



Italian guitarist **Flavio Sala** grew up in a rich family history of musicians. He soon found his passion for the guitar and added to the family legacy. As a young boy he was too bashful to express himself. In time he realized that the guitar gave him a voice and a way to share his feelings. He would eventually take that voice to concerts stages throughout the world.

“I love seeing a thirty year old guitarist knock my socks off!”

– Steve Howe

“Flavio Sala has a great technique.” – Paco de Lucia

You’re from Italy but moved to Baltimore in 2014. I would bet that many people in Baltimore would rather be in Italy! Please tell me what went into your decision to leave Italy.

Good question, Bill! Many people kept asking, “You were born in such a beautiful country! Why did you move to the United States?” That was so funny, but they were right. Indeed, a few months ago, I moved back to Italy, because I belong to Italy. I strongly missed all the people I love, my family, my girlfriend, and my teacher. I also returned for reasons out of my control. I came to the United States because I wasn’t happy how the music business was going in Italy and Europe. I also didn’t want to spend my time teaching in a conservatory of music. I wanted to open a new market for my career, to take a chance. The only way to do this was to move. I applied for a visa and I got the famous O-1 visa. It’s a three-year visa for artists. Specifically a visa for “Alien of Extraordinary Ability.” Funny but that’s the name the government gives it. I learned so much during my stay

of almost three years. I got to know the best and the worst about the music business and human nature. So, at the end of my stay I was kind of shocked, I had to leave. Now I am a “new” Flavio Sala. I’m a more mature person, therefore a more mature artist.

You have a rich family history of musicians. Tell me about this legacy that you carry on.

There are four generations of professional musicians in my family, on my father’s side. His grandmother was a pianist, also his father and himself, all graduated from the *San Pietro a Majella Conservatory of Naples*, one of the oldest and most prestigious conservatories in Italy. They never became performers, but they were very good musicians. It’s also very interesting that my grandfather was Sophia Loren’s music teacher, during her high school years. She wasn’t famous yet, but she was already very beautiful! I wish my grandfather were alive to ask him more about that story; I was only six when he died. My brother, Simone is also a brilliant pianist!

Everybody wants to know how and why I opted for the guitar. I wanted to break this very long piano tradition (laughter). My brothers, one sister and also my father used to play the guitar, but just for singing. I never asked to play, because when I was five or six my brother told me I couldn’t play because I was left-handed. One day, my father asked me to try. He put a guitar into my arms and taught me how to play two chords, E minor and E major.

I used to be so shy, timid, of few words and had difficulty with relationships, even in my family. When I discovered I could play I told myself: “You will see who I am!” I was sev-

en years old and was already spending all day practicing the guitar and singing. That was the best training you could ever dream of! For me the guitar is much more than an instrument to make music. It gave me the best way to exist and communicate. A way to share and fight my fears, a way to deal with my feelings and a way to avoid going crazy!

You studied at the Lorenzo Perosi Conservatory in Campobasso, Italy. Tell me about your studies there and your guitar teacher at this school.

I entered the *Lorenzo Perosi Conservatory* in Campobasso, in the region of Molise, in 1994 and my teacher was Pasqualino Garzia. He studied with Mario Gangi, Alirio Diaz and Andres Segovia. Not bad, hum? That's why I consider him an open door, a direct bridge that allows me to walk through the past. I truly love and respect him! He also lived in Venezuela, that's why I love Venezuela too! While in Venezuela he heard Antonio Lauro and many others. I am so grateful to him for what he has taught me, with no secrets. I still visit him once in a while and play for him. What he tells me is always gold! There is no question that seventy-five percent of the guitarist I am today is because of him. During the guitar lessons, he used to say, "Music doesn't need good enough musicians. If you are not willing to work hard and become the best of you do not persist, go home. I am not here to waste my time." I was only ten when I started studying with him. Being so timid, it was a nightmare to play in front of him. It was very hard for me but later I understood that it was his way to test me, a test of my mind, personality and talent. He knew you needed big balls to get your place in the music world. I graduated in 2002, with full marks and honorary mention, which has not

happened in more than forty years, except for my brother Simone and we graduated the same day.

