

Shifting Aesthetics: Classical Guitar in Contemporary Concert Music

Concert music has taken some fascinating twists and turns over the last few decades, and the good news is that the guitar has been very much along for the ride. There are several new pieces involving guitar in a traditional context. But there are just as many new works that ask us as players, teachers, audience members, and enthusiasts to re-imagine our expectations for the guitar in a concert setting. I would like to briefly explore some of those pieces and how they are stretching our definitions of virtuosity and beauty on the instrument.

Just as we see aesthetic priorities shift from the Renaissance to the Baroque, and from the Classical era to the Romantic, contemporary music has erected new hierarchies of musical values. But today's age is unique: unlike earlier eras where new styles developed in relative cultural homogeneity, we live in a dizzyingly diverse global culture. The consequence of this diversity on our musical landscape is that there is no shared set of aesthetic priorities, instead composers draw from myriad influences, and audiences have varied expectations and ways of understanding music's role in their lives. Instead of a shared compositional playing field so to speak, as in Mozart's Vienna, today's composers have to define their aesthetic priorities with each piece, and find a way to communicate those priorities to the performers and the audience. So it becomes the performer's job to translate those aesthetic priorities, whether they are rhythmic dynamism, lyricism, textural interest, etc. And as audience members, our experience is enriched by how open and responsive we are to different aesthetic values operating in different works.

In my experience, the biggest barrier to connecting with contemporary music, on the part of the audience as well as the performer, is the perception, "I just don't get it." More often than not, we are "getting it." If we hear a dissonant, harsh harmony, the composer was most likely aware of that effect, and it was intentional. But perhaps accompanying the dissonant harmony was a compelling rhythmic gesture, an innovative use of extended techniques, or an evocative timbral color. When an innovative piece is successful, it forces us to recalibrate our aesthetic barometer.

For instance, let's consider the style often called modernism, which would include such luminaries as Elliott Carter, Mario Davidovsky, Pierre Boulez, Milton Babbitt, and Charles Wuorinen, all of whom have contributed significant works involving guitar. If we listen to Carter's solo guitar pieces, *Changes and Shape*, expecting to hear a singing melody or pretty harmonic progression, we will be disappointed. On the other hand, if we take the music on its own terms, we notice the delightful rhythmic ingenuity and the expressive gestural language, and the dissonant harmonies all of sudden become appropriately mysterious and elusive. Or consider Mario Davidovsky's landmark solo work with electronics, *Synchronisms #10*, which focuses on using an electronic part to expand and amplify the guitar's limitations, all the while creating a sort of virtual chamber music partnership on stage between human and pre-recorded tape. There are wisps of staggeringly beautiful melodic fragments in this piece, as well as lush harmonies, and quirky

rhythmic simultaneities. But the driving force behind the piece, which ties together all of these elements, is the spatial expansion of the instrument through the use of electronics, and a poetic approach to integrating electronics into the concert setting. Davidovsky's quartet for guitar, viola, cello, and bass, *Festino*, imports these principles back to acoustic instruments, with the string instruments amplifying the guitar by elongating decaying pitches, plucking pizzicatos in imitation of guitar attacks, and integrating percussive sounds into the gestural language of the piece. In these Carter and Davidovsky examples, we see a blend of traditional virtuosity and classical beauty with new approaches that ask our ears to adjust and embrace different aesthetics.

Several composers have explored the percussive and extended technique capabilities of the guitar in depth, so much so, that in some instances, the performer need not be a trained guitarist. Any guitarist, percussionist, or otherwise motivated musician can play influential Italian composer Giacinto Scelsi's *Ko-Tha* for solo guitar. The music is scored like a percussion piece, there is no conventional playing in it whatsoever, and the work is to be played with the guitar lying face up on the performer's lap so the various percussive sounds are easier to access. German master Helmut Lachenmann's duo guitar work, *Salut für Caudwell*, is also written in unconventional notation, and is a fascinating sound painting of extended techniques including bottleneck slide playing and glissandi, and can also be played by non-guitarists. And yet *Salut für Caudwell* and *Ko-Tha* are both virtuoso pieces -- the virtuosity is of a different stripe than what we find in more traditional repertoire. Virtuosity in this context involves realizing the complex written score precisely and bringing it alive in a compelling and communicative performance. Fellow German Helmut Oehring's *Foxfire Eins* fuses this brand of virtuosity with more kinetic writing; it is an exhilarating work played with both hands tapping on the fretboard and interspersing the tapped notes with string scrapes and percussive notes. Arthur Kampela, a Brazilian composer living in New York, has written a series of works for guitar, entitled *Percussion Studies*, which combine a staggering level of virtuosity with a revolutionary approach to the sound world of guitar music, using an extensive percussion palette, playing off the side of the fingerboard, and employing extra-musical objects like spoons to create extended effects.

Microtonality and unorthodox scordatura are other areas which have become popular with some composers writing for the guitar, notably Brian Ferneyhough in *Kurze Schatten*, and Juan Campoverde in *Muna*, a work akin to *Foxfire Eins* in its use of right and left hand tapping as well as extensive playing on the string between the left hand and the nut. Vineet Shende's *Suite in Raag Marva* also employs wrong-side notes extensively, within the context of an unorthodox scordatura intended to evoke an Indian classical scale and the sound of the sitar.

