

In Search of Alberto Guerrero. By John Beckwith. Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006. 159 p. \$34.95 ISBN 0-88920-496-9

Although Alberto Guerrero (1886-1959) is not well-known to the general public in Canada today, a number of classical musicians, particularly pianists, might recognize the name as that of Glenn Gould's teacher. In this capacity, Guerrero has not received much in the way of flattering press. Gould himself was dismissive of his teacher's influence and abilities, and this view has been widely and unquestioningly repeated in the literature. (A significant exception is Kevin Bazzana's *Wondrous Strange: The Life and Art of Glenn Gould*.) Now, thanks to this engaging new biography by John Beckwith—himself a former Guerrero pupil—the situation has been rectified.

The book is a chronological account of Guerrero's life based on extensive research in both Chile and Canada, and on personal interviews and correspondence with family, friends and students. Without exception, the record points to a man of exceptional musical and pedagogical ability. Moreover, Guerrero was admired not only for his professional attainments, but also for his warm and caring personality, and the depth of his culture.

A celebrated musician in Chile, Guerrero's broad interests—which included languages, philosophy, painting, food and wine—also profoundly impressed students and colleagues after his arrival in Canada in August 1918. Pianist Malcolm Troup recalled that “often the lesson time would be occupied with conversation about literature, painting, or philosophy,

aimed at formation of the pupil's intellectual habits.” Conductor Boyd Neel regarded him as “extremely cultured,” and composer R. Murray Schafer stated, “I adored this man for the breadth of his knowledge and understanding.”

Pianist William Aide felt that Guerrero was “revered... as the unsung progenitor of our nation's musical culture.” “But,” he added, “it was all done privately. There were no public conducting or administrative posts... There are no recordings of what must have been astonishing recitals.” Continuing in the same vein, Beckwith explains that “Guerrero's influence, felt in so many spheres, was based on one-on-one contacts, with pupils, with consulting individuals, with colleagues.” For this reason, perhaps, Guerrero remains largely an unknown figure, despite the fact that the list of his students and colleagues reads like a who's who of Canadian musicians.

Beckwith convincingly demonstrates that a book-length study was overdue, but *In Search of Alberto Guerrero* is more than a biography. Alongside the objective research, Beckwith provides personal recollections that make for a richer, more complex picture. The reader will have no trouble separating fact from opinion, as the author is painstakingly clear on the distinction between the two. In fact, his caveats almost impair the narrative flow at times, especially early in the book. Beckwith does underline areas where further research is needed, and he also recognizes the limitations of his inquiry.

While Guerrero's accomplishments are documented in detail, Beckwith also does his best to deal with some of the puzzling aspects of Guerrero's life. Why, despite an excellent career, did he leave Chile for good, maintaining no contact or interest in his native land? Why was he so unconcerned with fame or documenting his artistic activities, keeping very few of his writings and compositions, and virtually no recordings of his piano playing? Unfortunately, there are no clear answers, as Beckwith notes at several points in the narrative.

For instance, not a single copy was located of *La armonía moderna*, a treatise on harmony Guerrero published in Santiago in 1915. Nor is there any record of a treatise on piano performance that Guerrero discussed with a colleague in Santiago in 1918; in fact, it is not certain the work was actually completed and published. Guerrero claimed to explain in this treatise that "a reasonably well gifted person needs no more than four or five years of well-directed study to be able to handle the technical demands of the most difficult works." (Not to be outdone, Gould echoed his teacher decades later when he famously declared, "everything there is to know about playing the piano can be taught in half an hour."¹) Two quite different works do survive: *New Approach to the Piano*, a method for teaching beginners, co-written with Myrtle Rose in 1935-36, that featured original compositions and how to teach them; and a short article

¹ Cited in Geoffrey Payzant, *Glenn Gould: Music and Mind*, rev. ed. (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1992), 94.

entitled "The Discrepancy between Performance and Technique," dated October 1950, and reprinted in Appendix 1.

About the "central enigma" of Guerrero's life—the decision to leave Chile—Beckwith speculates that the hardship and economic uncertainty of life as a touring concert performer, especially one with a young family to provide for, caused him to reconsider. Secondly, the development of a new professional interest—the formulation of an original approach to teaching that would "discard all formal methods"—was occupying his creative energies, and Toronto provided him with an excellent opportunity to pursue this new passion. Still, Guerrero's apparent loss of interest in family and friends in Chile remains a mystery.

There is also the inexplicable lack of recorded music from this concert artist who performed hundreds of recitals over his career. Despite many pioneering and acclaimed broadcast recitals beginning in the mid-twenties in major centres such as Toronto, Montreal, New York and Philadelphia, Beckwith was unable to discover any surviving transcription recordings from this period, or of the CBC network broadcast performances that Guerrero made during the 1940s.

Nor is there any indication why Guerrero avoided recording in the studio, despite his reputation as a pianist of the first order. There are only two surviving recordings: a "shoddy LP from Turnabout" and a 78-rpm disc recorded as a birthday present for his daughter, Mélisande. They do not provide good examples of his art. Beckwith does

suggest that “Guerrero’s example and inspiration are manifest” in recordings made by his students, including Gould, Aide, and Ray Dudley.

There is also the question of Guerrero’s early musical training. Beckwith concludes that the “common understanding” is that Guerrero “was an autodidact apart from the lessons with his mother and older brother,” adding that “the claim is in many respects extraordinary.” Later, in a section devoted to Gould, Beckwith states: “If a comparison is made between teacher and pupil, investigation suggests that the claim of self-education is far more valid of Guerrero than of Gould.”

In fact, some of the most interesting reading in the book comes in Chapter 5, where Beckwith examines Guerrero’s approach to the piano and demonstrates the extent of his influence on Gould, both technically and musically. The list of Guerrero traits reads like a description

of Gould. It includes new and unusual repertoire (Scriabin, Ravel, Schoenberg, Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*, the Elizabethan virginalists), keyboard technique and posture at the instrument, practice techniques (“finger tapping” and memorization away from the instrument), great attention to clarity and voice-leading, and the interest in broadcast recitals.

All in all, Beckwith paints a compelling portrait of a vital and remarkable musician. The book is highly readable and filled with details of interest. It reestablishes Guerrero’s reputation as one of the country’s finest and most influential artists of his day. *In Search of Alberto Guerrero* is an outstanding addition to Canadian music history.

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