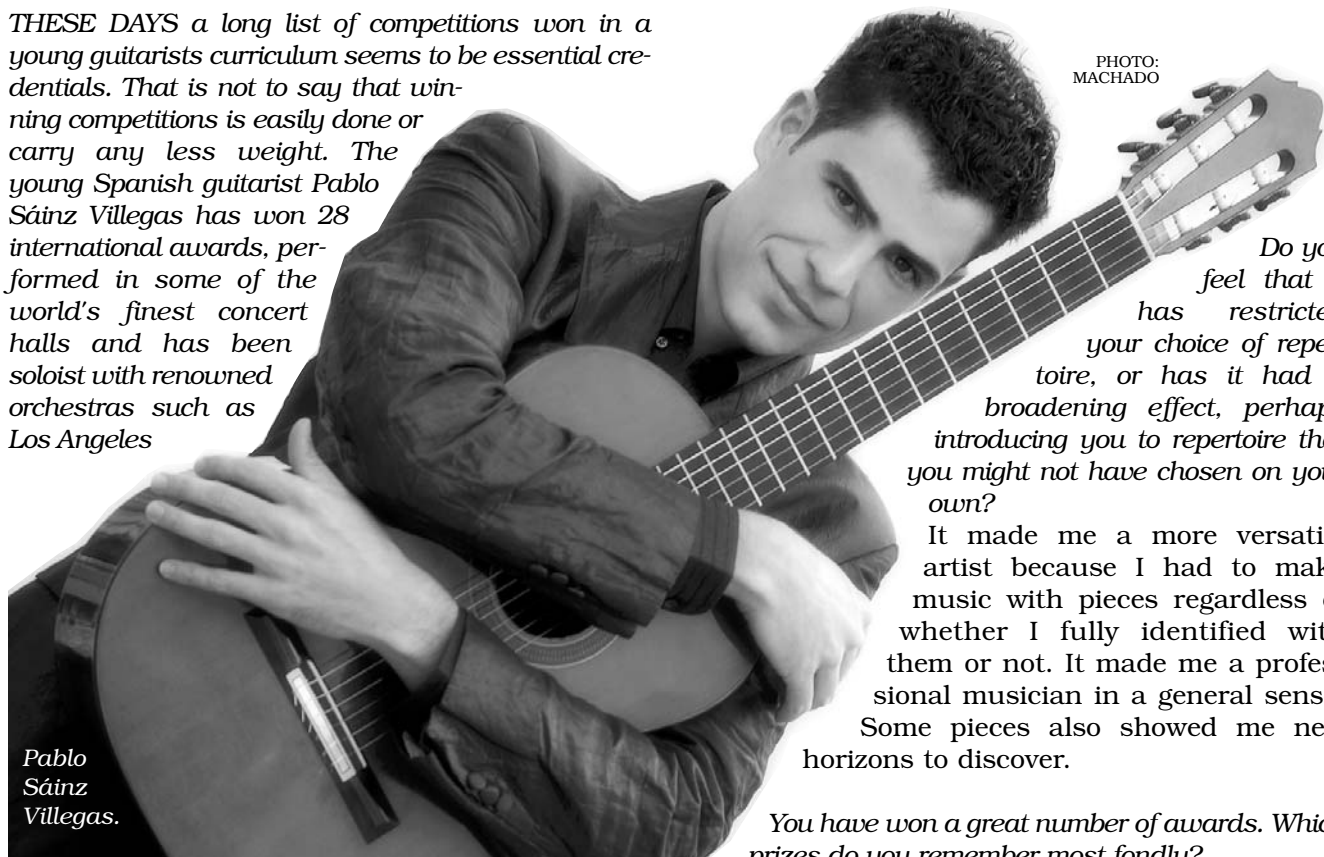


# PABLO SÁINZ VILLEGAS

Interviewed by THÉRÈSE WASSILY SABA

*THESE DAYS* a long list of competitions won in a young guitarists curriculum seems to be essential credentials. That is not to say that winning competitions is easily done or carry any less weight. The young Spanish guitarist Pablo Sáinz Villegas has won 28 international awards, performed in some of the world's finest concert halls and has been soloist with renowned orchestras such as Los Angeles

PHOTO:  
MACHADO



Pablo  
Sáinz  
Villegas.

