

## A Guide to the Recent Guitar Works of Poul Ruders

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### Introduction

In a recorded interview with David Starobin, Danish composer Poul Ruders sums up his mission as a composer: "To entertain, to enrich, and to disturb, not necessarily in that order." (*Poul Ruders, "Poul Ruders on his background and Concerto in Pieces," interview by David Starobin Melinda Wagner- Concerto for Flute, Strings, and Percussion; Poul Ruders- Concerto in Pieces (Purcell Variations), Bridge 9103, 2000, CD.*) Ruders has been a composer to reckon with for over twenty years, ever since the British conductor Oliver Knussen presented a performance of his *Four Compositions* for nine instruments to critical acclaim. Over this period, major orchestras and opera companies the world over have performed Ruders's works, which stand out for their daring eclecticism and luscious orchestration. His music gleefully defies category, preferring to suggest various "isms" (minimalism, neo-romanticism, modernism...) briefly, before skittering along to other expressive sound worlds. Ruders is the ideal composer for our time; in an age of oversaturation of musical sound and knowledge (to the point of inducing paralysis), Ruders's balance between intuition and self-awareness allows him to make convincing musical decisions over and over again.

Fortunately for guitarists, we are prime beneficiaries of this influential musical mind. Thanks to the American virtuoso David Starobin, Ruders has given the guitar repertoire four significant works within the last twenty years that deserve a place alongside the towering guitar pieces of the twentieth century. All four of these pieces can now be heard on a compilation recording of Ruders's guitar music recently released by Bridge Records. Starobin and Ruders have cultivated an important working relationship that promises to birth new works in the future. Of course, David Starobin is no stranger to fostering relationships with composers- he has collaborated with some of the giants of modern music, including Elliott Carter, George Crumb, and Milton Babbitt. But his relationship with Ruders remains unique. Ruders and Starobin are close personally as well as professionally, and the result is that each collaboration is an articulation of their individual artistic goals of the moment. Even though these composer-performer relationships are as old as classical music itself, they are more crucial to the future of new music, and the guitar, than ever before. The electricity that results from collaborations between a living composer and performer is palpable, and makes a performance of the work a real event.

Writing for the guitar represents a true challenge for non-guitarist composers. They commonly gripe about three idiosyncracies of the guitar: 1) The lack of sustain, 2) the unusual intervallic set up of the fretboard in standard tuning (while the harmonic logic of the guitar is based on fourths, other string instruments are tuned in fifths), 3) and the instrument's limited dynamic range. The guitarist has the responsibility and the opportunity to guide the creativity of the composer in order to help him articulate his vision on the instrument. Any collaboration will reflect the aesthetic of both parties involved, and this is particularly enhanced when a guitarist works with a non-guitarist composer. Of course, it is important to know when to stay out of the way, and the diversity of styles reflected in the works written for him demonstrate that Starobin has cultivated this balance assiduously. One of the benefits of this process is that non-guitarist composers come up with solutions for compositional problems that often elude those who are more familiar with, and consequently more constrained by, the logic of the instrument. Ruders has professed that the guitar intimidates him. In a short tribute to Starobin in *Guitar Review*, he wrote, "Composers beware, those six strings represent the most awesome challenge a composer can take up. The guitar is possibly the most difficult instrument a non-player could choose to write for." (*Poul Ruders, Sympathetic Strings, Guitar Review 118 (Fall 1999): 25.*) When a great composer is faced with such a challenge, he or she becomes resourceful, and frequently unearths new paths of expression on an instrument. This is the reason that works by non-guitarist composers continue to be essential to the expansion of the guitar repertoire; while we have a wealth of wonderfully idiomatic music written by guitarist composers, each piece by a non-guitarist taps into that resourceful creativity and opens new horizons for the instrument.

The guitar writing in Poul Ruders's works is consistently virtuosic. When a composer dedicates a work to a performer, he can tailor the music to the performer's strengths and aesthetic. David Starobin is as intrepid and resourceful a performer as Ruders is a composer. Ruders took full advantage of the fact that if a passage was at all playable, Starobin would find a way to play it. Ruders and Starobin have collaborated on four works thus far: *Psalmodies for guitar and nine instruments* (1989), *Etude and Ricercare* for solo guitar (1994), *Chaconne* for solo guitar (1997), and *Paganini Variations* (1999-2000). *Psalmodies* and *Paganini*

*Variations* represent Ruders's guitar concerti #1 and 2, and both exist in solo guitar versions culled from the original orchestral works. *Psalmodies* moves seamlessly between conventional guitar writing and a plethora of extended techniques, including passages for left hand alone, arpeggio sweeps on harmonics, *glissandi* beyond the highest frets, and incorporating the retuning to a *scordatura* into the musical fabric of the piece. *Etude and Ricercare* is particularly challenging technically, not only for the relentless left hand shifts that cover the entire fretboard, but because the dense counterpoint demands absolute clarity between the voices. *Paganini Variations* contains the most conventionally virtuosic music of the four works discussed here. Many of the variations require considerable facility in scale passages and angular contrapuntal lines. Ruders is as eclectic in his exploitation of the guitar as he is in his choice of compositional material. We find passages of dense chromatic counterpoint, requiring fastidious fingering, alongside lyrical single-line passages. It is not uncommon to see harmonic shapes that are transposed according to the logic of the guitar fretboard, moving one left hand shape to different positions. But Ruders employs independent voice leading in chordal textures just as frequently. Ruders seems to be a sponge- he has absorbed several different approaches to writing for the guitar, and he calls on each when it serves the musical goal of the moment. Certain broad characteristics assert themselves throughout much of Ruders's music, and these guitar works are no exception. Rhythmic variability is a constant goal for Ruders. He finds myriad ways to ensure that the rhythmic material is ever evolving. Sometimes that means that he will write in various meters or odd groupings, sometimes it is the tempo that fluctuates, and other times he develops tension between the prevailing meter and an overarching polymetric figure. Rhythm is being used as a developmental tool as well as a propulsive force. The two concertos display Ruders's virtuoso orchestration skills. In the scoring of the tutti sections, he creates multiple dimensions of activity in the orchestra while retaining a razor sharp clarity. When he opts for more chamber-like textures, he coaxes sublimely fresh sounds from the orchestra through unconventional pairings of instruments. He has an affinity for large, towering chord voicings that paint visceral frescoes of sound. If Ruders uses the rhythmic element as a developmental and structural tool, orchestration and timbre are used to provoke a direct, emotional response in the listener. Finally, Ruders draws from a wide pool of musical association to diversify the character of his music. He has a particular penchant for referring to older music; allusions to the Baroque and Renaissance are peppered throughout his works. But he is an equal opportunity collagist, drawing freely from minimalist strains, modernist gestures, and film score styles. His eclecticism serves two purposes: first, it expands his expressive palate, allowing him to dip into the well of shared musical experience, and second, he uses stylistic references to engage the listener on a semantic, rational level. Quoting pre-existing material or evoking a familiar style is a bold compositional move, and prompts consideration on the part of the listener- it is, in fact, an invitation to peek through the window of the compositional decision-making process. Ruders joins a tradition, carried on notably throughout the second half of the 20th century by the recently deceased Luciano Berio, of engaging the audience on issues of style and context.

