

# Villa rides on string of pearls

By IFAN PAYNE

SOME years ago I fell in love with the music of Villa Lobos, through his exotic and sometimes fantastical piano works, as played by Nelson Freire.

It is sad that the music of this fascinating composer is so little known.

Villa Lobos was a true minor master of the 20th century. A prolific composer, his father was a Spaniard and his mother a South American Indian.

He spent most of his life in his native Brazil, developing a musical style which is a unique mixture of South American folk music and 20th century neo-classicism.

Although the cello was his principal instrument, he also played the guitar with small bands in the bars and cafes of Rio de Janeiro.

Of his reputedly almost 2,000 compositions (including five operas and 14 ballets) none is more perfect than the five preludes for guitar.

These were originally composed in 1939 and 1940 as six preludes, but the sixth is now sadly missing.

Michael Conn is an elegantly expressive guitar player, and he included the five preludes in his recital given in the appropriately intimate space of the St Donat's Arts Centre on Thursday evening.

His calmly poised

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music-making is most appropriate for these Brazilian works, each of which is like a perfect musical pearl drop.

Perhaps there could have been a little more inflection here and there of favourite phrases like the delicious opening to Prelude No 2, but such fleeting thoughts were banished by the quiet enchantment which he brought to this music.

The repertoire of the contemporary six-string guitar may be divided into two parts.

Since the precursors of the guitar are so very different from the instrument as we know it, the pre-20th century repertoire tends to be later transcription of music written for other instruments.

Thanks largely to the efforts of Segovia, 20th century composers have increasingly written works specifically for the guitar. One of the better known of these is Benjamin Britten's *Nocturne*.

This is a set of variations descriptive of a disturbed sleep, leading to a theme composed by John Dowland.

Again, Michael Conn's interpretation was a model of taste, with the fevered quality of the music aptly portrayed, and a poignantly played final *Ayre*.