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GUY, MARTIN, DJANGO

This year's BBC Proms season has a gypsy in its soul, as JOHN FORDHAM discovers.



Guy Barker isn't one to blink under pressure, but if he's going to, it'll be sometime between July and October.

For several years past, Barker's life in the summer months has been taken over in preparation for the London Jazz Festival's popular curtain-raiser Jazz Voice - a cast-of-thousands extravaganza for which he's the bandleader, arranger, chooser of material, soother of star guests, and conductor. But every recent year too, the demand for his services as a composer has steadily risen, while his long-established status as a first-call trumpeter still brings a flood of invites. Barker was

recently the MD on a Thames barge for a big-band-and-vocals gig on the Queen's Jubilee celebrations, the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra has commissioned a symphony devoted to Miles Davis that premieres in Manchester in October and he's been invited to contribute a work to the Benjamin Britten centenary celebrations in 2013.

This ever-amiable workaholic isn't inclined to leave any spare moments unoccupied, however. On August 31 he conducts the Britten Sinfonia, a big band, and master-guitarist Martin Taylor with his Spirit of Django group at the BBC Proms

performance of the Spirit of Django Suite. It's a 50 minute-plus concerto, composed around six original Django-inspired themes of Taylor's. When the guitarist first participated in an early version on the Liverpool premiere two years ago, he says 'It almost took my breath away. Guy's orchestration was so beautiful.'

When we talk for JazzUK, Barker and I remind each other that this isn't the first time we've discussed the Taylor concerto and that the previous occasion involved one or two literally painful memories as well as a lot of pleasurable ones. In summer 2010, Barker was preparing



that year's Jazz Voice, alongside touring the USA in the trumpet section of Phil Collins' big band, conducting orchestras playing the pieces he wrote for singer Paloma Faith and completing the first version of the Django suite for Martin Taylor in time for its October premiere at the International Guitar Festival in Birkenhead. But the onslaught took its toll, even on him. He lost a fortnight of that packed schedule to a frozen shoulder brought on by hunching for hours between the piano to his right and the computer screen in front of him. All the projects went closer to the wire than Barker had ever taken them before.

In the end, of course, it all worked like a charm. 'I did have moments of wondering how I'd get the concerto and Jazz Voice done in time,' a chuckling Barker reflects. 'Even before I had that shoulder problem and stopped work, writing the first four minutes of Martin's concerto - the commission was for 50 minutes - had taken me eight days. But something clicks when you start to hear how the piece will work, and once that happens, even if there's still a lot to do, I'm happy.'

The association between Guy Barker and Martin Taylor goes back a long way. They played together in 1972

in the Harrow Youth Jazz Orchestra, when the guitarist was 15 and the trumpeter 12. 'That was about the time I'd only just realised that a lot of jazz was improvised,' says Barker. 'My mum found a cassette of us playing then, with the date in my dad's writing, March 16, 1972. Martin was way ahead of most of us; he sounded good even then. I reminded him recently that this year's our 40th anniversary!'

Though the two worked together on and off across the decades, nothing like the guitar concerto was ever envisaged, not least because Barker was primarily a trumpet player

Photo: William Ellis

who wrote tunes, not a big-scale composer. Then in 2006 he was not only invited to San Diego to play at a Mozart festival, but asked to bring some Mozart-inspired original pieces with him. The result was *The Amadeus Suite*, part of which he has called his 'jazz noir' variations on *The Magic Flute*, which mix a gumshoe-movie spoken narrative written by author Robert Ryan and a big band score evocative of old Bogart-Bacall soundtracks with a little of the compositional approach of Colin Towns.

Martin Taylor takes up the story over the wire from a 104-degree Nashville, Tennessee, where he's recording a new album: 'Dave Tracey, who runs the International Guitar Festival in Birkenhead, had wanted to do something special for their 25th anniversary,' he says. 'I've played there every year, and been festival patron for the past two. The 25th coincided with Django Reinhardt's 100th birthday, so Dave suggested I do something special with my *Spirit of Django* band. Guy and I had begun to talk about collaborating orchestrally, so I got Dave to check out Guy's orchestral work when his *Amadeus Project* came to Liverpool. He liked Guy's writing, so that's how it began.'

