

GUITAR INTERNATIONAL

INTERVIEW WITH LES FRÈRES MÉDUSES

By: Brad Conroy

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Les Frères Méduses (The Jellyfish Brothers) is perhaps one of the most imaginative and exciting classical guitar duo's performing today. Featuring guitarists Randall Avers and Benoît Albert, both who are equally accomplished as solo performers in their own right; this duo offers a breath of fresh air to the classical guitar world. And when these two different personalities come together, it is evident that they have achieved a very high artistic level and are able to deliver an expressive, polished, and captivating performance.

Their debut CD *Modern Guitar Duets* features an exciting program which hardly resembles that of the standard repertoire often heard in recitals and on recordings. The program focuses on modern composers of Eastern European influence, displays some very intricate and refined playing, as well as a few original compositions and improvisations. *Les Frères Méduses* perform with virtuosity, connection, clarity, and a broad dynamic palette.

Modern Guitar Duets opens with "Ethno Dance" by guitarist Goran Ivanovic, and as the title suggests it is a highly rhythmic and expressive Balkan folk dance which perfectly sets the mood for the rest of the CD. The *Modern Guitar Duets* program also features four improvisations which exemplifies the diversity that this duo has to offer and not only proves that they are superb musicians, but that they also share a deep connection with each other and their music.

Leo Brouwer's "Micro Piezas" is the only 'standard' piece on this recording, and it is performed with sensitivity, balance, and rhythmic precision. Other standouts include "L'ego Land" by Benoît Albert and "No Feathers on this Frog" by Dusan Bogdanovic which is an expressive, dynamic, and quirky piece that the duo executes flawlessly.

Les Frères Méduses recently sat down with *Guitar International* to discuss their new CD, how the group name came about, improvising, recording, and more.



Brad Conroy: Can you tell us a little bit about how you got started with the guitar and perhaps a bit about your educational backgrounds?

Benoît Albert: My father had a guitar at home. I was 13 years old when he decided to send me to my small, home-town Conservatory. There I met my first teacher Jean-Claude Audouin and he gave me the desire to go on with the instrument. Then, after my Baccalauréat I went to Bordeaux (CNR/University) and Paris (CNSMDP) where I studied guitar, chamber music, harmony and counterpoint.

Randall Avers: I started taking guitar at the age of 6 in Canton, Ohio with an amazing Suzuki-style teacher Michael Vahila. In 7th grade I began working with Stephen Aron at the University of Akron. Since then I've studied in guitar programs around the US (Oberlin, U. of Arizona, NEC prep department and Walnut Hill School, and NC School of the Arts) and abroad (Conservatoire de Paris and Norges Musikkhøyskole in Norway). I try to go back to my hometown Massillon, Ohio every year to visit my folks and help organize a guitar festival.

Brad: You guys have perhaps the best name for a guitar duo. How did that come about?

Benoît Albert: Everything began at the Akron Zoo in 2008 where we saw an amazing jellyfish exhibition. We had just started playing together again and the vision of beauty and freedom of those jellyfish matched perfectly with the idea of our collaboration.

Randall Avers: We knew we found the right name because we couldn't let it go – maybe it sums up the spirit of our collaboration. We're still trying figure out why it stuck. Funny thing is that after we named the duo *Les Freres Meduses*, we went off to play a concert in a museum where they happened to have a Dale Chihuly's Jellyfish exposition.

Brad: On your new CD *Modern Guitar Duets* you perform a few improvisations. Are they different every time you perform them or do they evolve around the same thematic material?

Randall Avers: Improvisation is a concert tool for us – it's an incredibly powerful way of creating meaning and space.

As a general rule, we use improvisations to dialog and explore. It's always free improvisation based on psychological material: an idea, a mood, a word or a technical/musical concept. We rely heavily on the dialog of the improvisation in order to create thematic material, sonorities and textures.

Benoît Albert: The “Modern Guitar Duets” CD improv is different from our usual live-concert improvisation. In this recording, we took the advice of our good friend and stage adviser PM Faure to come up with a single word off-stage, run back onstage and improvise around that key word the moment we sat down.

Free Improvisation enhances our ability to listen and interact.



Brad: Your new CD has a unique mix of repertoire by some lesser known composers. Can you tell us a little bit about the CD and how you went about choosing the program?

Randall Avers: This is our first CD as *Les Freres Meduses* and our basic goal is to be excited by the music we play. In this case, we were seeking music with a strong rhythmic pulse more than anything else – all the music on this CD is based on some form of folk music. Our intuition told us that we had a lot to learn from this music.

Benoît Albert: The program is also linked to the people we know (Ivanovic and Ourkouzonov) and an introduction to our own guitar duo music, co-created by other musicians.

Brad: Can you guys tell us a little bit about the influential guitarists in your lives?

Benoît Albert: I've known Randall for 12 years now and I think that, in the classical milieu, he's certainly the one I always enjoy listening to. Playing with him as *Les Frères Méduses* was really

obvious for me. Other inspirations are mostly composers, painters, contemporary dancers and movie makers.

