

The Vue Weekly
November 22 – 28,
2001
Edmonton, AB



By **ALLISON KYDD**

It's all about the Benjamin

Last weekend was like Christmas—so many experiences to unwrap there was hardly time to appreciate one before the next arrived. Benjamin Verdery, the “American original” guitarist, started it all on Friday, November 16 at Alberta College’s Muttart Hall. And he lived up to his nickname and reputation for adventurous performances.

Classical guitar recitals often begin with the simple but dramatic effect of a lone guitar in the centre of a bare stage, allowing the audience (theoretically) to ponder the instrument’s curved lines and polished symmetry and its pure, acoustic, un-amplified sound. On Verdery’s stage the guitar was there, but it was not alone. Before long the audience would learn the reason for the extra equipment, but first they met the guitarist himself as Verdery bounded out and immediately launched into his renditions of Prince favourites “Kiss,” “Purple Rain” and “Let’s Go Crazy.” Verdery summed up these pieces as “musical snapshots of Prince’s songs through a somewhat distorted lens.”

Having captured the audience’s attention, Verdery switched personas. With his guitar pressed against his heart and a boyish haircut suggesting both the wholesomeness of Glen Campbell and the unabashed intensity of Gérard Dépardieu, he offered something completely different: Bach’s *Cello Suite No. 6 in D Major*. For traditionalists, this was a welcome relief, and Verdery himself calls Bach his “desert island composer,” the one he would

take with him if there could only be one. His devotion to the master of Baroque came across as he wrung full value from every silvery note while melody and countermelody entwined as if in conversation with each other. His dynamics were daring, as when the sound dropped to a whisper, making the dialogue even more compelling.

With the audience still in a baroque trance, Verdery introduced his other guitar, also classical but “electrified inside,” and his digital delay system. “Nothing is pre-recorded,” he said. “What you’ll hear is a lot of me coming back.” *Soepa*—written for him by Ingram Marshall—apparently “quotes” Bach, but in the layers of sound looping back on themselves, little seemed familiar. It was sweet cacophony (if there is such a thing) that almost defied description, with Verdery uncannily in control. (Incidentally, *soepa* is the Tibetan word for patience, which accounts for the exotic quality of the harmonies and discords produced.)

Perhaps Verdery’s encore was the most daring selection of all. On went his digital delay, and his guitar became a drum for Zimbabwean Thomas Mufumo’s *Song for Our Ancestors*. Verdery ended the evening jamming with himself, creating music before the very ears of the audience.