Many of these extended techniques have found their way into the chamber repertoire as well. Phillipe Manoury's ensemble and voice piece *Cruel Spirals* alternates between a microtonally tuned guitar and a guitar in standard tuning. Magnus Lindberg's *Linea d'Ombra* for guitar, clarinet (or alto saxophone), flute, and

percussion is a veritable kitchen sink of extra-guitaristic techniques for the player, both on the instrument and off. Aside from a series of passages that incorporate percussive sounds, gestures beyond the fretboard, extensive playing with the left hand alone, and precisely notated string scrapes, several moments in the score call for simultaneous vocalizations from the performer, and at the end of the work, the guitarist lays down his instrument altogether and plays percussion on a tam-tam cymbal. All of this occurs within a context of a no holds barred virtuoso guitar part in the traditional sense of the word. Lindberg's piece is notated conventionally, or as conventionally as is possible given the music, but the effect is entirely otherworldly, bizarre, and wholly successful -- more akin to a circus show than to a chamber piece. Kaija Saariaho's *Adjö* for soprano, guitar, and flute uses some of the same broad techniques (vocalizations, percussive sounds) but achieves an entirely different result, evoking a frigid Scandinavian landscape.

There is also amazing music being written for the electric guitar by prominent composers, both as a solo instrument and in ensemble. Writing for the electric guitar opens up the prospect of using effects pedals for timbral contrast in a notated music context. Japanese/British composer Dai Fujikura's *Abandoned Time* for electric guitar and ten instruments deftly interweaves rock style techniques like right hand tapping, palm muting, volume swells, varying levels of distortion, and string bending into a musical context that fits this composer's background as a protégé of Pierre Boulez. Perhaps the most famous concert work for electric guitar is Steve Reich's *Electric Counterpoint*, which addresses another concert music/commercial music barrier in its use of a multi-tracked recording for the playback part. Other works involving electric guitar by prominent composers like George Crumb, Tristan Murail, Julia Wolfe, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Louis Andriessen have used the instrument in various ways, often intentionally avoiding the instrument's rock n' roll associations. There is also a growing literature for steel string guitar as well as amplified nylon string guitar.

As composers' experiments with the guitar take them further from the conventional training that is the basis of contemporary pedagogy, it starts to beg the question of whether this new repertoire belongs under the classical or concert guitar umbrella. And yet, even while much experimental music dispenses with some of the fundamental aesthetics of the classical guitar canon, I am more struck by what remains constant than by what is being left behind. There is so much more to the tradition, training, and lineage of musicians who play and interpret notated music on the guitar than just conventional guitar performance technique. Every one of the new works I mentioned involves an interpretive performer realizing a fixed score and crafting a compelling performance with dynamics, phrasing, structure, and expression. They all require skills that remain unique to musicians who are trained to play notated music and to solve musical problems with technical solutions. And they are intended for a concert environment, with the audience giving the performer the gift of its full attention. Compared with most music being recorded and performed today, even the most experimental concert piece has more in common with Sor's *Mozart Variations* than not. Gratefully, performances of the

traditional repertoire and contemporary repertoire grounded in mainstream aesthetics are thriving and there is no indication that their existence is threatened. The fact that there is also a seat for the guitar at the table of innovation is a sign of a healthy future for our instrument in concert music. (Learn more about the author)

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Selected discography of discussed works:

David Starobin, *New Music With Guitar Vol. 1-3 Bridge 9009*, including Carter's *Changes* and Babbitt's *Composition for Guitar*
Daniel Lippel, *Resonance*, New Focus FCR101, including Carter's *Shard* and Davidovsky's *Synchronisms #10*
ICE/Daniel Lippel/Tony Arnold - *Abandoned Time*, New Focus FCR104, including Davidovsky's *Festino*, Lindberg's *Linea d'Ombra*, Saariaho's *Adjö*, and Fuji-kura's *Abandoned Time*
Klangforum Wien - *Salut für Caudwell Kairos KAI0012652*
Ictus- Oehring's *Foxfire Eins Cyprès CYP5602*
Rémi Jouselme - *Kampela's Percussion Study #1*, YouTube
Magnus Andersson - *Ferneyhough's Kurze Schatten*, Montaigne M0782169
Pat Metheny - *Reich's Electric Counterpoint*, Nonesuch 979 176-2
Flexible Music - *Andriessen's Hout* New Focus FCR105

Some other works of note:

Peter Adriaanz - *Serenades II-IV* (3 el. gtr, bass gtr.)
Franco Donatoni - *About* (gtr., vla., vln.), *Algo* (gtr.)
Nomi Epstein - *Blueprint* (prepared classical guitar), *Untitled* (fl., prepared guitar, clnt., perc., vln.)
Reiko Fueting - *Red Wall* (gtr.), *Invisible Spring* (gtr. clnt., fl., perc.)
Peter Gilbert - *Nenia* (gtr., soprano), *Burn* (e. gtr, clnt., cello, pno, perc.), *Ricochet* (gtr., pre-recorded cd), *Awake and Shine* (gtr. and string quartet)
Panayiotis Kokoras - *Slide* (amp. classical guitar, pre-recorded CD)
Mikel Kuehn - *Unfoldings* (gtr.), *Color Fields* (saxophone, gtr., pno. perc.)
Gyorgy Kurtag - *A Kis Csava* (piccolo, trombone, guitar)
John Link - *For Irving Lippel* (amp. classical gtr., vibraphone), *Around the Bend* (saxophone, amp. classical guitar, pno. perc.)
Phillipe Manoury - *Cruel Spirals* (soprano, scordatura gtr., strings, winds, perc.)
Seung-Ah Oh - *So-Ri I* (gtr., fl.), *Fragments* (saxophone, e. gtr and effects, pno., perc.)
Poul Ruders - *Psalmodes* (gtr. with ensemble)
Vineet Shende - *Sonetos de Amor* (soprano and gtr.), *Throw Down and Shut Up* (saxophone, gtr., pno, perc.), *Suite in Raag Marva* (scordatura gtr.)
Orianna Webb - *Sustenance Variations* (saxophone, amp. classical gtr, perc., pno), *Mirrored Spaces* (scordatura gtr.)