### **Psalmodies: Guitar Concerto #1**

*Psalmodies* (Poul Ruders, *Psalmodies for guitar and nine instruments* - Copenhagen: Edition Wilhelm Hansen, 1992.) is one of a number of sublime "chamber" concertos written for the guitar (and often for Starobin) within the last twenty years or so. Presumably, composers and guitarists alike started to realize that the superficial difficulty of writing guitar concerti (the ever present issue of balance) was dwarfed by the music business reality that very few music directors were willing to program works for guitar and orchestra. When they did, they invariably returned to the beloved Rodrigo concertos. Wisely, Ruders and others (notably Richard Wernick, Simon Bainbridge, Tod Machover, and Hans Werner Henze) realized that writing chamber concerti for guitar and smaller ensembles would alleviate both the balance problem and the programming issue. A subtle result of the smaller forces is that one of the guitar's greatest assets, its intimate timbral range, can play a major role in the growth of the work. In *Psalmodies*, timbre and instrumentation are the driving force behind the structure of the piece. The concerto in eleven movements ends as it begins, with a guitar soliloquy (the final "Exit for One" balances the introductory "Entrance for One"). As in a Greek drama or a Shakespeare play, the guitar comments on as well as participates in the rest of the work. Bartok's penchant for formal symmetry comes to mind as the piece unfolds in a loose arch form; in each successive movement more instruments join the guitar, and after two movements of *tutti*, the guitar steps to the edge of the stage to commune once again with the audience in the brief seventh movement, "Cadenza for One". The whole ensemble gets its own cadenza directly afterward.

**I-**Entrance for one (Guitar)

**II-**Solo for Two (guitar and cello, left hands only)

**III-** Six in the Air (Guitar and Strings)

- IV- A Fanfare for All (tutti)
- V- With Passion for All (tutti)
- VI- A Chorale and a Song (guitar, violins, viola, and bass)
- VII- Cadenza for One (guitar)
- VIII- Cadenza for All (tutti)
- IX- A March of Light and Darkness (tutti)
- X- A Prayer with Halo (tutti)
- XI- Exit for One (guitar)

"Entrance for One" begins with two triadic structures in measure 1-2 in a technique that reoccurs throughout the movement.

"Entrance for One" m. 1-4

By placing F# minor and F minor arpeggios on top of one another as the line ascends, Ruders has the use of ten out of twelve chromatic pitches, but the line preserves an audible melodic organization around the two triads. This approach of infusing chromaticism with tonally structured elements harkens back to Alban Berg, who famously designed his twelve tone rows to suggest as many tonal relationships as possible (the *Violin Concerto* and *Lyric Suite* are two well known examples of this technique). In the Ruders example, the downshift of a half step to F minor suggests an increase in gravity as the line ascends. The b-flat at the top of the gesture hangs in the rarefied air, momentarily, before a *glissando* pulls it back to earth to face the consternation of three chord clusters of minor and major seconds. But our hero tries to fly again, and in measure 4 makes it one half step higher to b-natural, before being pulled back to earth by clusters. These swooping gestures pervade the movement, and create a character of striving.

What happens next when the cellist joins the guitar is fun to hear on recording, and must be even more delightful to watch in performance. The second movement, "Solo for Two", is written for the two instruments to play left hand alone- in other words, all the notes are generated with various hammer-ons and pull offs without plucking or bowing the strings. Ruders seems to be gleefully imposing a great equalizing force on the cellist, for when he puts his bow down, his sound is even more diminutive than the guitarist's. Adding to the humor is the conversation between the instruments that ensues, as each scampers, both literally and figuratively, around their respective fingerboards, sounding quick, chromatic nuggets of sound.

"Solo for Two" m. 1-2  
 Con Forza Latente  $\text{♩} = 120$

- 1) left hand touch only- slap finger as forcefully as possible against the frets. No right hand plucking at all.
- 2) left hand touch only- slap fingerboard as forcefully as possible against the fingerboard. No right hand pizzicato or bowing.

If Entrance for One was Puck's opening monologue in *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, "Solo for Two" is the first appearance of the character of Bottom.

“Six in the Air” is pure textural brilliance. Ruders fashions the whole sound of the movement around an opening sweep of harmonics at the ninth fret on the guitar. The airiness of this guitar technique is expanded when the strings join in with *glissandi* on artificial harmonics, *jeté* bow strokes across the strings with natural harmonics, and *tremolos*. The overall effect is one of absolute weightlessness in sound- there is no grounding. This mood culminates in three luminous major seventh chords, marked with hairpin swells like sighs of delight. Just at the close of the movement, as the guitar floats away into the stratosphere playing distant partial harmonics over an E major harmony, the bass and cello ground the festivities with an ominous E sharp. As in the first movement, where the F-sharp and F minor half step relationship provided resistance in the ascending line, raising the bass note by one half step here brings the six weightless revelers back to earth.

“Fanfare for All” introduces the whole band for the first time, and begins with a triadic ascending figure similar to the opening of Entrance for One.

\*Fanfare for All\* m. 1  
Trionfale  $\text{♩} = 72$

The image shows the first measure of the piece for three woodwind instruments: Oboe, Clarinet in B-flat, and Bassoon. The music is in 3/4 time and marked 'Trionfale' with a tempo of quarter note = 72. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The Oboe and Clarinet parts play a similar melodic line, while the Bassoon part is an octave lower. The music is marked 'ff marc.' (fortissimo marcato) and features accents and slurs over the notes.

This time, the climb is staggered throughout the wind instruments. When the guitar enters, the music turns slightly towards the grotesque. The wind instruments sneer in contempt as the guitar and strings toll away at an ominous march. The ridicule in the winds is later passed to the guitar in the form of ponticello clusters of minor seconds similar to those seen in the first movement, in this instance accompanied by sinister, staccato oboe 32nd notes.

\*Fanfare for All\* m. 23-25

The image shows measures 23-25 of the piece for Oboe and Guitar. The Oboe part features a rapid, repetitive eighth-note figure that is described as 'cackling'. The Guitar part plays a series of chords, marked 'sempre pont.' (ponticello) and 'ff' (fortissimo). The music is in 3/4 time and has a key signature of one sharp (F#).

This cackling figure in the guitar will figure prominently in *Paganini Variations* as well. Later in the movement, the violins convert the cackling figure to downright hacking, and the result is disconcertingly evocative of Bernard Hermann’s bone-chilling accompaniment to the shower scene in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*. Meanwhile, the guitar, usually such a dulcet instrument, is playing incessant fortissimo *glissandi* beyond the fretboard. The end of this movement is not for the faint-hearted listener.

“With Passion for All” begins with another *glissando* figure in the violins which Ruders marks “weeping” (a possible reference to Beethoven’s inscription “*Beklemmt*”, meaning restrained, or choked up, in the Cavatina from the String Quartet op. 130, though in a musical language a world away). Whimpering might be more

apropos, and after the violence of the previous movement, one cannot be surprised. What makes this figure so pathetic, while a similar *glissando* figure in *Six in the Air* sounds exhilarating? In this movement, the first and second violins begin their initial weeping figure on D and A flat, a tritone relationship that immediately signals tension. In addition, the glissandi on harmonics in the earlier movement were primarily ascending, and covered quite a bit of ground pitch wise, spanning an octave. The descending whimpers, on the other hand, only travel one half step down, thereby powerfully suggesting the human voice.

“With Passion for All” also provides a good example of Ruders’s interest in breaking out of the restrictive confines of traditional rhythmic notation. Throughout his music, there is a pattern of experimental notation of rhythms. In this case, the unconventional treatment relates to *accelerandi* and *decelerandi*. For the final seventeen bars of the movement, the tempo is in constant flux. Every measure is either within an *accelerando* or a *ritard* to a new tempo, and as soon as the gesture reaches its goal, the tempo turns around and goes through another shift. The effect is that the music feels out to sea all of a sudden, as if some other force external to itself is controlling the flow. Ruders is very particular with his notation in this spot, and even gives metronome indications to the conductor along the way within the context of an *accelerando* over several bars. In addition, irregular groupings of quintuplets or septuplets are introduced to further erode a sense of clear pulse. The regularity is linked not to a repeating pulse, but to a steadily evolving rate of change.

“With Passion for All” m. 32-34

Oboe

mf f

A different way of eluding rhythmic expectation is employed in “A Chorale and a Song”. The movement begins with a neo-Baroque texture with the guitar playing melodic double stops over a continuo like accompaniment of quarter notes in the violins and viola. Just as the listener is starting to get lulled into a sense of regularity, Ruders augments an occasional beat of a measure by adding a dot to the quarter notes.

