Not only is it fun to talk about a shared interest, it's also so important to get young people involved with the arts.

On December 7, 2013, you were part of the Festival Voyage au Centre de la Guitare, at the Espace Malraux in Joué-lès-Tours, France. Could you tell us a few words about this festival, in which you performed a recital in the evening and also gave tips during a masterclass? What memory do you have of it, and what can an event such as this bring to renowned musicians like you?

Benoît - To my mind, the *Festival Voyage au Centre de la Guitare* is a unique event in France. I was very touched as this festival is first aimed to student guitarists. It's also an event which doesn't omit that the guitar can reach a large audience (800 people attended the evening concert). The tutorial investment by the teachers team is amazing. It can be compared, in my

opinion, to some of the big events taking place in the USA, like in Austin or during GFA events.



The Grand Auditorium concert hall at the Espace Malraux, Joué-lès-Tours, France.
Soundcheck for the guitar octets during the Festival Voyage au Centre de la Guitare 2013
(photo by Les Frères Méduses).

Labyrinthe, the piece for guitar orchestra ordered to **Jean-Marie Lemarchand**, is remarkable quality, very beautiful chamber music, so colorful and intense. It's a genuine contemporary creation in a manner that the «langage» used requires the approval of the performers, and performing it on stage requires a total investment. It's a cruise and an immersion.

As duo performers in such a festival, the idea is to share our artistic vision throughout the advice provided during the masterclasses, but also, at the concert, to create a space of possibilities, where we can express ourselves as musicians, and in which the audience can take place naturally.



Festival Voyage au Centre de la Guitare 2013
last rehearsing on stage for one of the guitar octets (photo by Les Frères Méduses).

Randall - I agree with everything Ben says here. My memory of the Festival was the enormity of the event, and the fantastic performances by the young guitarists during the evening concert. As an organizer, I was really impressed with the work that Stephanie, Stephane, Olivier and the others did!

Besides being brilliant performers, you also compose. Lots of musicians have good careers as performers. As musicians, what does composing bring to you?

Benoît - Composing is an impulse to me, very close to the games of my childhood (Legos, model kit etc...). Through composing I've discovered all the importance of a delicate written transmission, of the reading of symbols on sheet music and in life in general. Composing enables you to explore what's going on before the sheet music, the initial, sometimes confused, idea which is awaiting to come true and take shape. The entire work consists in rendering the transmission of this idea the clearest possible way. Owing to the composing work, I feel like I've become a better performer on pieces by other composers because of a better understanding of the process leading to the sheet music.

Randall - I feel that composition is the extension of the improvisation work that both Ben and I do. It's a spontaneous, or less-than-spontaneous reflection of musical knowledge and tastes. I've learned very much from studying composition in order to interpret better, but now that feels very distant to me. Now I much prefer studying composers in order to understand the art of composition better.

You've got an official webpage and also a fan page here on Facebook. In your opinion, how important can the internet and social networks be to today's musicians ?

Benoît - The internet has completely changed the way we communicate, obviously. With Les Frères Méduses page we use Facebook like a blog which deals with our activity, it's the «news» side, and the website like a place that presents the duo in the most artistic and professional way. The website must be an entire piece of art.

Randall - I usually come away with the feel that a website can lose more gigs and fans than anything. Facebook and webpages are important, but they need to be managed very well - this just isn't easy - it's a work in progress for us.

And now, the inevitable « gear question » ! Could you tell us about your guitars, strings, or any other accessories ?

Benoît - I play an Erik-Pierre HOFMANN 2007 guitar, with a spruce top. Erik-Pierre lives in south Burgundy (<http://www.fine-antique-and-classical-guitars.com>).

I like Erik-Pierre's work because he makes light guitars, that are smaller than standard ones since they are inspired by romantic instruments, of which he's currently been one of the great experts. This is a very well-balanced instrument, very easy to play and I simply like its sound.

I play D'Addario Pro Arte J46 strings because I feel like they match with my guitar. They are also very reliable and inexpensive. If I want something more delicate, I use Hannabach Silver 200s. I never use carbon or composite strings.

