

REVIEW

Guitar Double Concertos

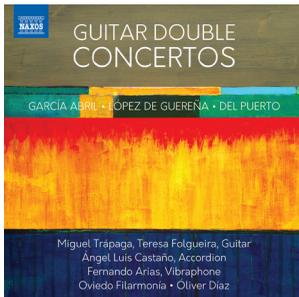
Works by Puerto, García Abril & López de Guereña

DIOGO ALVAREZ

Guitar Double Concertos

Miguel Trápaga and Teresa Folgueira, guitars; Ángel Luis Castaño, accordion; Fernando Arias, vibraphone; Oviedo Filarmonía; Óliver Díaz

Naxos 8.573816, 2019, 1 compact disc



RECENT RECORDINGS have presented exciting new developments in the guitar's Spanish repertoire, taking us far beyond the early twentieth-century works of Turina, Rodrigo, and others. One such project is Adam Levin's *21st-Century Spanish Guitar*, whose first three volumes have been reviewed by Nathan Cornelius in *Soundboard Scholar* 5. The year of 2019 saw the release of another important recording for the promotion of new Spanish music for the guitar:

Guitar Double Concertos, performed by guitarist Miguel Trápaga alongside co-soloists Teresa Folgueira (guitar), Ángel Luis Castaño (accordion), and Fernando Arias (vibraphone), as well as the Oviedo Filarmonía, conducted by Óliver Díaz.

Guitar Double Concertos features world premiere recordings of three works written in the twenty-first century: David del Puerto's *Mistral* for guitar, accordion, and orchestra; Antón García Abril's *Concierto de Gibralfaro* for two guitars and orchestra; and Javier López de Guereña's *Concierto ecuánime* for guitar, vibraphone, and orchestra. The works reveal different ways contemporary Spanish composers approach their country's musical tradition and integrate it into new aesthetics. In regard to the guitar, the album offers a glimpse of its place in new Spanish music, the styles of guitar writing explored by today's leading composers, and the instrument's relation to the classical music scene as a whole.

ANTÓN GARCÍA ABRIL (1933–2021) was one of the best-known members of the Grupo Nueva Música and the Generación del 51, both of which also included composers such as Cristóbal Halffter and Luis de Pablo. This generation of Spanish composers was responsible for embracing avant-garde movements such as serialism after the Spanish Civil War. However, García Abril soon diverged from his contemporaries' outright defiance of tradition—he believed in making music that was closer to his country's traditional culture, advocated for the power of melody, and sought to find novelty that did not eliminate tradition but built on the foundations of the past. Therefore, after some time experimenting with dodecaphonic and serial music, he turned to musical traditions from different periods and to Spanish folklore for inspiration. His work includes acclaimed film scores and music for television, as well as concert music ranging from orchestral and vocal works to solo and chamber music.

Concierto de Gibralfaro (2003) pays homage to the city of Málaga and was named after a castle overlooking Málaga Bay (*Castillo de Gibralfaro*). This work is the most conventional-sounding one in the recording, but by no means does it trail behind in artistic quality. García Abril's experience in scoring films is evident in his masterful manipulation of timbres and harmonies to create immersive atmospheres. His intimate familiarity with writing for the guitar allows for beautiful and strikingly clear dialogues between the two soloists. Equally interesting are the moments when the two guitars blend to form a single instrument, larger in sound and expressive capabilities—what the composer called “una gran guitarra” in a promotional video for the album on Naxos Music Library.

The first movement, “Visiones de la bahía” (Visions of the Bay), begins with solemn statements by the string and brass sections, introducing a serious character to the movement. The guitars then present the main theme, subtly accompanied by the strings. This clear distinction of roles assigned to soloists and orchestra is a constant throughout the work: the guitars are used for lyrical and intimate textures, while the orchestra brings weight whenever it is required. It is a pragmatic approach, perhaps, but an effective one: García Abril's ability to write captivating melodies for the guitars compensates for the lack of true outbursts of intensity and power in the soloist parts. The main theme is followed by what initially seems to be a transition to a second theme, following the traditional scheme of a sonata-form exposition. However, even though this transition does lead to another theme, the overall structure of the movement more closely resembles a sequence of “visions,” similar in character at first but eventually developing into more contrasting sections. Here, the composer's skill and creativity are on display. García Abril saves some of the most picturesque colors of his orchestral writing for the end of the movement: after a reappearance of the main theme, percussion, piccolo, and guitars add brilliance to a dramatic final tutti.

“A partir de un canto popular malagueño” (Based on a Malagan Folk Song) is the second movement in the concerto and a gem of expressiveness. Taking the slowest of harmonic rhythms, García Abril creates the illusion that time has stopped while he explores the two soloists' lyrical possibilities. The writing for the guitars is exquisite; they converse, complement, and accompany each other, as if floating above the

orchestra's discrete harmonic background. The use of guitar tremolo in the movement is noteworthy—despite its traditional role of providing sustained melody notes, it is used here solely as textural accompaniment, aiding the movement's dreamlike sonority. Halfway through, we hear an extended passage for the duo alone, which cannot help but recall Rodrigo's *Concierto de Aranjuez* and its second-movement cadenza. The orchestra, when called upon to shine, is characterized by contrasts between the lush sound of the strings and the sparkling voices of brass and woodwind sections.