*Do you feel that it has restricted your choice of repertoire, or has it had a broadening effect, perhaps introducing you to repertoire that you might not have chosen on your own?*

It made me a more versatile artist because I had to make music with pieces regardless of whether I fully identified with them or not. It made me a professional musician in a general sense. Some pieces also showed me new horizons to discover.

*You have won a great number of awards. Which prizes do you remember most fondly?*

Yes, I have won 28 awards, but without doubt there are two which are very special to me. The first was when I won First Prize at the 'Francisco Tárrega' competition in Benicasim, Spain in 2003, and the second was to have won the gold medal at the most important competition in terms of awards ever staged – the 2006 Parkening International Guitar Competition in Malibu, USA.

*Why was winning the 2006 Parkening International Guitar Competition so important to you?*

On a personal level it was a great honour to win this competition which was dedicated to one of the greatest guitarists of our time, Christopher Parkening. His brilliant career is an example to follow; his life has been generously devoted to music. To win the inaugural Parkening International Guitar Competition meant ending my competition career on a high note which fills me with satisfaction and peace.

On a professional level, in addition to the fabulous cash prize, I won the services of a professional management, who are now managing my concert tours and recordings over the next few years. It's a challenge which I'm really looking forward to. I am very motivated towards offering the public the best of the guitar and the purist part of myself.

*Will you continue to do more competitions?*

No. From now on I will be concentrating exclusively on developing my concert career, an aspect that has always been a priority for me.

*Chamber Orchestra, the Canberra Symphony Orchestra and the New York Virtuosi Chamber Symphony, among others. In 2003 he won First Prize at the International Guitar Competition 'Francisco Tárrega' in Benicasim, Spain and was also awarded the Prize for the Best Interpretation of Tárrega's composition. There have been many awards since then but his most recent was in June 2006, when he won First Prize at the Parkening International Guitar Competition at Pepperdine University, California. The Prize included \$US25,000 and an impressive tour of recitals and concertos with orchestra in 2007.*

*There are so many international guitar competitions available to young guitarists these days and you have won some of the most internationally prestigious ones. Can you become a better player through doing competitions?*

**Pablo Sáinz Villegas:** Competitions are an important part of our development as musicians. Participating in competitions is one more aspect of the stages in a musician's career which, if faced with the right mentality, can be very positive. Competitions help you to work towards an objective, to maintain a high level of concentration over a short period of time and to learn how to make an impression with your musical ideas. In this way you forge your personality as a performer.

When we first met we had an interesting discussion about memorising works which I would like to repeat here. Do you think that memorising works is important? Memorising a piece makes me internalise and assimilate the music, allowing me live in direct contact with it. That gives me a communicative freedom which originates not in the outward appearance of the score but in the metaphysical dimensions of my soul. I distrust my muscular memory and work on my musical memory separately in order to have total trust in the memorisation of a work. For this, I use a system without the instrument where I visualise the playing of the complete score, working through it from start to finish, imagining how both my hands are playing it at every moment. It's a system which requires practice and a lot of concentration but it's infallible and makes me feel calm when I play. The night before a concert I repeat this process where I also visualise the overall picture of the recital with its emotional development.

On the day of the performance itself, I hardly play the guitar except to warm up and to find the ideal physical sensations which will enable me to give the concert 100 per cent. To a certain extent, I slow down the rhythm of all my activities and try to gather all the energy possible which I will need to transmit on stage.

