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In Residence

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The German Guitar King

German guitarist Hucky Eichmann needs little introduction for the majority of Thai people. Originating from the Markgraeferland, the musically vibrant southwest of Germany, Hucky feels at ease in his adopted second home, the beautiful Kingdom of Thailand where his arrangements and recordings of the music of His Majesty King Bhumipol of Thailand, have single-handedly made the classical guitar a fashionable instrument.

By Philip Hall

The international press has dubbed him the "Musical Ambassador between East and West" and one Bangkok-based magazine went as far to call him the "Musical Ambassador for His Majesty the King of Thailand". Hucky's dedication to the music of His Majesty the King of Thailand is well known all over the world and early next year Hucky will release a new special album in honour of His Majesty.

"The very first album I did here in 1980 was called *Kun Nueng (One Night)* and it featured 10 compositions of His Majesty. I had previously discussed the idea with several Thai friends and they said everyone in Thailand knows the works of His Majesty, down to the last note. So after being graciously granted Royal permission everything moved very quickly and suddenly the album was finished in less than two weeks," says Hucky.

That album turned out to be a popular best seller. Back then, there were only three notable people who played classical guitar in Thailand, Ajarn Kate Arun Lertpipattana, Ajarn Sathien and Arjan Duan Srisa-ard. Once the album came out everyone knew the sound of the classical guitar, so in a sense it was the King's music that really made classical guitar popular in Thailand.

"It seemed that the guitar was everywhere almost overnight, it was in all the universities, in fact everywhere. This was followed by several guitar competitions and eventually this led us to start the Bangkok International Guitar Festival. So you could say that Thailand's first international music festival took its inspiration from His Majesty the King's music," Hucky reflects.

Hucky followed the successful *One Night with Gamgah Gamgah*, *Love in Strings* as well as *Huang Come Nueng 1 & 2*, but he was not quite satisfied with the record company's work on the first albums so he decided to start his own label to manage such recordings and AMI was born. Part of Hucky's plan was to create an end-to-end business so that he could guarantee quality control. AMI Records was later established to distribute His Majesty the King's *Candlelight Blues* and that was AMI's first attempt at releasing a music album, internationally. AMI later re-released *Gamgah Gamgah* in an audiophile re-mastered version, the soundtrack to *Suriyothai* with Richard Harvey and, of course, the



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"It was really out of necessity that we started all these businesses under the AMI umbrella and today we have AMI Events, Artists, Records, Publishing and Distribution. My main aim as an artist is to bridge the cultural barrier between East and West, the serious and the not so serious, the popular and classical music, to basically break down the borders and make music more accessible and enjoyable," he says.

"Next month I am going to Germany to make a new recording of His Majesty's music and the album will be called *Sweet Words* which will be released some time in January 2007. Again it will be a production comprising a CD as well as a musical score book.

His previous score book *Candlelight Blues - the music of His Majesty the King of Thailand* was released worldwide and has been recommended by the European Music Teacher Association curriculum and has been set to many international guitar competitions around the world.

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"When I performed with the Contemporary Music Ensemble of Stuttgart University I had to steal myself into a Tchaikovsky concert. I remember really wanting to attend one of the legendary Tchaikovsky concert conducted by the incredible Yuri Aronovich, but I could not allow anyone to know that I went to such a traditional concert because my field was contemporary music. I had already started playing and creating new repertoires for the guitar that included Asian music and Asian composers. And so the idea was to create an international festival where you have not only different styles of music like classical, popular and ethnic, but you also have different genres of the arts, such as dance, painting, ballet, mime and comedy, etc, plus a meeting place of various cultures."

"Another issue in those days was sponsorship, in a way it was more like giving alms to monks. I recall the very first time when I started the guitar festival I went to one of the top banks in town and I asked to see the President of the bank and, to my surprise, I got to see him within half an hour. He asked me what I wanted so I just said that the bank makes a lot of money and it would be nice of him to give something back to society. He asked me how much I needed, so I told him and he signed a cheque there and then, so that's how we got the guitar festival started. Luckily, sponsorship eventually developed into a more serious corporate business and with the personal connection to some top businessmen and the then Bangkok Governor, the doors started to open for the realisation of my dream, the first ever festival of its type in Thailand."