“A Chorale and a Song” m. 8-10

Guitar

mp p mf

The overall notion of four beats to the measure remains the same, but the values that those four beats refer to become fluid. After a lengthy chorale introduction, the violin enters with a beautiful modal melody in the same unpredictable rhythms while the guitar accompanies with a haunting, repetitive chordal figure moving from an E minor triad to a F# diminished triad. The bass, meanwhile, seems to be on the set of a totally different movie, playing a recurring F minor seventh arpeggio. Or is it a different movie after all? Recall that the opening gesture in movement I also juxtaposed two minor triads a half step apart from one another, except then it was in a melodic or linear fashion, and here it is harmonic or vertical. Once again, the orchestration is what makes the huge difference- the singing violin, the guitar accompaniment, and the bass (*con sordino*) murmuring away may be using the same material as the opening movement, but it will not hit anyone over the head, nor is it Ruders’s intention that it should. Of primary importance here is the gentle texture in the guitar and violin and the slightly disconcerting rumblings from the bass. Though Ruders makes a particular point of mentioning that *Psalmodies*, “has no specific religious contents or aims,” (*Poul Ruders, Psalmodies for guitar solo and nine instruments-Copenhagen: Edition Wilhelm Hansen, 1992, 2.*) this movement, with its chorale opening and modal melody, certainly satisfies the prayerful implication of the work’s title.

“Cadenza for One” returns to the sound world of “Entrance for One”. Here, all the materials from the opening movement are more overtly apparent, yet they are used to different ends. The half step harmonic relationship is present in figures outlining the intervals of a major seventh or a minor ninth. Triadic material appears at the climax of the movement with an ascending D flat major arpeggio. The characteristic figure of “Cadenza for One”, however, is the quick rhythmic repetition of four notes, giving the movement an unsettled feel.

“Cadenza for One” various measures

The image shows a musical score for "Cadenza for One" with various measures. The score is in treble clef and includes dynamic markings like *ppp*, *p*, *mf*, *f*, and *accel.* It features annotations such as "major 7ths", "minor 9ths", "repeated notes with minor 9th", "A tempo", "triadic outline of climax of movement", and "repeated figure with minor 7ths". Measure numbers 5, 11, 48, 51, and 58 are indicated.

“Cadenza for All”, the apex of the work’s arch form, is a *moto perpetuo* frenzy of 16th notes, anchored by a guitar part that comprehensively covers the whole fretboard. Ruders takes this opportunity to incorporate many of the timbral techniques he has introduced earlier in the piece, such as indeterminately pitched violin *glissandi*, pecking repeated notes in the winds, and divisions of phrases amongst several instrument groups. The pulse in this movement remains very constant and insistent, as the texture drives towards the conclusion- five full bars of *tremolo* strumming on an E major chord in 1st position with the orchestra doubling in unison on E. The wash of E major tonality is broken suddenly, as the oboe and clarinet play a *subito* F natural (one half step up) and the movement ends with a dolorous descending tritone in the contrabassoon. “A March of Light and Darkness” follows right away (another characteristic Ruders technique is to connect movements with an *attacca*, thereby giving the work a sense of natural progression- this is consistent with his attraction to variation forms, where each movement moves into the next). This movement is primarily an oboe solo, though the guitar provides commentary in the form of chord clusters towards the end. The movement closes with a trio of the bass instruments (bass clarinet, contrabassoon, and contrabass violin) making a less than joyful noise in the lowest reaches of perceptible pitch.

“A Prayer with Halo” occupies the same structural function in the piece as “A Chorale and a Song”- they are both introspective movements directly before guitar soliloquies. If “A Chorale and a Song” hinted at sacred music with its modal texture and chorale introduction, “A Prayer with Halo” makes no effort at disguising the association. It begins with viola and guitar in unison, playing figures with similarly irregular rhythms as in the previous slow movement. The direct unisons are broken periodically, and create some strikingly beautiful momentary intervallic relationships between the two instruments. The pairing of these instruments is itself a stroke of genius; the viola’s mellow tone seems to emerge directly out of the attack of the guitar and extend its duration as if by breathing into its sound.

"A Prayer with Halo" m. 18-19

After this searching chant-like introduction, the other instruments enter, and provide an Aflat major pillow floating underneath the guitar and viola. With a renewed sense of their relationship to this newfound tonic, the two instruments continue to play in unison, now exploring several of the church modes, such as Lydian, Aeolian, and Mixolydian. The music is truly transcendent, and offers up a prayer for all the mortal flaws exposed in the earlier movements. As a transition to the final movement, the bass and guitar are paired, in a decidedly more ominous caste.

The final commentary on the proceedings, "Exit for One", again returns to the more angular language of the previous guitar solo movements. But the character is notably less buoyant. After tuning down to E-flat at the end of the previous movement (the *glissando* with the tuning peg is integrated into the piece), E-flat becomes the central pitch of "Exit for One", around which Ruders hammers home the importance of the half step juxtaposition that has been present throughout the entire piece. The movement is written in two treble clef staves, underscoring the independence between the bass movement and the activity in the higher registers. Three loud, tolling tritons in the bass signal the close of the work, and the music fades away into dissolute guitar harmonics.

"Exit for One" various measures

*Psalmodies* displays many of the broad themes present in Ruders's music. His allusion to organum in the penultimate movement and his use of a choral texture in the sixth movement are references to older stylistic forms. The motivation for using these textures is consistent with how he employs the collage technique—eclectic sounds are brought in not for the fetishistic pleasure of being contrary, but in the service of drawing on emotional associations with a shared knowledge of music history. His experiments with rhythm and notation point to an interest in dividing musical time in an organic fashion. Throughout *Psalmodies*, (especially in mvts. 2, 3, 5) Ruders builds long stretches of music out of sheer sound, extending material by shaping large gestures out of instrumental texture.

#### Solo works: Etude and Ricercare and Chaconne

Chronologically, Ruders' next two guitar works are the formidable *Etude and Ricercare* (1994)(Poul Ruders, *Etude and Ricercare- Copenhagen: Edition Wilhelm Hansen, 1998.*), and the introspective *Chaconne* (1997)(Poul Ruders, *Chaconne- Copenhagen: Edition Wilhelm Hansen, 1998.*), both for solo guitar. They share a common approach to rhythm, one that can be seen as an outgrowth of some of the techniques previously mentioned in the discussion of *Psalmodies*. And they both engage the listener in a dialogue about the relationship between their titles and their music.

Do not be surprised if you fail to totally grasp *Etude and Ricercare* on first hearing- this is dense, polyphonic music that is as much about the process as the result. The *ricercare* was a popular form with organists in the Renaissance and Baroque. The word literally means “to search out,” - typically, a *ricercare* was a solemn work of imitative counterpoint. Ruders’s *Etude and Ricercare* balances a Renaissance and Baroque ethos with more contemporary materials. The pitch language that Ruders uses in the work is uncompromisingly modernist, with a heavy reliance on minor ninths, tritones, minor sevenths, and major sevenths. The meter for the duration of this *ricercare* is 3/2 (a nod to the Renaissance, when the prevailing pulse frequently represented larger values to the bar), and while the *etude* does not have a fixed meter, it is comprised entirely of various divisions of 8th note groups. With the exception of a handful of short *ritardando* passages, there are only two tempo changes through the entire thirteen-minute piece- one between the end of the *etude* and the beginning of the *ricercare*, and the other three measures before the end of the entire work. Both movements, but especially the *ricercare*, are explicitly non-vertical; they prioritize the continuity of individual lines above their momentary harmonic relationships. All of these characteristics point to various stringent guidelines that Ruders seemed to impose upon himself before writing the piece, making it a veritable compositional puzzle. Add to these self-imposed restrictions the fact that the guitar is an instrument that resists pure polyphonic writing (note how many “contrapuntal” works for the instrument employ implied counterpoint, taking advantage of the idiomatic *style brisé*, or broken style), and it becomes clear that Ruders has presented himself with quite a daunting task. *Etude and Ricercare* responds to the challenge to write a truly polyphonic work in Renaissance style, in a chromatic pitch language, and on a terribly stubborn instrument.