'It was on and off for a long time,' Barker remembers, 'It didn't finally get the go-ahead until 2010. The budget allowed me 24 strings, a harp and two French horns from the Liverpool Philharmonic. From the jazz side I brought in four saxes who could double woodwinds and other big band players. At first I had no idea what to do, how best to reflect Martin's amazing playing, but when he suggested using the whole *Spirit of Django* band I began to find a way.' Taylor describes the approach they developed, built around six of the guitarist's own themes, as maintaining 'a small group vibe within the orchestral setting, which would include accordion and clarinet/soprano sax as other soloists.'

Taylor had formed *Spirit of Django* in

1994, toward the end of his playing partnership with former Django associate Stephane Grappelli. The group, which included accordionist Jack Embrow, was dedicated to the music of the Hot Club de France. For the Prom, the band will feature Alan Barnes on clarinet and soprano and Karen Street on accordion. Barker quickly came to feel that the strengths of that ensemble would allow him to make the piece much more of a collaboration than simply an attempt to create a frame around Martin Taylor's solo playing.

'It was turning into a concerto grosso [a concerto featuring a small ensemble rather than a single soloist] now,' Barker says. 'I went up to Scotland to spend a day with Martin and by the end of it he'd given me six pieces of handwritten manuscript of the tunes and a biography of Django Reinhardt. I read the book, began to think about classical influences on Django, particularly Debussy, and then I thought, this is about Django, but also about the people around him and about France itself. So there's a strong Debussy presence in it as well as a funny cartoon-music piece of Martin's called *Monsieur Jacques*, inspired by the comic actor and filmmaker Jacques Tati.'

Late in the summer of 2010, when Taylor was at Barker's Chiswick flat listening to the simulated orchestral sounds emerging from the composer's computer, the two took a lunch-break in the local pub. During the conversation an excited Taylor said 'It's my dream to play this at the Royal Albert Hall, on a Prom concert.' Back then it was only a dream, but chance intervened the following year. Barker had re-orchestrated the music for a full symphony orchestra and big band after an invitation to run a workshop project of his own choosing at the Royal Northern College of Music. This year, Radio 3 controller and BBC Proms director Roger Wright called Barker to offer a spare Proms slot on August 31. Did Barker have anything suitable for the *Britten Sinfonia*?

While Wright was on the line, Barker paced his room. With the symphonic Miles Davis project and *Jazz Voice* looming, he was on the verge of saying no. 'Then I heard Martin's voice in the back of my head,' Barker laughs. 'I've got something!' I said to Roger. He went for it, and I called Martin. 'You're not doing anything on August 31 are you?' I asked him. 'I'll have to check the diary,' he said. 'No, I'm telling you,' I said, 'You're not doing anything on August 31 except this! I've got 80 musicians and a Prom concert and we can do the concerto!' 'I nearly fell over when he told me that,' Martin Taylor says. 'It's all incredibly exciting.'

Like Barker, Martin Taylor is a man who doesn't stop. For the past two decades, he has played in over 30 countries every year and has students for his innovative online *Guitar Academy* in 58. Based in California, the Academy is run as a partnership with multimedia operation *ArtistWorks Inc.*, founded by guitar-loving former AOL programmer David Butler, and running the same service for other instruments including drums, bass, and bluegrass banjo. But the *Spirit of Django Suite* has a very special place in the guitarist's crowded life and the unexpected twist in his 40 year-long relationship with Guy Barker has a great deal to do with that. 'There was one section, I remember,' Taylor recalls, 'where I wanted a theme to go into a Viennese waltz, like something out of one of those cheesy 1940s black-and-white movies they rerun on TV on Sunday afternoons. The next time we got together Guy had written it just as I'd imagined it, but a thousand times better. We both felt a big sense of achievement after that premiere in 2010. It's been an amazing experience so far. But hopefully the best is still to come.'

Martin Taylor, the Britten Sinfonia, the Guy Barker Jazz Orchestra and Spirit of Django play the BBC Proms at the Royal Albert Hall on August 31.