When it's nearly time to play, I like to go into a routine which allows me to gain the necessary concentration for going on stage. This is a time for getting dressed, warming up, having something to eat, visualising the theatre from the stage with its spotlights, its audience, their applause and so on, to prevent anything unexpected from breaking my concentration when I go out on stage. I also try to create an atmosphere of offering and generosity, as I believe that we have a duty to show respect and humility in every sense towards the public. Everything must be for them. I go out on stage feeling and benefiting from all the energy the audience projects onto me, so that from the very first note, I can immerse myself in its depths and in its drama.

*Is this a process which you were taught to do or did you discover it for yourself?*

Paulino García Blanco, one of my early teachers, showed me this method when I was a teenager. Since then, I have deepened and developed it into a more abstract artistic process that embraces not only the technical aspects of the piece but also its emotions.

*Do you always memorise pieces for recordings as well?*

Recording is a different process to live performance; it is a team effort for which the contact with the producer is a basic element. The producer needs to know the instrumentalist's artistic aims very well so he can help him to achieve them.

**“Memorising a piece makes me internalise and assimilate the music”**

For all the issues of microphones, sound takes, editing to musical issues as tempi, tuning, and other musical details, there needs to be a constant communication between producer and instrumentalist. For that purpose, I use the score to make the communication with the producer more efficient.

*In May 2006 your recording of Berio's Sequenza XI for the guitar was released as part of the complete Sequenzas of Luciano Berio with Naxos. Was that your first recording?*

Yes, it was my first. I was a little nervous about it because I was starting this experience with one of the most difficult pieces ever written for guitar. I had worked on it for six years and I had very clear ideas of what I wanted in each particular moment. But I remember just a few days before I thought of a new right hand fingering to play the trills on two

strings much more effectively. It worked so well! I had been fully dedicated to that piece for a year. Every morning I had been focusing on one aspect or section of the piece, trying always to be as exigent as possible with the score and to be true to the composer's will. The recording went very well; we planned to take three

days to do it, but we finished it in one session of two hours!

*What was your preparation process for a work of such magnitude?*

In my opinion, Luciano Berio's *Sequenza XI* (along with Brian Ferneyhough's *Kurze Schatten*) is one of the most dense works composed for the guitar and one of the most beautiful, both musically and intellectually speaking. And when I say beautiful, I'm not referring to the word in its romantic sense, but in its spiritual and dramatic sense. For me *Sequenza XI* was at first a dark and incomprehensible void. I endured many months of continuous desperation, but after much perseverance and patience, one day a glimmer of brightness appeared. From that moment on, the void which had been so dark gradually began to fill with light. Coming to understand the music which little by little, like a puzzle, began to form a beautiful, formal three-dimensional picture, forced me to reconsider the consistency of my fingerings on more than one occasion. Among other things, I realised what tremendous sovereignty the fingerings have over the music and the determining role they play in the artistic development and process of a piece. With every change, the work was gaining a more defined, clearer and more dramatic dimension as the composer's message was, in my opinion, better communicated.

*As the Berio and the Ferneyhough are such demanding repertoire, do you think that there is a*



*Pablo Sainz Villegas with David Starobin at the Manhattan School of Music.*

*possibility that they might become more commonly played in the future?*

I don't think so. Pieces of this magnitude not only require a great technical and musical dexterity but also a great amount of perseverance and faith in the long term. A professional guitarist would need to spend years of intense study and time that, unfortunately, we have not so much of because of the demands of a professional musician's life. In my opinion, these pieces will be always played by idealists. However, not all contemporary music is as difficult as Berio's or Ferneyhough's and we could play those other pieces more often.

*Are you idealist?*

Yes, I am. Ideals are what move the world to being a better place. I am also aware though that as an artist it is important to find the balance between the audience, the music and myself. In any case, the scant diffusion of pieces of this nature depends not only on their technical difficulty but also in part on the many institutions and concert organisers that are usually afraid of displeasing their audiences with it.