In an email correspondence, Ruders generously shared some of the secrets of his compositional toolbox. He periodically employs a rigorous system in generating the pitch content in his music that is based on the organization of English bell change ringing (contemporary guitar aficionados will note that Elliott Carter’s *Changes* was partially inspired by the same phenomenon). The ringing mechanism was designed to minimize repetitions of the order in which the bells sounded. Ruders modeled his own systematic approach around this concept, juxtaposing consistent elements, in this case notes, without any literal repetitions of the order of appearances of those elements. Over the years, Ruders diluted the process somewhat, and came up with a tongue in cheek name, “*minimorphoses*,” a hybrid of Latin and Greek that translates to “gradual variation on a minimal level.” *Etude and Ricercare* is one product of this approach towards maximizing variation and minimizing repetition. Ruders was careful to point out that, “the listener should never have his or her face rubbed into the ‘system’ behind a piece.” (*Poul Ruders, interview by author, 16 October 2003, email correspondence.*) Like any similarly systematic tool at a composer’s disposal (serialism, aleatoricism, minimalism), if the system trumps the overall expression, then all is for naught.

That said, process is, at its best, an expression of aesthetics. The *minimorphoses* in *Etude and Ricercare* can be a beacon to help the listener approach the work. Ruders retains growth and evolution in both the rhythmic and pitch material by using this concept of gradual variation on a minimal level. For instance, in the *Etude*, Ruders elects to omit a time signature, instead writing figures in various groups of repeated notes (i.e. a group of three 8ths, followed by four, followed by two...). While the first measure contains seven 8th notes, the second contains seventeen, and the third contains twelve.



Throughout the movement, the groupings are constantly varied, though the prevailing value of the 8th note is kept constant- an accurate incarnation of *minimorphoses*. Though dressed in fancier garb, this rhythmic technique is similar to that in “A Chorale and a Song” and “A Prayer with Halo” from *Psalmodes*. The emphasis is not on a consistent number of beats and beat-values from measure to measure (for instance, 4/4 meaning four beats to a measure where the quarter note receives the beat), but instead on the smaller grouping, and irregularity between those groupings provides rhythmic variety.



*Ricercare* is divided into three large sections and a very short coda. The first half of the piece is in two voices, and at the approximate midpoint of the work (m. 84 out of 164) one more voice is added to the texture. The music here seems to deliberate over every idea; once a motive is presented, it is turned around, and looked at every which way before moving on. Ruders has several imitative techniques at his disposal. After the initial subject is presented in m. 1, the second entrance in m. 3 occurs in inversion.

"Ricerca" m. 1-3

$\text{♩} = 48$   
a 2 voci

Guitar

*p cresc.*  
statement of theme

*mf* ————— *p*  
inversion of theme with 8th note variations

Two of the long values in the first subject entrance, the dotted quarter on A and the quarter note on G#, are filled in with passing 8th notes in the corresponding place in the second entrance. Since this work is not a fugue, there is no expectation that an initial subject will be heard again in another voice without fundamental structural changes. Nevertheless, it is clear that from the first bars, Ruders consciously varies all the material in small ways. Sometimes, the imitation is less direct but equally as audible, as in m. 6 and m. 7, where the shape of the motive starting on c" at the end of the bar is imitated and added to in the following bar.

"Ricerca" m. 6-7

Guitar

melodic shape established

some melodic shape expanded

*p*

M. 33 is almost a rhythmic palindrome in the top voice, with the second half of the measure closely mirroring the first.

"Ricerca" m. 33

Guitar

Each time listening to *Etude and Ricercare*, the piece reveals small relationships like these that were missed the last time through.

There are periodic structural breathing points in the *Ricercare* that are marked either by small *ritardandi*, textural changes, or drastic dynamic shifts. These points help to group the sections that are gradually building the rhetorical argument of the piece. Perhaps it is a coincidence, but several of the structural landmarks are punctuated by the prominent appearance of the interval of a perfect fifth.

"Ricerca" various measures

m. 20 into m. 21 rit. A tempo m. 52 m. 60 A tempo "P5" in an enharmonic spelling

Guitar

m. 112 into m. 113 rit. "P5" in an inversion A tempo end of m. 161 into 162

Meno Vivo m. 162

The first *ritard* in the piece includes a prominent A-E diad and arrives at a *tempo* on a B-F# diad in m. 20-21, the stark texture change that occurs when the second voice drops out and the dynamic changes suddenly to piano in m. 52 begins with a leap of a perfect 5th (plus two octaves) downwards to d, the next *ritard* includes an enharmonically spelled perfect 5th on the *a tempo* downbeat, and the climactic moment of the piece in m. 112 (ca. 68% through the piece for all the Golden Section lovers out there...close, but no cigar) when the range reaches up to its highest point, a high c", is marked by none other than a perfect 5th followed by its inversion, the perfect 4th. Even the short coda refers too strongly to this interval to ignore it; the *fff* in m. 161 is on a perfect fifth, and the work ends on harmonics outlining a G#-D#. Why the fuss over the ubiquitous perfect fifth? There are several reasons these prominent appearances of this ever so important interval deserve attention. First of all, the intervallic content of most of the piece steers away from consonant intervals. It may even be that one of Ruders's goals was to flip the notion of Renaissance dissonance treatment on its head, having the infrequent appearance of consonances treated with care, while the prevailing sound is one of "dissonance", that is, minor and major seconds and sevenths and augmented and diminished fourths and fifths. Second, the arrival on a perfect fifth that cadence points is a strong allusion to early practice harmony when unisons, octaves, fifths, and fourths were acceptable intervals for organum and chant writing. It is impossible to ferret out a composer's true intention simply through analysis, but the prominence of the perfect fifth interval at key structural points throughout the *Ricerca* certainly strengthens the notion that Ruders was consciously controlling the subtle stylistic incongruities in the piece.

The final section of the work, from m. 113 to the end, is characterized by a relative increase in the regularity of the material. The operating principle behind *Etude and Ricerca* thus far had been gradual variation on a minimal level. For the close of the work, Ruders allows himself to stick with a few ideas for a longer time. In m. 116, an E pedal asserts itself in the lower voices, only to be replaced by an A pedal in the bass in m. 117-118 and then in the top voice in m. 120.

"Riccercare" m. 116-120

Guitar

E pedal

"A" pedal in bass

mp

pizz.

and

cresc.

"A" pedal in top voice

mf

The technique of pedal point, crucial to form in the Baroque, is sprinkled through the final section of the piece. The insistence of a pedal note is all the more dramatic in this context because of the dearth of repetition in the piece to this point. The rigorous independence of the voices gives way to clearer vertical relationships between the pedal note and those above it. It is as if the carefully deliberated rhetoric of the previous eleven minutes coalesces into a deeply felt oratorical conclusion. Adding to the sense of finality is the presence of more repetitive rhythmic figures, often revolving around some permutation of the superimposition of three beats over two beats. The short coda that closes the piece is a brief reflection on the piece that precedes it. It consists of three phrases that are considerably more gestural and directional than anything in the rest of work. The first two ascend, climaxing on a high B, and the last descends, ending on a crystalline harmonic.

"Riccercare" m. 159-end

Guitar

Phrase 1

A tempo

p

Phrase 2

p

pizz

cresc.

Meno Vivo  $\text{♩} = 42$

Phrase 3

mp

dim

dim

The coda is a tender moment that stands just beside the rest of the piece, acknowledging the severity of the composition that it concludes.

