



By jcrowe on April 4, 2014

Minimalist Music for Guitar Plus

The closing concert for the sixth season of the Guitar Plus chamber music concert series took place March 27th at Symphony Space in New York City featuring a program of minimalist music written and transcribed for guitar. Artistic Director David Leisner, who is co-chair of the guitar department at the Manhattan School of Music, delivered an intense performance of his transcription of Philip Glass' elegiacal *Fourth Knee Play* (from his opera *Einstein on the Beach*) for solo guitar.

The piece featured on Leisner's CD, *Music of the Human Spirit*, is played note-for-note with the exception of one repeated-note passage in which every other note is written up an octave. Originally written for solo violin, Leisner transcribed the piece in 1982 after meeting Glass in the subway.

"Philip Glass has always traveled by subway in New York and continues to do so today," Leisner says. "Remember, this is a man who worked as a plumber and a cab driver even after the American premiere of *Einstein on the Beach* at the Metropolitan Opera House."

Leisner had been wearing a tee-shirt bearing a photo of American avant-garde composer Charles Ives, which caught Glass' attention.

"He'd asked me where I got the tee-shirt and we chatted. In the early 80s, I attended a concert of the Philip Glass Ensemble at Town Hall in New York and reintroduced myself to him afterward. On the program was the violin solo, the *Fourth Knee Play*, from *Einstein*, and it occurred to me that it might sound terrific as a guitar arrangement," Leisner says.

"Phil has always been clever about keeping strict control over his music and, in order to obtain this piece, I was told to visit his high-powered attorney's office, where they removed a copy of the music from a vault! Soon after I completed the transcription, I played it for Phil in his apartment and he was very impressed and surprised that it worked as well as it did."

The Brasil Duo, comprised of Joao Luiz and Douglas Lora performed *Nagoya Guitars*. The piece derives from David Tanenbaum's collaboration with Steve Reich to transcribe Reich's composition, *Nagoya Marimbas*, originally written for two marimbas, for two guitars. The fast-tempo piece conveys lively, repeating patterns of a melody with one or more beats out played out of phase between the instruments. The Brasil Duo also performed Leisner's work *Ghosting*, which is dedicated to them. The piece, commissioned by Symphony Space through the Isaiah Sheffer Fund for New Initiatives, opens and closes with freely



David Leisner performs his transcription of Philip Glass' *Fourth Knee Play*. Photo by Julia Crowe.

floating harmonics that switches to a simple tune that shifts meter to create variations. There is an eerie quality throughout, as the original melody is outlined like a distinctive cloud shape on a windy day that expands and then fragments from the original tune, shifting and reforming sonically with echoes of its original self that linger hauntingly in the end.



Brasil Guitar Duo. Photo by Julia Crowe.

“A composer friend whom I hadn’t seen in decades showed up for a visit at a house we were renting in Santa Fe,” Leisner says, speaking of his inspiration for the piece. “We spent a glorious afternoon on the patio, catching up. The next morning, sitting alone on the patio, I felt that his presence was still palpable in the space, as if his essence had remained, held by the air, like an afterimage. It made me think about presence and absence, life and not-life, and the seen and unseen traces we leave behind.”

Guitarist [Benjamin Verdery](#), head of the guitar department at Yale University’s School of Music and Artistic Director of the [92nd Street Y’s Art of the Guitar series](#) and [Yale Guitar Extravaganza](#), performed mesmerizing and meditative *Soepa*, which was written for him in 1999 by composer [Ingram Marshall](#). Performed on an amplified classical guitar routed through digital delay, the piece creates loops and echoes built upon quotations from the B-flat Major Prelude of Book 1 of J.S. Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*.

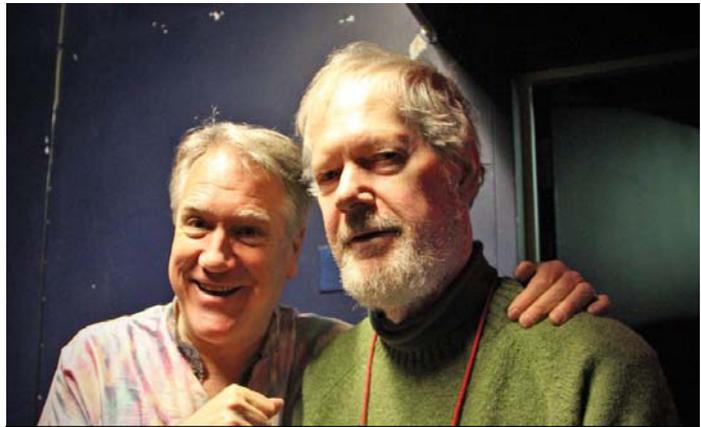


Guitarist Benjamin Verdery invokes the string gods.
Photo by Julia Crowe

Marshall says he chose this motif because Bach’s music happened to be sitting open on his piano the day he started to work on this piece. As a way of explaining the title, “It means ‘patience’ in Tibetan, according to the Dalai Lama, who talks about this concept in his book, *Healing Anger*,” Marshall says, per the program liner notes. “I am not sure if this refers to Ben’s patience with me in writing the piece or my own meditation on the idea that the more anxious you become about something the less likely it is to happen the way you want it to.”

Onstage, Verdery appeared to be surrounded rather impressively by five small Marshall amps but he did not use any of them. “I was plugged into the house system,” Verdery says. “The speakers were above me. The amps were used by the Dublin Guitar Quartet.” For the piece, he used a Jam Man Delay Looper pedal made by Digitech and, to improve the overall sound, a Fishman Aura Spectrum with his Gary Lee guitar, which is outfitted with a B-band pickup system. “I will always love my Smallman,” he says, “but I felt the desire to change guitars after twenty-five years.”

As for his collaborative process with Marshall on *Soepa*, Verdery says, “Ingram would bring me passages and I would simply play them for him, changing what little had to be changed. There really was not too much that had to be altered. And there is no improvisation in the piece. He does allow great freedom in terms of dynamics and articulation in certain passages. I did not really have much leeway in terms of the machinations in terms of the delay or looping. Ingram was quite specific about what he wanted. He is and has always been a bit of a pioneer in this regard. I learned a tremendous amount from working with him and am very grateful to him for writing such a moving and innovative piece.”



Ben Verdery and Ingram Marshall backstage
Photo by Julia Crowe



The Dublin Guitar plugging in and adjusting foot stools.
Photo by Julia Crowe.

The Dublin Guitar Quartet, featuring guitarists Brian Bolger, Patrick Brunnock, David Creevy and Tomas O Duircaín, performed a spectacularly beautiful and transcendent transcription Philip Glass’ *String Quartet No. 3 “Mishima.”* The original orchestral piece appeared as parts of the score for the 1985 film, *Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters*, a biopic of the famous Japanese novelist Yukio Mishima, produced by filmmaker Paul Schrader. The quartet, all graduates of the Dublin Conservatory of Music and Drama, arranged the piece for guitar quartet with the composer’s approval. The quartet’s repertoire is devoted entirely to contemporary music written and they will soon be releasing two albums, one funded by the Music Network/Arts Council featuring works by established and emerging Irish

composers for classical guitar and the other is a recording of arrangements for electric guitar quartet by internationally established composers.

Guitarists [David Leisner](#) and [Benjamin Verdery](#) are interviewees in [My First Guitar: Tales of True Love and Lost Chords](#).

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