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During many of the interviews Hucky was giving at the time, the same question always seemed to pop up: 'What does this word 'festival' really mean?' He states that nobody knew what a festival was back then, but adds today there are beer festivals, sausage festivals and even a *Som Tam* festival is held somewhere in Thailand.

"With the second year falling just into to the infamous Asian financial crash, things were already getting critical financially, so I made sure we invited Gogol

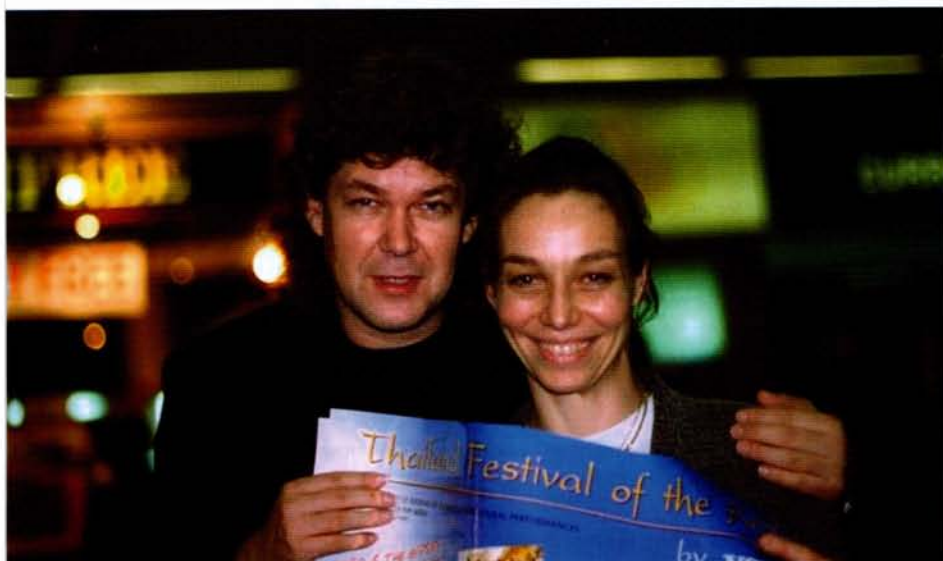




& Max, musical clowns from Germany to add a touch of fun. I did this because people had stopped laughing and it gets really scary when Thai people stop laughing and smiling. I then got a shock when many of the sponsors started calling and asking me to cancel the festival due to the unfolding financial crisis. I thought to myself 'no wait a moment, this is the thing we should be doing now, during the hard times'."

"So I called a meeting with all the sponsors and I reminded them that in Eastern Europe, for example, times have been bad for quite a while, but people always go to concerts and the halls are always packed to the rafters. This sort of thing makes people feel comfortable, perhaps they say okay we don't have much to eat, but let's have some music, some dance, something to hold on to that is food for the brain and soul. So they said okay do what ever you want because all the money has gone anyway. But we went ahead with the second festival in 1998 and it was completely packed out and people really came out in force and it was a huge success. Even though we planned ahead, in the end we didn't have enough tickets as the festival was held at The Bangkok Playhouse, which only seats only 700," reflects Hucky.

During the festival questionnaires were handed out to gauge how people felt about the festival and Hucky and his team were happy when a majority said they would welcome an annual event such as this. However, many people expressed their concerns of spending too much money trying to attend every concert, as well as having to battle through the sometimes mindboggling traffic jams.



During the festival Hucky and his give gave out questionnaires to gauge how people felt about the festival and they were surprised when a majority said they would welcome an annual event such as this.

A suggestion of doing a series of concerts over a couple of months rather than weeks came forward so AMI decided to form the Bangkok Showcase Series and hold the concerts at a bigger location with five-to-seven concerts per year and AMI invited artists such as Carlos Bonell, The Australia Ensemble, George Winston, Les Ballets Jazz de Montreal, the Martin Taylor Trio, the world famous Stuttgart Ballet and the legendary Pat Metheny Trio to Thailand.

"Over the years many of our original ideas about having a festival have been copied in various ways which actually sort of honours us in a way and which is good in the sense that many more people are getting access to arts events. However, I myself strongly believe that the focus of any arts event **must** be on the arts and the arts only and not on the social side or business side. Having said that, it is important to understand that today it is much different from a couple of centuries ago when European royalty would "sponsor" basically all cultural life. Today we need the private sector and/or governments to support such things."