Throughout *Etude and Ricercare*, Ruders alternately fulfills (pure polyphony, imitative counterpoint, somber mood) and subverts (modernist pitch content, *minimorphoses* technique, *ritardandi*, short plaintive coda) the expectations that his title establishes. The dialogue between composer, audience, and tradition is happening on a very subtle level, but it is ever present. Of course, this dialogue is by no means the only level on which to experience the work. *Etude and Ricercare* is the kind of piece that rewards and confounds at every turn. One can approach it on the microcosmic level and be fascinated with the breadth of contrapuntal techniques in evidence, or on the macrocosmic level and be swept up in its massive proportions. Yet, it retains a powerful sense of mystery that only increases upon further listening. I know of no other work originally written for the guitar in the contemporary idiom, or any other idiom for that matter, that sustains this density of polyphonic writing for as long, and with as much invention and intensity.

Ruders's next guitar work is his *Chaconne*, written in 1997 for David Starobin and released on the guitarist's Grammy nominated record *Newdance* on Bridge Records. As with *ricercare*, the mere invocation of the form *chaconne* carries with it a host of expectations. Traditionally, a *chaconne* is a slow movement in  $\frac{3}{4}$  meter with a harmonic structure that repeats itself at regular intervals through the entire work (as distinguished from a *passacaglia*, in which a bass line repeats throughout a work, even as the harmonies above it change). Not surprisingly, Ruders's *Chaconne* is consistent with this traditional definition in certain ways, and diverges in others.

*Chaconne* is written in triple meter though the designation of three beats to the measure is left without an indication of what rhythmic values those beats refer to. The result is that each measure in the piece contains some combination of groupings of three pulses, but the number of subdivisions of the beat is constantly shifting. The first measure contains twelve 16th notes broken up evenly, the second measure has ten 16th notes divided 3+4+3 (or 3+5+2 if you consider the tie from the second beat to the third beat), the third measure is back to twelve 16ths, but this time broken into 4+2+6, and so on...

m. 1-3  
Andante Amabile  $\text{♩} = 60$

4+4+4  
3+4+3 (3+5+2)  
4+2+6

whole note rhythm  
minor 2nds cluster

Guitar

*p dolce*

The rhythmic treatment throughout the work reminds us of the variable groupings in "A Chorale and Song" from *Psalmodes*, except taken to an extreme. Ruders effectively establishes a model of tension and resolution with rhythmic groupings throughout *Chaconne*. The few measures where the pulse returns to  $\frac{3}{4}$  divided conventionally serve as rhythmic cadences, and these are the moments that Ruders brings back key melodic and motivic material as well.

m. 7-8  
 whole tone theme in quarter notes  
 m. 14-15  
 whole tone theme rhythmically anticipated  
 m. 29  
 whole tone theme

m. 36  
 whole tone theme with grace note embellishment  
 m. 77-79  
 minor 2nds cluster  
 whole tone theme inverted and rhythmically augmented

A repetitive harmonic structure is harder to find. There are, however, certain characteristic melodic and harmonic elements that pervade the work. Two contrasting motivic ideas share the stage in *Chaconne* (see example above of m. 1-3). The first makes its appearance in the opening measure- a stepwise three-note descending figure outlining two whole steps. The second motive is harmonic and consists of the interval of a minor 2nd, suggesting scale degrees seven and one of a major seventh chord. The melodic material of the whole work is predominately stepwise, giving the piece a songlike character. The clashing minor 2nds add a bittersweet sentiment to the proceedings. At approximately the midpoint of the piece, the direction of the melodic material shifts- what had been exclusively descending motion previously becomes ascending motion (this awareness of the work's proportions was present in *Etude and Ricercare* as well, where the third voice entered at the halfway point of the *Ricercare*). The first ascending measure holds to the whole tone formula, passing through two whole steps.

m. 42-43  
 whole tone theme  
 whole tone theme in inversion, ascends for the rest of the piece

The next ten measures climb into the upper register of the instrument, arriving at a forte  $g^{#3}$ . This moment is not only the climax of the piece, it is also a direct inversion of the first three notes of the whole work, E-F-G#. For the duration of the piece, similar phrases to those in the first section appear, but now they rise instead of fall. The last five bars affirm the essential material of the entire work; the final chord in m. 77 contains only the notes E and D# (see example above), related by a minor second, and what follows is another tenderly rising whole tone scale. Rolled harmonics (ascending) at the fourth fret finish the piece with a shimmer.

These four composite elements give *Chaconne* its unique sound. The stepwise motion gives the piece its lilting, songlike character. The whole tone material allows Ruders to float above tonal implications, and emphasizing the pure relationship between melodic notes. The consistent presence of whole tone modality and the melodic motive of three stepwise quarter notes allude to the expectation of a repetitive chaconne pattern. The gently clashing minor 2nds add a bittersweet color to the piece overall. The rhythmic irregularity lends individuality to every single phrase, as if the piece were trying, every which way, to say something urgently intimate. *Chaconne* is a love song, but one sung by a lover desperately trying to avoid clichéd proclamations.

So why did Ruders choose to title the piece *Chaconne*, with all of the baggage it carries? Perhaps it was precisely the weightiness of the association that he was looking for. Preparing oneself to listen to a chaconne means preparation for a deeply moving experience. That Ruders chose to move us in this understated way further emphasizes the point. He wanted to establish the expectation of a profound, bombastic expression, only to make his point with sublime tenderness.

An integral aspect of the evolution of a tradition is the balance between drawing on well-entrenched forms and reinventing them. The composer who chooses to title his work sonata or passacaglia adds himself to an illustrious list of composers who wrote masterpieces in those forms. This, of course, can help the composer by establishing a set of clear expectations for appreciating the work, but it also requires that the composer grapple with those expectations. The composer who successfully sheds new light on a form with a long tradition participates in the invaluable activity of keeping that tradition alive. In his two solo guitar works, *Chaconne* and *Etude and Ricercare*, Ruders invokes forms associated with ages past, and revitalizes them by balancing a mastery over their essence with a willingness to put them in a contemporary context.

### **Paganini Variations: Guitar Concerto #2**

Ruders's most recent guitar work is his virtuosic second guitar concerto, *Paganini Variations*. Ruders's style is particularly well suited to the variation form. His keen ear for orchestration, deftness at characterization, and tendency towards eclecticism give him an endless well of ideas with which to alter a theme. He likens *Paganini Variations*, and his earlier concerto grosso *Concerto in Pieces*, to "a stroll through a hall of mirrors: the 'portrait'- the theme- is gradually being distorted out of all recognition, but it is still the same original walking by." Variation forms present a particular challenge to a composer aspiring to write a large-scale piece. On a moment-to-moment level, the repetitive structure of each variation is a natural organizing principle for composition. But how does the composer transcend the progression from variation to variation, and achieve a shape over the course of the entire piece?

*Concerto in Pieces* is a significant predecessor to *Paganini Variations* in the way it addresses this issue. The work was written as the result of a commission by the BBC to celebrate the 300th anniversary of Henry Purcell's death and the 50th anniversary of Benjamin Britten's *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra*, a piece based on a Purcell dance theme. Ruders chose a different Purcell theme- the witches' chorus from Act II of the well-known opera, *Dido and Aeneas*. The theme is presented clearly and with exuberance to open the work. The variations that follow gradually distort the theme, and include extended solos for the saxophone, timpani, tuba, harp, and muted trumpet. Though each variation approaches the theme and its orchestration differently, Ruders organizes the piece so that the outer sections are predominately for tutti orchestra, while Variations IV-VIII exploit chamber textures within the orchestra. If a listener decided to sit back and not keep track of each variation going by, what they would perceive is a piece divided into three large sections- the first, starting with the theme and continuing through Variation III, is characterized by involvement of the whole orchestra, the second, from Variation IV-VIII, includes more solos and pairings of individual instrument groups, and the third, from Variation IX, gradually gathers the entire forces again for the rousing conclusion. This architectural shaping allows Ruders to stray further from the theme, because the piece has an independent logic of its own. By the time we arrive at Variation VII, the third to last movement, the connection to the original theme is basically imperceptible. The movement derives its meaning from its function in *Concerto in Pieces* as opposed to its relationship to the original Purcell theme. It is not until the pizzicato movement that follows that we are reminded about the theme that we started with, but now the aesthetic balance has been tipped towards Ruders's original invention and away from the vehicle that was Purcell's theme. The minimalist fugue that closes the work sweeps the whole orchestra up into raucous fragmentation of the melody, but more importantly, satisfies the expectation for the reassertion of the entire orchestra. *Concerto in Pieces* successfully marries the requirement to approach the theme in a new way from variation to variation with the need to craft an architectural shape to the overall composition. Ruders's approach to *Paganini Variations* is similar; he balances exploration of the theme with original invention.