You had the good fortune to study with the legendary Oscar Ghiglia for several years at the *Accademia Musicale Chigiana* in Siena. Tell me about this experience and about his influence on you as a musician.

I met Oscar Ghiglia for the first time in 1996. I was thirteen and I played the "Sonata Omaggio a Boccherini" by Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco for him. He was impressed and invited me to study with him at the "Accademia Musicale Chigiana" in Siena. My teacher Pasqualino Garzia was very happy and encouraged me to go. I studied with Ghiglia during the summers of 1998, 2000, 2001 and 2003. He helped me learn to listen to myself and pay attention to every single thing I did unconsciously or should maybe I should say instinctively.

Imagine being there, walking through that wonderful palace and meeting Zubin Mehta, Raina Kabaivanska, Trieste Trio, Uto Ughi, Salvatore Accardo, Maurizio Pollini, Jury Bashmet, Franco Donatoni, Nicola Piovani, and the great concerts every night. What a happy and formative period in my life! I'll never forget it!

If I'm not mistaken I see an influence of flamenco technique in your playing. Would I be correct? If so tell me where this influence came from.

Oh, Bill! If you could have seen my face when I saw Paco de Lucia for the first time! I was just shocked! I was fourteen when I went to his concert in Naples. After that experience I totally fell in love not only with flamenco



music but also with all the technical possibilities that that genre offered. I wanted to discover and learn all of them! I took three flamenco lessons here in Italy, but more than ten years later and I kept learning by myself. I wanted to incorporate the technique and the flamenco feeling into my classical guitar world. I never said, "I am a flamenco guitarist," because I am not able to play with a cantaor or a bailaor (with a singer and dancer) I have no interest in that.

I had the opportunity to play for Paco de Lucia when I was seventeen. He told me I had a great technique, especially my right hand. That was something! I also had several meetings with him, in Spain and Italy. We never became friends, but he was such a kind person and I would be a very different musician if I hadn't met and listened to him. I've also had the chance to share recording

projects with his extraordinary musicians such as Jorge Pardo, Carles Benavent, Rubem Dantas, Alain Perez and Israel el Pirana. That was another important step into the world of Paco de Lucia. At one time I almost moved to Spain to study flamenco, to become a real flamenco player, but things changed for me. I got an invitation for a twenty-five-concert tour in Russia and I couldn't say no!

I really enjoy your performances and arrangements of popular music and music from movies. Do you mix this music with the classical in your concerts?

Always! When I was a child and went to a guitar concerts I always felt like something was missing. I wanted to hear a variety of music genres in one concert! Now that I am the owner of the stage, I enjoy doing it and people love it! Guitarists around the world

have criticized me. I have never understood why.

You befriended the rock guitar legend Steve Howe. You have also played and recorded with him. How did this friendship develop?

This is an amazing story, Bill. A huge fan of Steve Howe and dear friend of mine, Leonardo Bigott is a journalist for LaDosis, the most important music magazine in Venezuela. He went to the press conference the day before YES was going to give a concert in Caracas. But, before going, he went to a CD shop and bought a couple of recordings of mine and gave them to Steve.

He didn't tell me because he didn't know if Steve was going to listen to them or not. But a few months later, I noticed a comment on a video on my YouTube channel. Somebody wrote, "I just came back from a Steve Howe master class and the first thing he said was, "Flavio Sala is one of the best guitarists I've ever heard!" I guess the guy went online to check if Steve was right or not (laughter). I wondered how it happened that Steve Howe heard me. I knew Leonardo was a big fan of Steve and finally he told me what happened. Later, Steve was going to play in Caracas with ASIA and Leonardo sent a message to his manager, leaving him my phone number. Steve surprised me with a phone call and said, "Flavio, I will be in Caracas in a few days and I want to meet you! Please, bring your amazing Camillo Perrella guitar!" I was living in Caracas at that time. So, we met and had a great time together! Then we met again in Italy and in the U.S. I also got to spend a few days in London with him recording a duet for my new album *Mi Guitarra y Mis Amores*. We recorded at Steve's home studio. I will be al-

ways grateful to Steve, for his friendship and all the advice and things he has shared with me. We became good friends and always stay in touch.

In 2016 you did a tour of house concerts across the United States. Tell me about this experience and how you developed and booked the concerts.