To end this concerto, García Abril writes an homage to Pablo Picasso, who was born in Málaga. This final movement, named "Homenaje a la tauromaquia picassiana" (Homage to Picasso's Art of Bullfighting), is described by Javier Suárez-Pajares in the album notes as "a kind of *pasodoble*"—a musical genre linked to the *corridos de toros* often depicted by Picasso. There are several moments of interest, especially in subtle rhythmic variations and in the writing for the orchestra, whose palette of timbres is used in its entirety and combined extensively. Following one of the repetitions of the opening statement, García Abril's *gran guitarra* is expertly presented in a web of rapid arpeggios by the two soloists. Perhaps in this movement, however, the restraint of the guitar writing cannot be fully compensated by its lyricism—I found myself wishing to hear the guitars joining in with the orchestra's energetic playing.

JAVIER LÓPEZ DE GUEREÑA (born 1957) is a composer and guitarist from Bilbao who has had an extremely versatile career in music. He has worked alongside *cantautores* (singer-songwriters)—Javier Krahe in particular—as well as having extensive experience in the jazz scene and composing music for films and television; he has even produced an album by the rock group Maquia. He also has a relevant body of classical works to his name, although it is not as well known as some of his other music. The composer's varied musical experience brings freshness and glee to the recording—López de Guereña likes to play around with his music, and his games are present in all three movements of *Concierto ecuánime* (2017), written upon Trápaga's request. In this work, the guitar uses the scordatura that Ramón Montoya used in his famous *rondeña*, as mentioned in the album notes (sixth string tuned to D and third string to F#). Montoya himself could have been influenced by the tuning of the vihuela, as proposed by Norberto Torres Cortés.¹ López de Guereña's choice of tuning and his jazz influences help shape the harmonic and rhythmic elements of *Concierto ecuánime*, according to Suárez-Pajares's notes.

The concerto's fundamental concept is presented in its title—*ecuánime* is used here with the meaning of "impartial," signaling the composer's intention of finding balance between each of the three forces in play: guitar, vibraphone, and orchestra. In the first movement, as López de Guereña explains in his video accompanying the album on Naxos Music Library, there is basically one constantly repeated melody,

¹ Norberto Torres Cortés, "Sobre el toque de rondeña," *Actas del XX Congreso de Arte Flamenco* (Málaga: Estepona, 1994), <https://www.juntadeandalucia.es/cultura/flamenco/content/el-toque-de-ronde%C3%B1a> .

but it does not follow a “formal system of repetition.” Consequently, the listener does not realize it is the same melody, and the movement at times resembles a type of written improvisation, occasionally returning to melodic ideas presented before. This is the work’s most challenging movement to follow, mostly because the melody itself cannot be easily identified and labeled as a theme.

The second movement’s melodic approach both resembles and opposes that of the first movement. Here, a melody is also presented several times, displaying modifications and being set against different harmonic and textural backgrounds. Nevertheless, the melody is clear from the start, and the modifications it undergoes are immediately recognized as such. The melody is presented in its “purest” form toward the end of the movement, when the orchestra presents the theme in all its glory and expressivity.

In the light-hearted final movement, the main theme is once more revealed in its entirety only at the very end. The snippets heard before the presentation of the complete subject can be more easily identified in a second hearing of the work, as they are surrounded by contrasting melodic and harmonic ideas. It is the shortest movement and the one that best achieves the balance desired by López de Guereña—a sort of celebration where almost every instrument or orchestral section has its chance to shine.

DAVID DEL PUERTO (born 1964) is an award-winning composer from Madrid. His music has been performed by prestigious orchestras and ensembles, such as the Ensemble InterContemporain. A guitarist himself, Puerto has written extensively for the instrument, including dozens of solo works, numerous works for guitar in ensemble, three concertos with the guitar as soloist, and even a chamber opera with a guitar part. His familiarity with the accordion is also notable: not only has he written three solo works for the instrument, he has also performed alongside accordionist Ángel Luis Castaño in their group rejoice! (styled with a lower-case *r*). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that *Mistral* (2011), dedicated to soloists Castaño and Trápaga, explores the very best each of those instruments can offer. As pointed out by Suárez-Pajares in the album notes, the unusual pairing of guitar and accordion might give the impression that this concerto is somehow related to Astor Piazzolla’s *Hommage à Liège* for guitar, bandoneon, and string orchestra. However, this is familiar territory for Puerto, and his complete control of the instruments’ expressive possibilities is evident from the start. The soloists seem equally comfortable with the composer’s musical language—after all, Castaño’s doctoral thesis is a discussion of the composer-performer relationship in Puerto’s accordion works.²

Mistral is a single-movement work, structured in three main sections linked by two intermezzos. Its title refers to a cold, dry wind that blows toward the Mediterranean

2 Ángel Luis Castaño Borreguero, “La música para acordeón de David del Puerto: La relación intérprete-compositor” (PhD diss., University of Extremadura, 2015, <http://hdl.handle.net/10662/3862>).

coast. In a 2009 interview for RNE 2 (Radio Clásica), which can be found on his website, Puerto mentions the importance of natural and human landscapes as influences in his work. This influence transpires in several of his pieces—references to wind can also be found in *Céfiro* (2008) for guitar and chamber ensemble, and *Viento de Primavera* (2009) for solo guitar.