Randall Avers: I remember hearing amazing concerts when I was growing up in Ohio: David Russell, Jorge Morel, and the Assads. Those guys have been my heroes through the years. There was a time when I was completely bowled over by Tuck Andress and performed his arrangement of “Man in the Mirror.” Working with Ben over the last four years has been a real adventure – very insightful. Ralph Towner has been a real inspiration for me these last years. I was able to work with him on a recent project.

Brad: What are some elements that you think make a good musician?

Benoît Albert: Patience, clarity, imagination, open mind

Randall Avers: A person who can listen well, and transform criticism into something useful. Patience, positivity and humility.

Brad: How do you feel the modern classical guitar scene is doing?

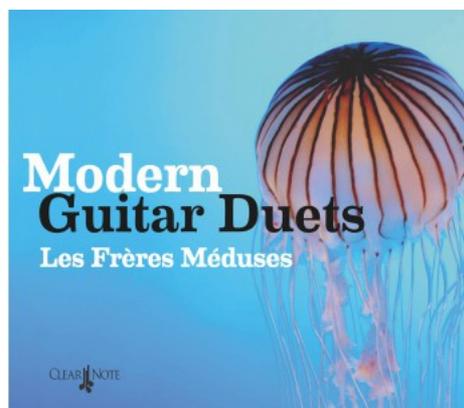
Benoît Albert: Times are changing, there is a huge acceleration in every aspect of our life due to new technologies and the classical guitar as we knew it 20 years ago doesn't exist anymore, it's a souvenir. Music is made by people, I mean living people, and it evolves and changes at the same level.

Randall Avers: I think there is real growth in certain parts of the world. In some places, the scene has organized itself to tremendous results (ACGS, GFA). Performers and teachers are always raising the bar and that's exciting to see. We're really fortunate to have a place in the classical guitar scene and also have the opportunity to branch out using different media and collaborations.

Brad: What are some of the differences you guys notice between the American and European audiences you perform for?

Benoît Albert: As a French citizen, American audiences have a real positive energy and I really enjoy that a lot. On the other hand European audiences are perhaps more ready for new experimentation... but it's just a feeling.

Randall Avers: I believe that European Audiences are more conservative.



Brad: Can you give us some advice on what you believe it takes to make a career out of music?

Benoît Albert: Where I'm now in my own career, I think that it's not possible to make a living only with giving concerts as a classical guitarist or composer. So the most realistic idea is to give lessons at the most interesting level you can expect (best ratio money/time) and save time to your own creation and concert program development. That gives me a lot of freedom in my creativity, I never do what I don't want to do and above all I can say no.

Randall Avers: Constant work, constant creation and contact. Trying to find what really works and never pre-judging.

Brad: What made you guys relocate to Norway?

Benoît Albert: I am French, and I live in France where I choose to die one day, later will be the better!

Randall Avers: That's me. I'm American and my wife is Norwegian and we've been living there with our two boys for about 9 years now. In the beginning, my wife was obliged to return after a two-year Fulbright, and then we felt like it was the place to be.

Brad: Can you tell us about the recording process and perhaps give some insights into the editing of classical guitar music which seems notoriously difficult?

Randall Avers: We did the entire recording process on our own. We used three Brauner microphones with DAV preamps from a fairly long distance to get the sound for the recording. As for editing – this was collaborative – we both edited, sending files back and forth to improve the previous. We used Merging Pyramix software and Sphynx converter and Z Q2 eq and Quantec reverb for the mastering.

Brad: How do you guys go about composing? Is it at the instrument or with a pen and paper or computer program?

Benoît Albert: When I'm composing, I'm using three different tools: pen and paper, computer (Sibelius) and the guitar. Each tool has its own quality, and I really try to keep the best of each depending on the compositional personality. Sometimes it's just me and my guitar (writing the music after) and sometimes I'm doing everything on Sibelius not thinking about the instrument and adapting it for the instruments afterwards.

Randall Avers: When composing, I enjoy hearing how the guitar resonates to certain harmonies. I hardly use paper unless to scribble down some quick ideas. Sibelius is the tool I use most to compose.

The selections that we performed on this recording were all the result of collaborative composition/improv – Rami Vamos and I made the Silly Songs, Ben and Christian LaBorde made "L'ego Land". These tunes come about mostly through a jam session turned into composition.

On the other side of the spectrum, Ben and I created a film score to the Silent Film "The Unknown" this past summer and there we both used Sibelius software and sent the score back and forth – there we passed the score B/F at least 100 times.

Brad: What does the future have in store for Les Frères Méduses?

Randall Avers: We have been deeply involved in film scoring over the last year. In June, we premiered “The Unknown” with violinist Will Fedkenheuer of the Miro Quartet, commissioned by ACGS and The Alamo Draft House. This Spring, we’re writing a 35 minute film score based on the short films of Méliès for a childrens concert series, commissioned by the Rikskonsertene in Norway. This summer, we’ll be performing at the GFA (Guitar Foundation of America Convention) in Lexington KY.

We have other projects on the burner – A DVD «The Unknown» project. More publications released on ClearNote including Ben’s *3 Caprices* for two guitars and the score to 12 Silly Songs for 12 Silly Strings. We’ll be collaborating with a dancer and a percussionist next year.