

Julian Bream

Laura Snowden

England

On a grey June afternoon typical of an English summer, I arrived an hour early into Tisbury station to meet Julian Bream for the first time. Little did I know that over the ensuing years I would be standing here many times again, looking out for Julian's car as he pulled in with a cheery 'Hello, Laura!' or waiting in all weathers for my delayed return train to London. I would find myself here one final time after playing at Julian's funeral; a small, private affair in the midst of the Covid pandemic, held in Wardour Chapel, the church in which he made his iconic recordings.

This first meeting with Julian was effectively an audition for the Julian Bream Trust, a charitable organisation which he had set up in 2009. He was justifiably proud of the Trust, which exists to commission major new works from leading composers and to provide scholarships to young guitarists and lutenists. Julian had created a concert series for the Trust at London's Wigmore Hall, with the first concert given by Jonathan Leathwood and the second by Andrey Lebedev, featuring new commissions by Harrison Birtwistle and Leo Brouwer. The Trust kindly offered me financial assistance to continue my studies at the Royal College of Music, and Julian subsequently invited me to give two of the Wigmore Hall concerts, premiering the Trust's new commissions by Julian Anderson and Olli Mustonen. The concert programmes were devised by Julian and spanned at least four hours' worth of music; across a four-year period, I would regularly get the train to Tisbury in order to work closely with him on the repertoire.

After each session, I would feel electrified. We would often have been working for several hours, and there was a focus and quiet intensity to the sessions which I rarely experienced elsewhere. My mind would be buzzing; I'd arrive home exhausted. As the train moved through the Wiltshire

countryside and the sun fell, and as windows outside twinkled, I would sit in my own world, oblivious to the chatter around me, writing notes about everything we had covered; notes which would form my musical understanding for years to come and which I have beside me now to write these words of tribute.

There was a stillness about Julian's home. The sound of a ticking clock, birds singing outside the window and, when Django was alive, the dog's gentle plod from room to room, revealing his amusing disinterest in the classical guitar. There was always space for quiet and reflection. Julian liked to sit in the same armchair, looking out of the window towards the blossoming garden flowers and the village beyond. 'Look at the three layers in that view,' he said to me. 'Isn't it beautiful?' I could see that it was, though I wouldn't have noticed it had he not pointed it out. Julian had a way of not just looking, but seeing. He told me he had been interested in Chinese philosophy for forty years and that he would often sit here in silence, looking through the window, not thinking about anything specific. Other times, he would sit with the fire on and listen to music on his record player, contemplating the view and allowing the music to transport him.

The stillness in his house was so different from the fast-paced life I was used to. Indeed, so much about Julian was different from what I was used to; he didn't have the internet or a mobile – our communication took place largely via letters, in elegant handwriting on his part – and it often seemed that he and I were from different planets. But this was partly what made our relationship feel so special to me; it was a dialogue across generations, a pathway into another world. I remember once we were talking about dancing and I explained to him what clubbing was (having only been to a club once, I admit that I was somewhat under qualified for this task). I told him about being in love ('well, that's the best, Laura!') and about my life as a musician living in London. His stories took me to other places altogether – from ships crossing the Atlantic and the people he met on board all the way to the rolling hills of the Wiltshire countryside where he lived.

Julian's attention to detail was remarkable. It was a kind of care – I would call it a love – of the small things. It was there every time he pointed out a particular plant or bird on the drive to and from the station. It was there in his devotion to whatever book he'd last been reading, in the way he described its contents and the effect it had on him. 'That's a nice folder. Lovely colour', he'd say of my purple folder from WHSmiths, to which I hadn't given a second thought. His attention to detail was evident even in his choice of words; he would take great care to find just the right word for

something, pausing for thought before declaring ‘that’s the word!’ As a teacher, it was never ‘you must’ or ‘you should’, but rather ‘now what *I* would do’ or ‘if I were you’. This difference may seem trivial, but it gave me the sense that I was observing another person’s approach and assimilating a way of working, rather than simply being told what to do.

Through his choice of words, Julian seemed able to conjure just the right images that would spark my imagination. The start of Britten’s Nocturnal was ‘shrouded’. The sound of the Coral from Mompou’s Suite Compostelana wanted to be ‘less materialistic’. He had a beautiful way of talking about sound: ‘It has a centre, and an aura,’ he explained. ‘If it’s jagged, it won’t travel through the air.’ Needless to say, his attention to detail applied also to the music; he emphasised the importance of taking care of every note, every sound, but not at the expense of musical feeling. One had to know when to be self-critical, and not let that impede one’s freedom.