*So what music was on your next recording?*

The following year I decided to record Spanish music and that recording received great reviews; it was nominated as 'CD of the Week' by the German music magazine *Musik Heute*. For me a CD is an art form in itself. That is why I think about every detail of the CD to make the listening experience a unified and entertaining journey.

This recording was part of the prize for having won the 2003 Tárrega competition so I decided to make it a homage to Francisco Tárrega and to our most beloved guitarist, Andrés Segovia. I also wanted to include a première piece that would fit into this aesthetic. I started to research and discovered two pieces that had not been recorded before: *Five Anecdotes* by Andrés Segovia and *Sonata-Fantasia* by Moreno-Torroba.

The recording starts with Turina's *Homage to Tárrega*. I go through Moreno-Torroba and Rodrigo to reach the dramatic peak of the recording with *Homage to Debussy* by Falla and *Fantasia* by Gerhard. I start going back home with the *Five Anecdotes* by Segovia and close with a wink to the listener playing *María* by Tárrega.

*Can you tell us a little about the Torroba and Segovia pieces?*

I think they are both good pieces. The *Sonata-Fantasia* has a very refreshing impressionistic style for the guitar repertoire. The first movement is in a great and balanced sonata form of large

proportions. The second and third movements are very interesting and musically contrasted to the first movement but in my opinion not dramatic enough to fully balance the enormous weight of the first movement. Then the *Five Anecdotes* by Andrés Segovia are five humoresques pictures, full of grace. Each one has its own character and is very interesting in the development of motives and key relationships.

*You have also a live recording of the Aranjuez Concerto with the Orquesta de Radio Televisión Española.*



*Pablo Sáinz Villegas.*

Yes. The label RTVE decided to include in the collection *Clásicos Españoles* my live performance of the *Concierto de Aranjuez* with the Orquesta de Radio Television Española under Adrian Leaper. The concert was a big success and it was an honour to share this recording with artists as important as Plácido Domingo and Pepe Romero.

*Can you tell me a bit about your early teachers?*

I'm very grateful to all of the teachers and people throughout my career who have offered me their wisdom and experience to help me develop as a person, musician and artist. I was introduced to music by Julián Aliende, then I studied for seven years with Miguel Úbis; he was my first teacher. Once I finished

the Middle Level at the Conservatoire, I went to Santander for three years and studied privately with Paulino García Blanco; we worked a lot on the sound and touch of the right hand and their relationship to the musical phrasing; I was 15 years old and that deeply determined my present way of playing. Later, I went to the Royal Superior Conservatory of Madrid and studied with José Luis Rodrigo for two years. He was one of the best teachers that I ever had.

*After you completed your studies in Spain, where did you travel to study first?*

When I was 19 years old, I went to Weimar in Germany and I studied with Thomas Müller-Pering for four years. He is a very dedicated and great teacher and helped me to develop my musicality and my own ideas. He always gave me very good advice about what to play or what to do in each moment. At that time I also lived in Berlin and I had the most extraordinary musical experience hearing the Berliner Philharmoniker play so often. I heard conductors such as Rattle, Barenboim, Abbado, Mazzel and Levine – I will never forget the experience of those concerts. Berlin at that time was full of a

historical social blend that made the city unique. Then, I went to New York in 2001 to study with David Starobin at Manhattan School of Music.

*Which pieces did you work with David Starobin?*

We worked on numerous pieces from different styles. Some examples are: Bach's *Chaconne*, Berio's *Sequenza XI*, Bland's *Six Pieces on Spanish Subjects*, music by Giuliani, Regondi and Sor, Turina... Donatoni's *Algo*, Gerhard's *Fantasia*, Torroba's *Sonata Fantasia* and many more.

*After having studied in Spain and Germany with different teachers, what did you learn from David Starobin?*

Starobin is a great musician. He always speaks on musical terms which transcend the guitar itself. He does not impose his ideas but rather guides the student through to the right path that forges the artistic personality of the student. He taught me to be a better musician.

