

Works by Lejaren Hiller, Stephen Funk Pearson, Walter Hartley, James Piorkowski, William Ortiz, Lorin Chobanian
New World 80384-2

The guitar is the popular instrument par excellence. As apt for Brazilian sambass for Irish ballads or American blues, the guitar has also recently been adapted as a surrogate for plucked instruments from non-Western musical traditions; no idiom seems beyond its reach. When social history of the second half of the twentieth century is written, it may be seen that the guitar is as central to this era as the piano was to the nineteenth century. But while the piano was an emblem of upward social aspiration, the guitar is anything but. An instrument of the masses, its enormous appeal has to some extent derived from its antibourgeois associations, from its very opposition to the salon world of the piano.

Unlike most other popular instruments, however, the guitar has an aristocratic tradition of its own. A collateral descendant of lute, *vihuela*, and Renaissance guitar, the modern "classical" guitar, the modern "classical" guitar has inherited the repertoire of the lutenist-composers of the Renaissance, as well as the incomparable musical legacy of Spain. Although the major eighteenth and nineteenth-century composers generally ignored the guitar, its noble tradition was preserved and passed on by a long line of (mostly Spanish) guitarist-composers. Over the past two or three generations, through the crusading efforts of a few virtuosos such as Andrés Segovia and Julian Bream, the guitar has finally regained its rightful place as a serious recital instrument.

But the guitar continues to be something of an outsider in the world of concert music. It is too quiet to compete with the powerful instruments of today's orchestra, too intimate for many of today's large recital halls, and, most important, it still lacks a mainstream repertoire. Many lovers of the guitar have accepted these limitations; others have sought to transcend them.

One obvious way to expand the guitar's concert capabilities is to multiply the number of instruments. Not only does this increase the volume of sound, it also allows for greater contrapuntal possibilities. The Buffalo Guitar Quartet is a pioneer in this new venture. In the present recording they present six works (including three commissions) from six American composers of widely divergent stylistic persuasions, some guitarists themselves, and some not.

Lejaren Hiller (renowned for having devised the program that produced the first-computer-composed musical composition), has presented the quartet with a work entitled *Metaphors*. Like Erik Satie's similarly Greek-influenced *Gnossiennes* and *Gymnopédies*, the form of *Metaphors* is inscrutably simple. The work is divided into ten sections of twelve measures, each concluding with a four-measure ritornello of strummed chords. Features associated with classical Greek music, such as descending tetrachords and modal rhythms, mark the score, as do the headings of the various sections: *prologos*, *thema*, *dialemma*, metaphor, and *telos*. The sound of the four guitars may be intended to evoke the lyre-like ancient Greek *kithara*. Yet other things about the piece sound distinctly American, especially the bent, "blue" notes, the swing rhythms, and the plain harmonies.

Stephen Funk Pearson's *Mummychogs (Le Monde)* is a sort of continuous suite employing various exotic (mostly Eastern) materials. The composer writes:

“*Mummychogs* is an American Indian word meaning ‘traveling in a group.’ The piece reflects the impressions of a band of musicians as they wander the world assimilating the influences of other cultures and peoples. The musicians...may improvise their movements by pausing longer here or there, or picking up more quickly and moving on as they feel the urge.”

The score calls for many special effects, including much pizzicato playing (a technique in which the players damp the strings with their right hands), drumming on the side of the instrument, left-hand plucking, and bent notes; one section of the score is even marked “sitarly.” These effects are entirely in the service of a kind of pan-ethnic aesthetic that treats the guitar as a stand-in for other plucked instruments of the East. It is a tribute to the composer's knowledge of the guitar that he is able to make it sound so consistently unlike itself.

Walter Hartley's *Quartet for Guitars* treats the guitar as a thoroughly Western instrument without neglecting its antecedents. This concise, four movement work fills classical sonata-form with Spanish-flavored materials from the Baroque era to the twentieth century. The writing is sophisticated and clever without sounding self-consciously “learned.”

James Piorkowski is not only a member of the Buffalo Guitar Quartet, but a composer as well. *The Struggle of Jacob* is a three-movement programmatic work depicting the biblical story of Jacob's wrestling with the angel. Written with a player's understanding of guitaristic color, the piece employs fast hockets, trills, harmonics, arpeggios, and repeated-note figures to weave rich and evocative textures.

Abrazo (Spanish for “embrace”) is the title of William Ortiz's homage to the Puerto Rican folk musician Rafael Hernandez. About midway through the piece, a short phrase from a song by Hernandez is quoted. The song is about a peasant who leaves the countryside to sell his wares in the city, only to find disappointment. The texture of *Abrazo* is pointillistic and fragmented, but its harmonies are often tantalizingly close to the familiar, suave chords of Latin music. The piece requires extremely precise ensemble playing to convey its subtle rhythms.

Loris Chobanian, who is a concert guitarist as well as a composer, asks that the performance of his *Sonics* for four guitars be approached in “the grand orchestral manner.” The piece is built out of three distinct kinds of material: percussive sounds; tremolos and arpeggios that establish and sustain tonal centers; and thematic materials derived from a chromatic set that gives special consideration to the open strings of the guitar. Cast in three movements, the work is a compendium of contemporary extended techniques for the guitar. —*Ben Yarmolinsky*

Ben Yarmolinsky is a composer and guitarist.

THE BUFFALO GUITAR QUARTET was formed in 1976 and made its New York debut at Carnegie Hall in 1979. The group concertizes throughout the United States and Canada, and has toured West Germany, the Soviet Union, and Poland. It has been responsible for adding over two hundred transcriptions and arrangements to the guitar ensemble repertoire, and its commissions include the Hartley, Ortiz and Hiller pieces on this recording. The Buffalo Guitar Quartet has recorded on the Ozra and Musical Heritage Society labels.

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SPECIAL THANKS TO ELI AND HIS GUITAR; DR. PATRICK MCMULLEN; THE FREDONIA SCHOOL OF MUSIC; AND THE LATE OSWALD RANTUCCI, THE QUARTET'S MENTOR AND A PROPONENT OF THE PERFORMANCE OF NEW MUSIC.

Engineer: Ros Ritchie Assistant engineer and editor: Mary Van Houten Recorded August, 1989, at King Concert Hall, Fredonia, New York

Cover art: Adolph Gottlieb. *Dialogue I* (1960). Oil on canvas, 60 x 132 in. Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, New York, Gift of Seymour H. Knox, 1961.

Cover design: Bob Defrin

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THE BUFFALO GUITAR QUARTET

John Sawers, Richard Falkenstein, Florante Aguilar, James Piorkowski

- 1. Lejaren Hiller:** *Metaphors* (5:38) (©Lejaren Hiller)
- 2. Stephen Funk Pearson:** *Mummychogs (Le Monde)* (11:16) (publ. Doberman-Yppan)
- 3. Walter Hartley:** Quartet for Guitars (©Walter Hartley) I. Allegro deciso (2:07)
II. Andante molto (3:13) III. Scherzo vivace (1:23) IV. Allegro con brio (2:02)
- 4. James Piorkowski:** *The Struggle of Jacob* (©James Piorkowski) I. Night Time (4:11)
II. Daybreak (1:39) III. Penuel (1:02) (the second and third movements are played without pause)

5. William Ortiz: *Abrazo* (11:15) (©William Ortiz)

6. Loris Chobanian: *Sonics* (9:11) (publ. Belwin-Mills Publishing Corp.)

Each movement of the Hartley and Piorkowski works is indexed.

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