A brief guitaristic note about *Paganini Variations*: for the past several years, David Starobin has been working closely with the British luthier Gary Southwell. Some of the design concepts that have been associated with this collaboration are a cutaway body for ease of access to the higher frets, a thinner neck (Southwell spent several years copying 19th century instruments, and subsequently incorporated this aspect into his modern instruments), and the use of electronics to amplify the guitar. All of these structural characteristics of Starobin's Southwell guitars are well known to Ruders, and they figure into *Paganini*

*Variations*. It is not an easy piece for the left hand even with a cutaway, but it would be devilish without it. The guitar writing in the piece spends a good deal of time above the twelfth fret, routinely calling for fleet passagework up and around high g" and a". In addition, the orchestral score has been notated with an expectation that the guitar will be amplified. This has given Ruders quite a bit more flexibility with respect to instrumentation. He could be free to write delicate passages for the guitar with full orchestral scoring without fearing that it would be drowned out. It would be nearly impossible to give a successful performance of *Paganini Variations* without the use of amplification in some form. Ruders and Starobin should be commended for using these innovations in guitar design and sound technology to their advantage. In the ongoing debate over whether to amplify or not, it is sometimes lost that the history of the instrument has been shaped by individuals who were constantly reevaluating and augmenting the guitar's capacities.

The subject of the second guitar concerto is the famous theme from Paganini's *Caprice #24* for solo violin.



Ruders has shown time and again that he does not shy away from lofty associations, and here he has set himself beside Brahms, Liszt, Rachmaninov, and Lutoslawski in choosing this theme. And who can blame any of them? The theme makes for a perfect subject for variations, first because it is recognizable to any modern concertgoer, but more importantly because its characteristic rhythms and transparent phrase structure allow a composer to manipulate it significantly with the confidence of knowing that it will retain its integrity. Not to mention, Paganini was an avid and talented guitarist himself, having spent several years of his life including the guitar in every piece he wrote.

The theme at the core of *Paganini Variations* differs in one crucial aspect from Purcell's theme in *Concerto in Pieces*- it is significantly shorter. This means that Ruders's job here is even more challenging, because the frequency of structural repetition will be much higher than in *Concerto in Pieces*. Nevertheless, Ruders uses some of the same techniques in the organization of *Paganini Variations* as he did in *Concerto in Pieces*. The work is divided into four large sections that are marked off by the three introspective variations in the piece. The first section of the work covers the opening theme through the haunting guitar and harp duo of Variation VIII, as the theme morphs gradually away from its initial presentation. The second section, from Variation IX thru Variation XIV, displays more angularity in its relationship to the theme, and the orchestral writing relies heavily on call and response passages between instrument groups. The third section, from Variation XV-XX, finds itself furthest afield from Paganini's theme, as it powerfully asserts its individuality as a separate entity. The final two variations bring the theme back and integrate it with Ruders's work, which has taken on a life of its own. The first sixteen variations follow Paganini's original sixteen-bar pattern strictly (the correspondence between the numbers is surely intentional), the next four are more "symphonic," as Ruders describes them, and less rigid. The finale returns to the original skeleton, and contains six 16 bar structures. The elements for variation at Ruders's disposal here are instrumentation, meter, melodic contour, rhythmic grouping, pitch and harmony, role of the soloist- all the parameters available to composers in a typical concerto setting.

Ruders states the theme in a straightforward way at the opening of the work. The trumpets and oboes play the familiar melody, joined by the flutes when the harmony changes. The guitar, meanwhile, is playing its traditional accompanimental role- it enters strumming tonic and dominant chords. Something goes terribly wrong with Paganini's theme at the end of the sixteen bars. The trumpets slide away from their final concert A, and the violins are exposed, sustaining a D# (tritone in the tonic key of A minor) before playing a pickup into variation one. Ruders was so eager to get on with things and begin the variations, he started distorting the theme three beats early!

Variation One asserts the guitar's primary role as soloist right away with the familiar four note grouping of the theme in the solo part; meanwhile, the transformation of the structural harmony has already begun. In m. 1,

the melodic line in the guitar part and the flutes outlines an A minor chord, but the bass note in the guitar is a B natural, and the double basses and cellos play an A sharp.

Var. 1 m. 1  
♩. 108 *B natural in guitar over A# in cello and bass*

Guitar

Vc.

Cb.

This dissonant rumbling in the bass is reminiscent of “A Chorale and Song” from *Psalmodies*, where the bass outlines a harmony one half step away from the prevailing chord. These “wrong notes” pop up here and there in Variation One, often poking out flat-ninths or tritones over the harmony. As the variation progresses, Ruders hangs on to the sequential logic of the original theme, but gradually dispenses with any relationship to the original pitches.

Var. 1 m. 9-12

Guitar

Four bars before the end of the variation, the bass notes in the solo part begin to move in groupings of three 8th notes, while the melody climbs up to an F# and remains beamed in groups of four 16ths. This juxtaposition of two rhythmic groupings, a technique that pervades the work, propels the music into Variation Two. The polymeter of the first few bars of Variation Two becomes explicit in m. 5-8 where the guitar, horns, and digital keyboard play accented chords every three 8th notes.



Var. 2 M1-8

♩ = 108

Guitar

Polymetric groupings: 3/8 over 2/4

5

etc.

Variation Three also focuses on a figure of four sixteenth notes but now the characteristic shape of the original theme is adjusted. Here, each burst of notes is either an ascending or descending arpeggiated minor seventh chord. The opening four bars outline an ascending B-flat minor seventh chord, followed by a descending B minor seventh chord. The strong alternation between tonic and dominant that exists at the beginning of the theme has been replaced by the simple notion of a call and response texture reflecting the original bar to bar harmonic rhythm of the theme. The strings play a supportive role, holding a B major ninth chord in first inversion under the arpeggiated B flat minor chord, again demonstrating the use of accompanimental harmony one half step away. Ruders's reasons for choosing this harmonic dichotomy invariably differ based on context; the polytonality here gives the orchestration a multi-dimensional sound and preserves the resonance of triadic voicings within a chromatic setting.

Variation Four introduces the first drastic changes to the original theme thus far. The meter shifts to 9/8 and the groupings of four 16th notes are gone, substituted by sighing triplet figures in winds and glockenspiel. The guitar responds to another call and response passage with cackling minor and major second double stops like those in *Fanfare for All*.

Var. 4 m. 2

*sul pont.*

Guitar

*mf*

Variation Five begins with a haunting pizzicato figure in the solo part that is based entirely on the contour of the opening phrase of the theme. Ruders takes this contour and sets it in eighth notes in 3/2 meter, first in groupings of six notes, then eight notes, until the groupings become progressively smaller.