I planned and booked the tour by myself. It was an idea that developed when I discovered the house concert circuit in the U.S. I played twenty-four concerts, drove through twenty-four States, for seventy days and traveled thirteen thousand miles! I made many new fans and friends around the country and also saw some amazing places. It was an amazing experience.

How do you approach your daily practice?

I am very methodical about it. I practice three to four hours in the morning, almost every day. I can do that because I practiced an average of seven hours during my time at the conservatory. I warm up by playing a new piece very slowly. In doing so I accomplish two things, I warm up and also learn a new piece that I want to add to my repertoire. When I don't practice I think about practicing, kind of mental practicing. Even when I listen to music, I am not only listening I am working! (laughter)

Which musicians have inspired and influenced you?

I have to say that it's a very long list and made by very inhomogeneous artists, because I love all good music. Starting from the very beginning, Andres Segovia, who made me fall totally in love with the guitar. Then Julian

Bream, who was so different from Segovia but so powerful. Then John Williams, who made me discover new repertoires for the guitar. Alirio Diaz, the voice of South America and Venezuela, which I love with all my heart. Definitely, Paco de Lucia, who literally shocked me! Then Uto Ughi, Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli, Luis Salinas, Chris Botti, Glenn Gould, but also Marc Anthony, Jennifer Lopez, Christina Aguilera, and many others. Of course some friends like Mango, Claudio and Giovanni Baglioni, Alain Perez, Rafael "Pollo" Brito, etc. They all have given me something you could recognize in my playing.

Do you currently teach?

I love teaching, but only if I have the freedom to make a plan for every single student. Everybody is different with different talent. It's very important to make a personal study plan for each student. That's why I enjoy teach privately and online. When invited I also give public master-classes.

In what areas do you wish to improve and grow in your music?

You know, while I was living in the U.S., I met Andrew York. I had been playing his composition "Sunburst" for years. After I introduced myself, he asked me right away if I also played MY music. I said "No, I don't." and he added "You should." I took his words so seriously. I don't know why, but they sounded so powerful to me. I went home and started to write some notes down that same night. Then I couldn't stop. In a few hours I had my first piece ready to play and it wasn't bad, actually I liked the result. Finally I have been working on and writing my own music continuously. This is the most important step I

had been missing. I learned so much playing and arranging other's music, but I have always felt like I was "telling" a story that was not mine, a copy of somebody. When you copy somebody, you are a copy, even if better than the original you are still a clone. I want to be myself, I want to tell and share my story, which is unique, original and it's mine. This is what makes me feel I have a special place in the world. Definitely I am kind of tired of playing other's music. Now I feel ready to introduce my music to the audience after years of fear and doubt.

What are your future hopes and goals?

My hopes? That people will love my music! Now that I am here again in my country, I am focusing all my energy on making it here. I am recording a new album, which will include my original music, maybe, a couple of covers. I never know what will happen during the process. I am also very proud and happy because, this time, I am working with a very good friend of mine, Giovanni Baglioni, a great acoustic guitarist himself who is taking care of my new recording. I still don't know when it will be ready. We've just started, but I hope it will be ready in a few months. Then I will be touring Italy and sharing the new work. Of course, I am in touch with all my fans in the United States. Next spring I will probably return for a concert series in Russia, a country that makes me feel so specially loved. I really can't wait to share my music with everybody. It's a strange and a new feeling, I feel naked but complete. I'm now a guitarist who plays his own music. Nothing better than that!

<https://www.flaviosala.com/>

Photo credit: Francesco Morgillo.

Prelude in D for Vello BWV1007

J.S. Bach

⑥ = D

Musical notation for measures 1-2. The treble clef staff shows a melody starting with a quarter rest, followed by eighth notes. Fingerings 'i a' and 'm i' are indicated. The bass clef staff shows a bass line with a 'p' dynamic marking. The guitar TAB below shows fret numbers: 0 2 2 2 0 2 2 2 | 0 3 2 3 0 3 0 3 2 3 0 3 0.

Musical notation for measures 3-4. The treble clef staff shows a melody with slurs and fingerings '1 2 1' and '2'. The bass clef staff shows a bass line. The guitar TAB below shows fret numbers: 2 3 2 3 2 3 2 2 3 2 3 2 3 2 | 3 2 0 2 3 2 3 3 2 0 2 3 2 2.