For ergonomic reasons, I do want to keep my two feet on the floor (on earth :)). Therefore, after trying lots of guitar rests equipped with suction pads that were not so reliable :) I now use the «G. Rest Murata» which is absolutely perfect to me.

For about one or two years, because of some special projects, we've been using mini contact tuners that are very discreet.

Randall - I play a Paco Santiago Marin guitar from Granada, and use D'addario J46 strings. On stage, I use a planet waves headstock tuner and I use a 3 kg footstool (made in Chicago 1970's) that was given to me by my first guitar teacher, Michael Vahila, when he decided to stop teaching guitar and go into Chinese medicine.

What are your upcoming concerts and projects ?

Benoît - The concert in Joué les Tours was the last of a long tour of more than a month and a half, featuring concerts in the USA (Nashville and Austin), in Norway (Oslo) and in France (Agen and Joué-lès-Tours), including three different programs and the creation ordered for us by Austin Guitar Society to American composer Joe Williams.

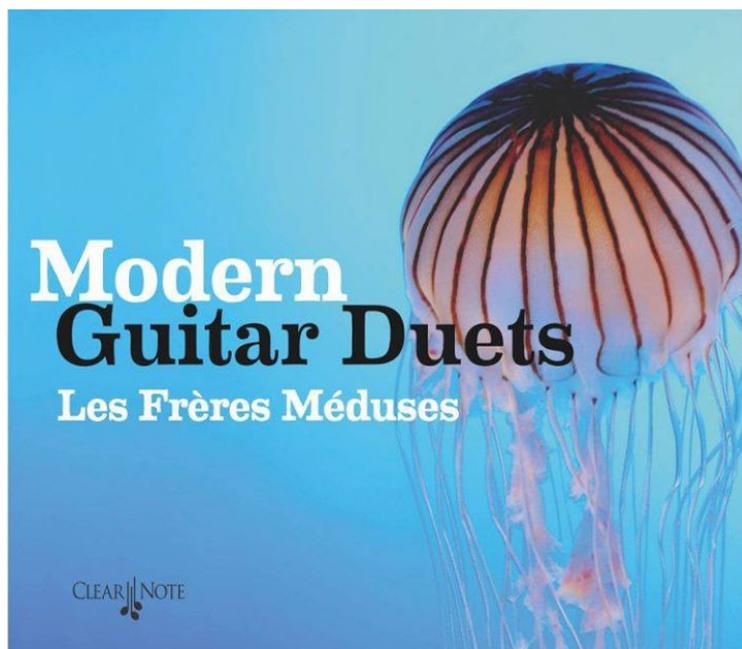
2014 is going to take us to California in March for a concert in Loyola, then in Ohio and Kentucky in April, and to the USA again in September for a very exciting tour in trio with a violin. On this tour over Texas in partnership with Austin Guitar Society and The Alamo Draft House theaters, we will present our work on a silent movie by director Tod Browning, *The Unknown*, shot in 1927, in Austin, Dallas and Houston.

The long-term duo projects comprise a second CD, entirely turned to new music (orders and compositions), along with a DVD dealing with MEKANISK project - there is a distant possibility for us to orchestrate our film scores. And also my «3 Caprices» for 2 guitars is going to be published. They are pieces I especially composed for our duo.

Thank you very much Benoit and Randall for this interview. Hope you enjoyed this little moment at The Acoustic Corner. Wish you all the best for the future, and feel free to knock at the door anytime, this page is yours!

Benoît - Thanks to you Pascal and to «The Acoustic Corner». It's always a pleasure to have somewhere to talk about artistic work and projects.

Randall - Thank you Pascal! It was a pleasure, and hope to be back soon!



For further information about Les Frères Méduses :

<http://www.lesfreresmeduses.com>

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Les-Fr%C3%A8res-M%C3%A9duses/111086288913424>

«Modern Guitar Duets» CD

https://clearnote.3dcartstores.com/Modern-Guitar-Duets-CDby-Les-freres-meduses_p_99.html

CDs and Publications by Randall AVERS

https://clearnote.3dcartstores.com/Avers_c_51.html

CDs and Publications by Benoît ALBERT

https://clearnote.3dcartstores.com/Albert_c_33.html