Julian never gave me a musical idea without giving a reason why. This was very important to him. A phrasing or articulation suggestion, for instance, would always be accompanied by a compelling reason, and what I would take home would be less about the external manifestation of the idea and more about the reason behind it: the energy, the drama, the movement, the feeling, the character of the thing. ‘We’re looking at what the composer is trying to say and how they are trying to say it,’ Julian said in our first session. He didn’t play the guitar during the sessions – he had stopped playing guitar by this point, and preferred to play the piano – but he would often speak or sing a phrase to me as an example. I took this approach into the practice room, speaking and singing before playing; the idea was to know exactly what I was looking for first, and only then try to work out how to replicate it on the guitar. Sometimes it would seem impossible to do these things on the instrument, but I was encouraged to try, to keep searching; he spoke frequently about the importance of making the guitar sing – *truly* sing – in ways one might have thought unachievable. Sometimes Julian would have me try out three or four different fingerings, to which we would listen carefully to ascertain which most closely matched the intention. I really had the sense that I was seeing how Julian himself might have practised; I was learning a way of working rather than a set of instructions.

Musical feeling was paramount. ‘Musical feeling is a kind of empathy with a particular idea,’ I remember him telling me. ‘You have to feel something from within! Ultimately, the playing must be a transmission of what you feel.’ He seemed to have a sixth sense for when I was truly feeling the music from within, and when I wasn’t entirely convinced myself. ‘In the end, you’re the one who has

to play it,' he made sure to tell me early on in our relationship; 'and there's nothing worse than going on stage and doing something you don't believe in!' I took this to heart, knowing how much conviction Julian himself had in his playing. He encouraged me to trust my instincts, telling me 'you know when it's right.' Rather than feeling increasingly dependent on him, as one easily can with a teacher, I felt increasingly able to trust my musical instincts and to use the approach he had taught me to work for myself. Indeed, he preferred not to call our work 'lessons' or to label his advice as 'teaching'. 'In this business of teaching,' he said to me once, ' – if that's what you can call what we're doing – what we're really trying to do is to teach you to teach yourself.' And that he did.

In his retirement, Julian delighted in simply spending hours a day listening to music, to pieces both new and familiar, something he hadn't had the time to do during his busy concert career. Listening to the radio and to records seemed to give him great meaning, clarity and solace in the final years of his life. 'Music is a way of life,' he said to me as we drove through the Wiltshire hills on that June afternoon. His approach to life and to music seemed intimately linked – his attention to detail, his curiosity, his desire to learn, his love of the small things. The connection was there in his concentration and focus, his desire for stillness and simplicity, and, of course, in his humour, his ability to take things lightly, to balance that all-important relationship between self-criticism and freedom. 'Music can pull you through,' he told me once; I had the sense of somebody who had overcome the odds and shown great resilience throughout his life. He certainly empathised with my inner world and understood life's ups and downs: 'The important thing is not to be defeated, Laura!'

I got the impression of a person who was deeply true to themselves, a person who knew how to appreciate the small things, a person who was always learning, an unpretentious, honest person who spoke their mind and followed their heart; and all this transformed him in my mind from *the* Julian Bream to just, well... Julian. We shared some beautiful moments – listening to music on his record player, walking with Django, the informal concerts I gave at his house, telling him about my love life, hearing him play the song Laura to me on the piano – and in the end, it wasn't about him being Julian Bream, but about the values and lessons he had imparted. And it is those very values which made him into the Julian Bream we know and love, the Julian Bream whose dedication to the guitar leaves a legacy of outstanding commissions, recordings and a charitable Trust, and whose unique artistry and profound feeling for music transcended the instrument and spoke directly to people's hearts.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Snowden studied with Julian Bream and gave two of the Bream Trust recitals at Wigmore Hall, premiering his latest commissions; this led to international recognition and festival debuts across Europe and the US. Her musical work has ranged from performing at Shakespeare's Globe with her folk group Tir Eolas at the invitation of John Williams, to recording Lisa Streich's new guitar concerto with the Deutsches Symphonie Orchester Berlin. As a composer, she has been commissioned by the Park Lane Group, ABRSM, Birmingham Symphony Hall and International Guitar Foundation. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6012-4756>. E-mail: lurasnowdenguitarist@gmail.com