However, some have tried to put business and/or social aspect before the arts, but in Hucky's opinion that just does not work; not if people possess an understanding of the true meaning of the arts, anyway.

"The main reason why I brought the Stuttgart Ballet to Bangkok was to honour Her Majesty The Queen on her 72nd birthday and to give Thai audiences an idea of what an incredible experience real world class ballet can be. I studied music in Stuttgart and the music academy was just besides the State Theatre and one day a group of us were having lunch when John Cranko (Director of the Stuttgart Ballet since 1961) came along to the small restaurant we used. For some reason this very famous man



It really changed their understanding of ballet in this country and Her Majesty the Queen, Princess Sirindhorn and Princess Galyani mentioned that it was outstanding.

started asking us, first year students, questions about rhythm, music and so on and it took me until 2004, while watching Stuttgart Ballet rehearsing *Romeo and Juliet* at the Thailand Cultural Centre, to figure out what Cranko was talking about some thirty years earlier," he says.

"I thought to myself this would be an excellent opportunity because I had had quite enough of all those so-called "world-class performances" that sometimes turned out to be second or third rated so I decided to bring a real world class ballet performance here and for a great occasion, too.

The Stuttgart Ballet has been around since the 17th century but it was under the legendary artistic direction of John Cranko, that the Stuttgart Ballet was propelled into the premier league of world-class ballets which include the American Ballet Theater, Paris Opera Ballet and New York City Ballet. The company's tour to New York City in 1969 was such a triumphant success that critics hailed their success "The Stuttgart Ballet Miracle" (Clive Barnes, *New York Times*).



So Hucky returned to Stuttgart where he knew a few people and told them his story of performing for the Queen of Thailand and they were thrilled by the idea. Unfortunately the Stuttgart Ballet is always booked for years in advance, but they really loved the idea so they cancelled another performance to come to Thailand to celebrate Her Majesty's birthday with the performance of their trademark work *Romeo and Juliet*. And, in a scoop for *In Residence* readers, next year they have cancelled performances in Moscow and New York so that they can return to Thailand on February 8 and 9, 2007.

"They told me that they really enjoyed performing here last time and that it was one of their best performances ever and everything went very smoothly."

"The reaction to the Stuttgart Ballet's first performance was enormous. I stayed at a hotel with them during the time

they were here and when I returned to my office it was full of flowers that people had sent in thanking us for bringing such a class act to Thailand. It really changed their understanding of ballet in this country.

"I was approached once to help start a local ballet company but I am not a dance expert, so I don't think I am the right person for that. We can only deal with the so-called "finished product" as a producer and promoter. AMI's aim is to present the best in arts and many of my businessmen friends think I am crazy spending all this money on top class acts. They ask me why we have to present the best which very often is equivalent to the most expensive. Today, there are many people who see the value in this and presenting to them the best of it is the right way to grow the arts market here or anywhere else for that matter. It is a little bit like with food, if you have only plain rice and you are hungry, you, of course, eat it but if you have some nice vegetables or seafood to go along with it, you start to truly enjoy your meal."

This will be the second time the full company of 100 dancers and full technical crew of the Stuttgart Ballet will visit Thailand with its critically acclaimed production which is an absolute must for all lovers of Classical Ballet but also for the fans of Contemporary Ballet, Modern Dance and Jazz Dance. The thrilling show incorporates the very best of classical technique twisting and turning in a contemporary new wave of ballet which has overwhelmed audiences all over the world.

Here in Thailand the Stuttgart Ballet will perform a fantastic programme that will include *Kazimir's Colours*, *Mona Lisa*, *Skew Whiff* and *Seventh Symphony*. All four pieces are Bestsellers in Europe and highlights of their programme which is an absolute must for all lovers of Classical Ballet but also for the fans of Contemporary Ballet, Modern Dance and Jazz Dance. The thrilling show incorporates the very best of classical technique twisting and turning in a contemporary new wave of ballet which has overwhelmed audiences all over the world.

When they perform in Germany it is so hard to obtain tickets, so when some Germans heard about the 2004 show in Bangkok, quite a few people from Stuttgart flew in just to witness their very own Stuttgart Ballet for one memorable performance, in Thailand!

Keep a look out for more world class artists coming to Bangkok in 2007 from AMI at www.amithailand.com.