Throughout the work, themes and motives are constantly reintroduced, either in their original form or varied. This audible coherence of musical ideas makes the concerto very easy to follow, while by no means repetitive. *Mistral* emphasizes rhythmic music, from the sharp attacks over an ostinato in the outer sections to the middle section's unambiguous meter. It also relies heavily on the use of counterpoint, within the soloists' parts as well as between different instruments—particularly interesting are passages for the guitar in the opening section, for the accordion in the second intermezzo, and for the oboes in the middle section. The employment of contrapuntal textures in the piece is very effective, the guitar and accordion being very appropriate instruments for this kind of treatment. It also sheds light on Puerto's approach to Spanish tradition in the work—even though passages reminiscent of music commonly related to the Spanish guitar (such as Rodrigo, Turina, Torroba, etc.) are not obvious in *Mistral*, extensive use of counterpoint reveals the piece's relation to Spain's much earlier tradition of vihuela music. This "atavistic character," as described by Suárez-Pajares, makes this work non-stereotypically Spanish.

The formal structure of the concerto deserves special mention. Castaño comments on its similarity to a traditional three-movement scheme, and Suárez-Pajares describes it as having a symmetric, arc-like form. This symmetry is crucial to the experience of the listener, as Puerto writes memorable themes and then revisits them at the end of the piece. However, the composer delays and subverts the re-exposition of those elements, engaging the listener in the large structure of the work. After the second intermezzo, which ends in a descending scale to the lower register of the accordion, the pedal and rhythmic ostinato that opens the piece returns, setting up expectations of a traditional recapitulation. Nonetheless, Puerto subverts the reintroduction of the orchestral attacks and of the melody initially assigned to horns and tubular bells—the accordion takes over the orchestral attacks, and the guitar comes in with a new theme, which characterizes the final section of the piece. For the most part, this section uses more dissonant sonorities and an overall sense of rhythmic and textural chaos to create a climactic ending. The actual recapitulation of subjects from the first section happens in the last two minutes of the twenty-minute piece and in almost perfectly reverse order, delaying the resolution of the work's formal symmetry as much as possible.

Mistral opens up exciting possibilities by showcasing how successful a concerto for guitar, accordion, and orchestra can be. It displays the accordion as an adaptable instrument, able to create striking contrasts as well as blend together with other instruments, such as in a haunting passage with the clarinet. As expected of a guitarist-composer, the guitar writing is also very effective, detailed, and nuanced. Puerto's

indication in the score that there must be amplification for the guitar reveals his concern that nuances, colors, and dynamic variations be clearly audible. Regarding his orchestral writing, the composer skillfully used the colors available to him, especially when writing for tubular bells, horns, and woodwinds. This work deserves to be performed and heard more often, given its quality, currency, and uniqueness.

PERFORMANCES IN THE ALBUM are of the highest quality, not only because of the musicians' technical and musical skills but also because of their close relationship to the music being performed—accordionist Ángel Luis Castaño is a researcher and frequent performer of David del Puerto's music; conductor Óliver Díaz had already premiered two other works by Javier López de Guereña; and Teresa Folgueira released an album of Spanish and Latin American music in 2017. It is also important to mention Miguel Trápaga's continuing contribution to expanding and recording the guitar repertoire with orchestra—in addition to the present recording, he released the world premiere recording of Brouwer's *Concierto de Benicàssim* in 2016.

Guitar Double Concertos is a remarkable project and a substantial musical experience. The album reveals three very different approaches to guitar writing and to Spanish musical tradition in the twenty-first century. From García Abril's use of folklore and characteristically Spanish percussion, to Puerto's exploration of Renaissance counterpoint and the vihuela as major influences, and López de Guereña's incorporation of elements from jazz and flamenco, we are presented with a fascinating perspective on today's Spanish guitar music.



About the Reviewer

DIOGO ALVAREZ is a Brazilian guitarist and researcher in music theory and musicology. He holds a BM in Classical Guitar from Universidade do Estado de Minas Gerais, Brazil, and an MM in Classical Guitar Performance from the University of Denver. In 2016, he finished a transcription with commentary of Josquin des Prez's *Missa la sol fa re mi* for solo guitar. His research addresses large-scale rhythmic structures in Renaissance music, the music of nineteenth-century guitarist-composer Fernando Sor, the guitar music of Tōru Takemitsu, and Schenkerian analysis.

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