Var. 5 m. 1-2

$\text{♩} = 50$  *Mirrors the contour of original theme*

*pizz.* *4 note groups* *8 note group*

Guitar *mf* *etc...*

Variation Five also includes a brilliant instrumental combination; the guitar pizzicato is doubled by digital piano. The icy quality of this pairing combined with the repetitive groupings and the melodic pedal point on E evokes works of the minimalist school. Variation Six is a duo between guitar and piccolo. The guitar part returns to sixteenth notes in six note groupings over an A pedal, while the piccolo plays an simplified and syncopated version of the original theme in B-flat minor.

Var. 6 m. 1-4

$\text{♩} = 100$

Picc *mf*

Guitar *mf*

It is a disturbing, expressionist scene in which the piccolo is whistling away a tune while the guitar plays mad ramblings in the corner of the room. The ensemble returns in Variation Seven as the meters shift each measure between 5/8, 3/8, and 4/8. Interspersed guitar chords begin as minor triads, and later in the variation shift to major seventh chords, but throughout they are simply moved up and down chromatically in idiomatic transposition fashion.

Var. 7 m. 9-11

*Chromatically Placed Major 7th Chords*

Guitar *mf*

(Violin)

A delightful surprise enters in m. 8 of this variation; Ruders writes an entire bar of just sand paper blocks playing 8th notes. Anyone who knows the score to Bernstein's West Side Story will be unable to ignore the striking similarity.

Emerging into the sound of Variation Eight feels like walking into a luminous planetarium filled with stars. The accented chords and grotesque characters of the previous variations are worlds away, and all that remains is the incredible wash of sound created by a lush A minor/C# in the entire orchestra. The guitar and harp play octaves in unison in varying duple and triple groupings. The connection to the original theme, though tangential, is still apparent through the initial ascending minor third, and the descent from A down to E at the end of the first phrase.

Var. 8 m. 1-3

$\text{♩} = 72$   
3+3+2+3

*Min. 3rd up reflects contour of theme*

Guitar

Harp

etc...

More importantly, the variation provides a structural contrast to the others, and signals the end of the first group of variations and the entrance into the second overall section of the piece. Any large scale variation piece has to marry the disparate elements of a constantly repetitive formal structure (the skeleton of the theme which returns every variation) and the larger architecture of the piece as a whole. In the first seven variations, Ruders deftly dresses the theme in different garb, but with Variation Eight, Ruders provides the necessary contrast for the piece to assert its own large scale formal structure above the variation skeleton.

Variation Nine raises many signposts telling the listener it is the beginning of the second section of the piece. A swirling fantasy of alternating four and six note 16th note groupings provide a link to the theme, except now the figures fly around the orchestra between winds, percussion, and digital piano. The guitar remains silent until the second half of the variation, when it returns in the accompanimental role it took in the theme, strumming major and minor chords in a circle of fifths pattern. The guitar resumes its soloistic role in Variation Ten, playing double and triple stops with a predominance of minor ninths, tritones, and sevenths. This interval content mirrors that of Variation One, further underscoring the parallel evolution of the two large sections of the work. Variation Ten has its own unique character, however. Closely spaced microtones in the horns plead pathetically and the strings frenetically scurry around the dispassionate guitar. The guitar bursts into Variation Eleven with torrential descending arpeggios spanning the fretboard from high a'' (the corresponding Variation Two also starts on high a'') down to the low E string. The pitch material could not be simpler- the arpeggios alternate between tonic and dominant harmony. The orchestra essentially supports these harmonies, with the exception of the violins and vibraphone, who play as if they are wandering around in their own world, harmonically and metrically.

Var. 11 m. 1-4

*Arpeggios outline tonic and dominant harmony*

Guitar

*Violin and Vibraphone create parallel harmonic and metric field*

Vibraphone and Violin

The guitar and oboe double each other at the beginning of Variation Twelve, with insistent repeated 8th notes. Ruders revels in the beautiful and grating sounds of each instrument and his attraction to clipped, nasal writing for the oboe is consistent with his goal to disturb. At first, it seems that the violin part is still in its own world from the previous variation, but the material is actually a distortion of the Paganini theme, in a tied over quarter note triplet rhythm.

Var. 12 m. 1-2

*♩ = 108*

*solo oboe*

*expr*

Violin

The guitar remains tacet throughout the ominous Variation Thirteen. This variation contains some of the thickest orchestral writing in the piece thus far—dense chords in the high strings and winds are offset by pulsating chords in the bassoons and brass, over a pedal in the low strings outlining a C minor chord in first inversion. In the ninth bar, the violins, flutes, and oboe play a heartfelt melody over lush viola and horn harmonies, but one that bears no resemblance to Paganini's theme. This variation has arrived at the point Ruders refers to when he writes that the "original is distorted beyond recognition". After building to a dissonant climax at the end of Variation Thirteen, with the bassoons hanging onto an E-flat in the high register, the strings anticipate the next variation by playing a D major triad with the mutes on. The striking bassoon E flat then resolves down a half step to D in the guitar, which starts a disarmingly elegant melody over a D major pedal.

Var. 14 m. 1-2

$\text{♩} = 36$  *Melody in Mixolydian Mode*

Guitar

*mf* *SONORE ESPRESSIVO*

The melody turns to the Mixolydian mode in the second bar, and with the static “organum” accompaniment, hearkens back to *A Prayer with Halo*. David Starobin shared with me that many audience members at performances of *Paganini Variations* pick Variation Fourteen as their favorite- the earnest simplicity of the melody and the contrast with the surrounding movements really make this variation a special moment in the piece.

Variation Fifteen shocks the listener out of the dreamy atmosphere of Variation Fourteen with a mixture of 16th note and quintuplet groupings in the solo part. Variation Sixteen includes more idiomatic chordal writing in the guitar in m. 13, like the example in Variation Seven. Variation Seventeen is the first to truly break the sixteen bar structure of Paganini’s theme. Imitative texture starts the variation as the guitar entrance follows the initial violin and flute entrance. There are few overt links to Paganini’s theme, though the loose intervallic and gestural similarities are discernible. In m. 14, Ruders uses the orchestra in a supportive role that figures prominently in the Finale; the brass and strings play stabbing forte-piano chordal accompaniment on accented weak beats to egg the soloist on. Variation Eighteen is notable for a short guitar solo that sounds like *Caprice #26* might have had it been arranged by Alban Berg for his German expressionist opera, *Wozzeck* (which does in fact have a very prominent guitar solo in the pivotal tavern scene). Variation Nineteen reestablishes several strong links with the original melody. The symmetrical phrasing over the first four bars reflects repetition. The harmonies outlined in the descending string arpeggios are A minor and E dominant- the original tonic and dominant. These harmonies are obscured by the low strings and bassoons, who create a polytonal texture with alternate harmonies. The soloist remains silent for the second half of Variation Nineteen, again in preparation for the ensuing introspective movement. Ruders is savvy to remove the soloist momentarily before intimate musical moments. As listeners, our connection with the guitarist is personal, while with the orchestra it is one of collective awareness. If an oboe is tacet for one of the variations, we make no note of it, but when the guitar sits out for a while, it strengthens its return. In the tender music of the piece, this welcome reentrance of the guitar adds force to the moment.

Variation Twenty, therefore, stands as the third, and last, point of repose in the work. Its tone is distinguished from the luminosity of Variation Eight, or the innocence of Variation Fourteen. The guitar plays a reflective melody to very sparse accompaniment in the violins. The function of this movement is similar to the dramatic function of the soliloquies in *Psalmodies* or the short coda in *Etude and Ricercare* ; the soloist is given a brief moment to reflect on the journey that has been taken with Paganini’s theme. There seem to be more questions than answers. Certainly the confidence of the introduction and the hopefulness of Variation Fourteen have been replaced with a sense of world-weariness and alienation. The guitar recedes as the orchestra intones dense chords that lay heavy like a thick fog.