Musical notation for measures 5-6. The treble clef staff shows a melody with slurs and fingerings 'i a m i m' and 'i m'. The bass clef staff shows a bass line with a 'p' dynamic marking. The guitar TAB below shows fret numbers: 0 2 0 2 3 2 3 0 3 2 3 | 4 7 6 4 | 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 | 6 7 7 7 7 6 7 7 7 7.

Musical notation for measures 7-8. The treble clef staff shows a melody with slurs and fingerings 'i m a m a' and 'i m'. The bass clef staff shows a bass line with a 'p' dynamic marking. The guitar TAB below shows fret numbers: 0 5 4 5 0 3 0 0 3 0 2 2 0 2 | 3 2 3 3 3 2 3 3 | 2 4 4 4 2 4 4 4.

9

i m 3
m i a m a i
l i a i m
i m i a m i m i

6 2 4 2 6 4 2 3 2 4 5 4 2 0 3 2 0 2 5 5 2 0 2 0 6 3 6 0 2

2 0

11

3 m
m
II
3 i a m i m i a m i m i m

4 2 5 4 5 2 4 2 2 5 4 5 2 4 2 0 0 7 8 0 0 0 7 8 0 0 6 0

0 2 7 7

13

i m a m a i
II
m i m i m i m i m i m

3 2 3 2 0 2 0 2 3 3 2 0 2 0 2 3 2 4 3 2 3 5 2 3 2 4 2 5 4 2 5

2

15

i m i
2 4 a m i

4 5 2 5 2 5 2 5 4 5 2 5 2 5 2 5 5 4 5 0 5 4 5 4 5 4 5 0 5 4 5 4

5 4 5 4 5 4 5 4 5 4 5 4 5 4 5 4

II 1/2

17

i a i m i
4 o l o o o 4 o l o o

0 2 0 0 0 0 2 0 0 0 2 3 2 3 2 3 2 2 3 2 3 2 3 2

5 5 2 0 0 0 5 5 2 0 0 0 0 0

19

i a p i a m i a m i
1 2 2 3 1 3 1 4 3 1 4 3 1 3 o 3 o 2 4 o 2 4

0 2 2 0 2 3 2 4 2 5 4 2 5 4 2 0 0 6 7 0 6 7 0 6 7 0 6 7

0 2 2 0 2 3 2 4 2 5 4 2 5 4 2 0 6 7 6 7 6 7 6 7 6 7

21

i m a m i a m i m a m a i m
3 4 o 2 3 4 2 3 4 2 1 3 4 1 3 1 2

0 6 7 0 6 7 0 6 7 0 6 7 0 9 10 2 4 5 2 4 2 3

5 7 7 6 7 6 5 7 7 6 5 7 7 6 5 7 7 6 9 10 2 4 5 2 4 2 3

23

a i m a i m m i i m a i m i p i
4 1 2 4 1 2 1 3 4 1 2 3 1 3 1 3 4 3 2 3 4 2 1 2 4 1 2 o 2 1 4 i

5 2 2 4 2 3 5 7 8 5 6 7 5 7 8 10 11 10 9 10 10 8 7 8 8 5 6 0 2 2 4 0

0 0

33

③ ④ 1 3 1 3 1 3 4 3 3

harm. 7

6 7 0 0 0 0 0 5 7 0 0 5 7 0 8 0 0 7 0 8 0 0 0 11

<7>

35

1 4 1 4 1 4 2 3 1 4 1 4 1 4

8 11 8 9 7 9 7 7 5 7 5 6 3 6 3 4

37

1 2 4 1 2 1 2 1 2 1 3 1 3 1 3 4 2

2 2 4 2 3 4 5 6 7 7 8 9 10 5 6 7 8 9 10 8

39

VII

a m p i a m

1 3

10 7 7 10 7 10 7 10 7 7 10 7 10 7 10 10 10 10 10 10 10 9 7 9 9 9 9 9 7 9 9 9 7 0 0 0 0

41

VII

3

2

1

rall.

VII 1/2

9 8 8 9 8 9 8 9 8 8 9 8 9 8

0 7 0 0 7 0

10 7 0 0