*Do you teach at all?*

Yes, I have given master classes at the Australian National University in Canberra and the Royal College of Music in London, among others. My advice is always, before anything, to be patience and exigent: 'Patience and exigency are the mother of good artists'. The student needs to create and develop tools of quality to mould music: good sound, articulation, different attacks and timbres, and vibrato. It may seem obvious to say this but it is important to keep in mind that music is built on three basic and interconnected pillars which demand consistency: rhythm, melody and harmony. Through them the student will have to phrase and frame the piece into sections that need to be related to each other and be unified through the emotional discourse of the piece and the character we want to give.

*You are doing a lot of international touring now, but where is it that you are actually living?*

I have been living in New York City since 2001. It is a great metropolis full of contrasts which gathers a very special energy from the influence of the different cultures and artistic trends there. The opportunity to live in this environment is a source of great inspiration; the many cultural activities this city offers makes every evening a festivity for the arts.

*You already have a very busy professional life, how do you feel about the demands of a performing career?*

I have played concerts in 24 countries around the world and on stages as important as the Carnegie Hall in New York, Sala Verdi in Milan and the Tchaikovsky Concert Hall in Moscow. It is tiring but I love to fly, to meet new people and to get to know other cultures and ways of life. I love my life and feel fortunate! Musicians are in contact with

beauty all the time, moulding sounds and structures to bring them to life; it is magical. The process of solitude, exigency, patience and intimacy with our instrument has a priority aim: to enjoy others. It has to be an exercise of humble generosity and devotion to the audience. What I have felt on stage through music and the audience is the most precious experience I have ever had in my life.

In March this year I performed the guitar concerto *Nocturnos de Andalucía* by Lorenzo Palomo with the State Symphony Orchestra 'New Russia' in the Tchaikovsky Hall, Moscow. It was just great! Music is an essential part of the Russian culture and the audiences there are so passionate and supportive that you feel great on stage. The concert was sold out and the orchestra was fabulous. I have been invited to return this season to play Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez* with them.

*Can you tell us about the guitar concerto Nocturnos de Andalucía by Lorenzo Palomo?*

It is a masterpiece of the literature for guitar and orchestra. Lorenzo Palomo is a Spanish composer who lives in Berlin. Personally, I consider him as the next natural step in the Spanish music after the legacy of Falla, Albéniz, Granados and Turina. He is able to create a unique Spanish music full of refinement, subtleness in the timbres of the orchestration and passion. His music lures the audience with fragrances of Andalucía. This concerto describes six beautiful Andalusian images with a great orchestration for full orchestra that allows not only the guitarist but also the conductor and the orchestra to shine.

*What are your future projects?*

For this season I have engagements with the Lexington Symphony Orchestra, Mobile Symphony Orchestra, South Bay Chamber Symphony, Los Angeles Chamber Symphony, Moscow Symphony Orchestra 'Russian Philharmonia', Petrobras Symphony Orchestra in Rio de Janeiro, Orquesta Sinfónica de la Comunidad de Madrid, and solo recitals in such important halls as the Musikverein in Vienna and the Spivey Hall in the US. I have projects to play with Spanish soprano María Bayo and make some recordings.

I will be playing guitar concertos by Castelnuovo-Tedesco, Guinjoan, Palomo, Rodrigo and Villa-Lobos. I will also play Spanish music for voice and guitar by composers such as Falla, Gerhard, Granados, Rodrigo and Sor and many pieces in different styles, particularly from the Spanish repertoire, for my solo guitar recitals.

**Recordings:**

Guitar Recital (Naxos 8.557596)  
Sequenzas I-XIV by Luciano Berio (Naxos 8.557661-63)  
Live recording of the *Concierto de Aranjuez* with the Spanish Radio and Television Orchestra. Conductor: Adrian Leaper. (RTVE 00009)

Website: [www.pablosainzvillegas.com](http://www.pablosainzvillegas.com)