Just when hope seems extinguished, the soloist spots some light at the end of the hall of mirrors, and the guitar part leaps into quirky 8th notes to begin Variation Twenty. The links to the original theme are truly buried in this variation, which is probably more strongly connected to other variations than to the theme itself. The irregular swirling passages in the winds, similar to those that appeared in Variation Nine, actually represent a direct quote from Act II of Ruders’s opera *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which was being premiered during the composition of this work. The minor ninths in the guitar part point back to the first introductions of dissonant harmony in Variation One.

Var. 21 m. 3  
♩ = 108

Guitar

*Consecutive Parallel Min. 9ths*

Brahms' concept of developing variation is at work here; music is constantly evolving, so by Variation Twenty-One, Ruders is not just varying the original theme, he is also allowing the material from the rest of the piece to continue to grow (and borrowing from his other work for good measure!).

Ruders has set the stage for the grand finale, which returns affirmatively to Paganini's theme, spinning out a toccata style texture of exuberant 16th note runs worthy of the Caprice melody. All of the various links used to connect material to the theme throughout the piece are in evidence here- the harmonic outline in the first few bars sticks closely to tonic and dominant harmony, virtually all of the instruments play figures in groups of four 16th notes, and the repetitive and call and response characteristics of the original structure are present. At the beginning of the finale, the guitar bides its time, before interjecting fleet bursts of sixteenth notes. Ruders describes the relationship between the guitar and orchestra in the finale as, "primus inter pares," or first among equals. This movement is a tour de force for the entire orchestra, as bristling passagework flies around the string section. To add to the cascading effect, Ruders passes quick lines between divisi members of a section.

Var. 22 m. 1-2  
**Finale prestissimo**  
♩ = 135

Violin I

Violin II

The whole variation cycles through the sixteen bar structure of the theme six times- the first two sixteen bar cycles spin out with the strings playing basically consistent sixteenths, the guitar adding terse interjections, and the horns and harp intoning bell-like sustained notes. As the thirty-two bars progress, the soloist's involvement gradually increases.

At the beginning of the third cycle, the guitar steps to the forefront to assert its soloistic role. The guitar writing in this movement reaches a feverish pitch of virtuosity and relentlessness. The player is asked to sustain a formidable tempo (135 b.p.m. to the quarter note) playing virtually constant 16th notes until the end of the work- some sixty bars away. Much of this fleet fingering happens in the stratosphere up above the 12th fret- not a hindrance if you have the cutaway, but a nightmare if you don't. As the guitar leads the way into the fourth sixteen bar cycle, the harmony strays further from the tonic A minor, and the frenzied energy takes on a life of its own. Real bells join the horns, harp, and flutes in tolling the impending ending of the work.

The fifth cycle begins with the guitar racing through arpeggios suggesting A dominant, V/D minor. This implication is confirmed in m. 77 when the double basses and cellos play a towering *fp* D minor chord. In the

Baroque, the arrival at the subdominant frequently signaled the final push in a large scale piece- consider, for instance, Bach's reliance on the subdominant inflection in his fugues to land safely on a final authentic cadence. The harmonic reference to the Baroque is consistent with the *fortspinnung* running sixteenths texture.

For the next sixteen bars, the orchestra expands on the stabbing huge chords first introduced in Variation Seventeen. The drama heightens as the guitarist hurtles towards the finish line, buoyed by the propulsion of the orchestral masses of sound every six beats. Then, as if Ruders were thumbing his nose at all the accumulated tension, the soloist plays a chromatically ascending triplet figure spanning an octave and ending on a first inversion A minor chord above the 12th fret.

Var. 22 m. 93

*Triplet Chromatic ascent is passed through the orchestra*

Guitar  
cresc. *f* Violins and Flutes decrease.

*senza rit.* *pp* Piccolo *pp*

*Contour of Theme- Ends a half step "too high" on B-flat!*

As with Variations Seven and Sixteen, the idiomatic transposing principle is exploited here in the guitar, but in this context, it seems that Ruders does so playfully. For ninety-two bars he has pushed the soloist to the limit of what is possible on the instrument, forcing truly inventive fingering, and to end this monumental work, he uses the oldest trick in guitar composition. The other members of the orchestra pick up on the joke, and they too run up an ascending chromatic scale ending on high A. Last to float away is the high pitched piccolo, but just as it approaches the end of its scale, the four note figure from the opening theme appears in sixteenth notes, and ratchets the final note up one half step to B-flat. Ruders indeed gets the last laugh.

## Conclusion

The works that Poul Ruders has written for David Starobin over the last fourteen years are rich on many levels. His interest in finding a way to liberate rhythmic expression is pervasive in the four works. A hallmark of Ruders's style is the variability of rhythmic groupings, combining duple and triple figures within the same phrase. In *Psalmodies*, he included several techniques to render the rhythm irregular, including modulatory *accelerandi* and *deccelarandi*. *Etude and Ricercare* displays rhythmically inventive writing within strict boundaries. *Chaconne* expands upon the variable groupings that are present in the earlier works, establishing tension and resolution through the use of differing note values. In *Paganini Variations*, polymeter abounds and several variations base their character primarily on a subversion of the downbeat through over the barline phrasing. The common goal throughout these works is the integration of rhythm with the organic unfolding of the musical material.

Ruders's eclecticism allows him to inject allusions to both old and new forms into his works. *Psalmodies* moves seamlessly from horrifyingly violent music to serene passages that suggest medieval church music. *Etude and Ricercare* is a work that is engaged in a constant dialogue with several traditions- that of the guitar repertoire, of the *ricercare* form, and of modern chromatic harmony. *Paganini Variations* is linked to the virtuoso era for obvious reasons. In his variations, Ruders adds the full range of his stylistic palette, transforming the theme in ways that could only be possible in the diverse musical climate of last decade of the 20th century. Ruders is a composer who emerges after the debate over the preeminence of the various -isms is over. His works reflects a belief in music's continued ability to

communicate both emotionally and intellectually, and a willingness to use the vast store of musical association to reinforce that communication.

*Psalmodies* and *Paganini Variations* are particularly important works because they bring the guitar into Poul Ruders's territory as a virtuoso orchestral composer. So often, works for guitar by major composers are created on the fringes of their career, disconnected with the genres of music for which they are best known. Ruders is very well respected for his orchestral and operatic writing, and to have two major works for guitar and orchestra (albeit a chamber orchestra in the case of *Psalmodies*) puts our instrument in the spotlight of Ruders's oeuvre. He exploits the entire expressive range available to him in the orchestra, mixing shimmering chordal voicings (*Paganini Variations*, #8) with obnoxious oboe passages (*Paganini Variations*, #12); sparse chamber textures (*Psalmodies*, "A Chorale and Song") with cacophonous tutti riots (*Psalmodies*, "Fanfare for All").

The guitar repertoire has never burgeoned with the music of so many master composers as it does now. And the seeds for continued growth have been planted through the collaborations between established performers and composers, as well as among younger musicians. Various factors have contributed to this latest interest in serious composition for the guitar: the increased presence of conservatory level guitar departments over the last forty years has produced guitarists hungry for repertoire, the contemporary avant-garde is attracted to the timbral flexibility of the guitar, and the continued ubiquity of guitar in popular styles nominates it as an ideal messenger for the revitalization of interest in concert music among younger audiences. David Starobin has been a tireless advocate for the guitar repertoire and its deserving consideration by the most influential composers of our time. The relationship that he and Poul Ruders have nurtured has produced four major works thus far- and we can be confident there will be future products of this fruitful pairing. Collaborations such as these are praiseworthy, not just for the bracing music they generate, but because they offer a vital alternative to the stale programming and risk averse behavior of so much of the classical music world. Indeed, Ruders's music entertains, enriches, and disturbs, but perhaps most importantly, it inspires.

*For more information on the works of Poul Ruders and a list of available recordings of these pieces, visit [www.poulruders.net](http://www.poulruders.net) and [www.bridgerecords.com](http://www.bridgerecords.com). Ruders's music is published by Edition Wilhelm Hansen.*

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